

The Crucial Importance of Attending Sunday Mass



CATHOLIC DIOCESE
of SALINA

Bishop Gerald Vincke

Table of Contents

To the faithful in the Diocese of Salina	2
Who Are We?	3
Back to the Beginning	4
We Are Invited: Please Say Yes!	5
The Way to Eternal Life	6
The Best Pastures, The Best Food.....	7
Seeking Fulfillment	7
Sin and Reconciliation	8
Holy Days: Missing Mass Is A Big Deal!	9
How to Dress for Mass	9
Persevering in the Faith	10
Those Fallen Away	11

The dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation will be lifted beginning with the Solemnity of Pentecost which we will celebrate the weekend of May 22-23.

“One day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”
Psalm 84:10

To the faithful in the Diocese of Salina,

1. On March 17, 2020, I issued a dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation because of the uncertainty caused by Covid-19.¹ On Pentecost weekend, May 22-23, this dispensation will be lifted, unless people have valid reasons.² The Covid-19 pandemic has been a reality that we have dealt with for over a year. Thankfully, we are now getting back to what we all consider a more normal way of life.

2. The reason I am writing to you is because I love and care for each of you. I deeply want what is best for you. All of us are created to love and to be loved. No one loves you more than Jesus. No one cares for you more than Jesus. What is love? Love is when we want the absolute best for one another. Jesus wants what is best for us. He created us, He knows us and desires each person to be with Him for all eternity—and that is what I want for you, too!

3. The pandemic has been with us for long enough to influence our lifestyles, particularly staying home from Mass. While technology is a wonderful tool, it can never substitute for the reality of attending Mass in person. It is important we are clear about this distinction. The Letter to the Hebrews (10:24-25) reminds us, “... let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” *Not neglecting to meet together* is a direct reference to the Christian practice of attending Mass on Sunday. We are called to come together in the flesh and actively participate in the Eucharistic meal - passively observing a television is not a substitute for reality.

4. It is part of the very nature of our faith that we have a personal and in-person encounter with Christ through His Church. As stated in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “the liturgy, ‘through which the work of our redemption is accomplished,’ most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.” Further, *Code of Canon Law*, c. 1247 states that, “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.”

1 I want to apologize to any of you that were hurt by the decision to close Masses to the public for the six weeks that we did.

2 Valid reasons include being ill or elderly. Additionally, those who are unable to attend Mass because of extenuating circumstances, such as traveling or work, must seek individual dispensation from their pastor.

5. Some may express frustration about the obligation of attending Mass, claiming, “The Church is all about the rules.” I admit I did not always like this rule either. Growing up as a child, my father made it very clear that living in his house meant going to Mass on Sundays. Now, looking back I can see that my dad enforced that rule because he loved me. Jesus said, “Remain in my love.” My father did not want me to be separated from God by making the wrong choice.

6. Jesus said that we will remain in His love if we keep His commandments (John 15:10). God gave the Ten Commandments to us because He loves us and cares for us. He knows what is best for us! The First Commandment is to love God with our whole being and the Third Commandment is to keep holy the Sabbath (which for us is Sunday). These are God’s commandments. When we do not follow God’s ways, our priorities are not in order. We also know that rules without a relationship often lead to rebellion in most situations. Jesus desires to be in a relationship with us. Hopefully, we desire to have a relationship with Him. Attending Mass is being in relationship with Him and His love for us. When we go to Mass in person, we choose Jesus!

Who Are We?

7. Several years ago, I read an article that involved a former player of one of the most successful football coaches ever. On the first day of practice, the coach asked the team three questions: Who are we? Where are we going? How are we going to get there? In other words, what is our identity, what is our goal, and what are the strategies to get us there. This led not only to success on the field, but also success in other walks of life.

8. In the spiritual life, we can ask those same questions. Who are we? Our deepest identity is that you and I are beloved children of God our Father. Where do we want to go? Hopefully, all of us would respond, “heaven.” If not, then we really do not know who we are. How do we get to heaven? By following Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. It is all about remaining with Jesus, who loves us more than anyone. It is not whether we live or die, but rather if we belong to Jesus or not.

9. If we are missing Sunday Mass because we do not feel it is important, or we simply put other things before God, we are likely on the wrong path. We have forgotten who we are, and this only leads to our unhappiness. St. Paul reminds us that the three things that last are faith, hope and love—not our belongings, our finances or our successes—but our faithfulness to God (1st Corinthians 13).

10. Once there was a man who ran a business. The man was frustrated with not being able to keep up his success. He realized then that he needed to focus on the one necessary thing in his life each day. Once he did this, he became very successful. The same thing is true with our spiritual life. We need to focus on the one thing necessary: becoming a disciple of the Lord. In Christ we find true fulfillment, and this is what our heart longs for, “Like a parched land my soul thirsts for you” (Psalm 143:6).

11. Attending Sunday Mass is the most important thing we do all week. There are many important events in life, but nothing is as important as participating in Sunday Mass. Coming to Mass is participating in the greatest, most passionate love story that has ever existed: celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who comes on a rescue mission to save humanity from hell.

Back to the Beginning

12. We all know the story of Adam and Eve. They walk with God. All is well. All is beautiful. But then Satan, the devil, tempts Adam and Eve to rebel against God throwing aside their trust in Him. Who is Satan? Jesus called him a liar, the Great Accuser. Satan was originally created good by God, but then he told God, “I will not serve. I will not obey.” Satan wants us to tell God the same thing. Satan wants to dislodge our loyalty to God - to disobey His commandments and cast aside our trust in His eternal love.

13. In the Garden of Eden were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Jesus gave Adam and Eve one command; they could not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But they decided to disobey God and eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This led to sin, which led to death. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God restored the world. God did not want to lose us, and He loves us despite our sin.

Not only this, but He is also inviting us to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Life once again: the Eucharist! Jesus is the new fruit of the Tree of Life! We see that God is a God of continuous second chances. He never gives up on us. He is always seeking us, no matter how far we have strayed from Him.

14. As we move through the Scriptures, we see how God desired to free His chosen people the Israelites from sin and slavery and lead them to the promised land. God did this by asking His people to take an unblemished lamb, put the blood on the doorposts (those who did so were saved) and then eat the lamb. This event was the founding of Passover. Today, Jesus is our unblemished lamb who takes away the sins of the world and leads us to the promised land, heaven. We partake of His saving act by eating the lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And in Cana (John 2:1-11), Jesus reveals his miraculous power by turning water into wine.

The wedding guests are astounded that the bridegroom has saved the best wine for last. Again today, Jesus' blood on the cross becomes the "wine" that is the best wine, the wine of everlasting life. At Mass, we participate in the new and everlasting Passover!

We are Invited: Please say yes!

15. In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus tells the parable of the wedding feast. Many are invited. Sadly, some people completely ignore the invitation. Others are too busy with "important" things, and some simply do not want to come. What a deep sadness this brings the Bridegroom! Every Mass is a wedding banquet in which Jesus our Bridegroom and the faithful - us - unite. God invites you to be there! He desires you to be there! This is a foretaste of heaven. Going to Mass is saying, "I want to go to heaven." Saying no is saying, "I really do not want to be with God in the marriage feast of heaven." It is a deep heartbreak to God when we turn down this personal invitation.

16. But is it really a big deal if we miss Mass? Of course, we can still pray, talk with God wherever we are, but skipping Mass is telling God "no." Perhaps the biggest lie in our world today is that everyone goes to heaven no matter what.

This is not what Jesus said or what the Church He founded teaches us. Ultimately, whether we spend our eternity in heaven or hell is determined by our relationship with God and the choices we make in our daily lives. Hell is a place where there is separation from God, an agonizing abyss without love. But heaven is a place where there is union with God, who is ablaze with Love.

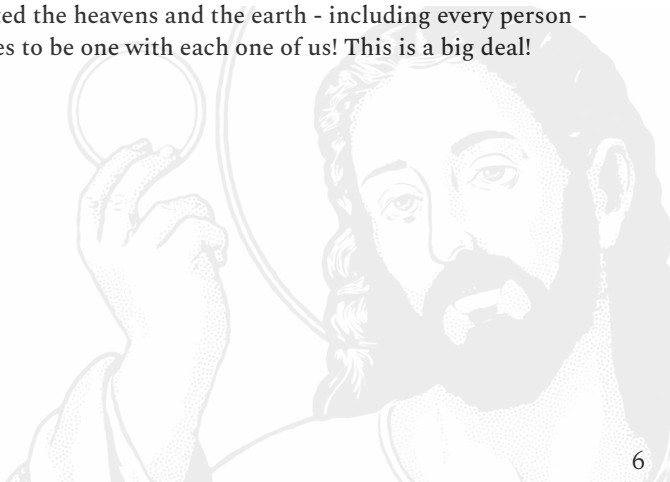
17. Why would any of us want to be separated from love? Jesus loves you, so how will you respond? He desires so much to be with you - right now - through the Eucharist. I understand that homilies and music can be uninspiring, but at Mass we receive the Eucharist – who is Jesus! We unite with Him and others through His presence. At every Mass, Jesus says, “This is my Body, given for you.” If we offer ourselves to Jesus, we too become one flesh with Him in a transforming way. We become ‘in communion’ with the God of everlasting Love. Will you give your yes to Him?

The Way to Eternal Life

18. We spend a lot of money and effort seeking ways to prolong our lives, but despite our good efforts, each of us will inevitably die. Our mortality rate is 100%. But the good news is that there is a remedy for death - the person of Jesus Christ. His Eucharistic self is the true pathway to eternal life. Jesus Himself tells us, “whoever eats my Body” will live forever (John 6).

19. I realize that many Catholics today do not believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. I would never have become a priest if the Eucharist were just a piece of bread. But it is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Since the beginning, the Church has proclaimed the Eucharist as the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of God. Jesus in the Eucharist is the most precious gift on earth, more precious than all the wealth in the world.

20. Receiving Jesus in the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life because Christ not only gives us grace, He also gives *Himself* to us. Imagine this for a moment: The God who created the heavens and the earth - including every person - comes to be one with each one of us! This is a big deal!



The Best Pastures, The Best Food

21. Many of the faithful in our diocese are farmers and ranchers who care for cattle. They strive to provide the best quality food for their cattle so they can grow and thrive. When the food in a pasture is exhausted, they move their cattle from one area to the next to provide the best nourishment. One of my favorite images is of Jesus the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd not only lays down his life to protect his sheep - just as Jesus did - but he also leads his flock to the best pastures where they find the best food.

22. Of course, good food is necessary to sustain our bodies and give us energy, but while on earth, our appetites are only temporarily satisfied. It is only a matter of time before we are hungry again. The Eucharist, however, is spiritual food - a food which awakens our hope and deepens our capacity for life. It is a foretaste of God's heavenly banquet which gives everlasting food. Jesus leads us to the Eternal Banquet, to unending pastures of good food!

23. "The liturgy ... shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd." ³

24. Isaiah also reminds us of God's invitation to this heavenly meal: "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come receive grain and eat. Come without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! Why spend your money for what is not bread, your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Come to me heedfully, listen that you may have life" (Isaiah 55:1-6).

Seeking Fulfillment

25. We all want to be happy. We do things in our life—eat, exercise, attend social events, etc.—that make us happy. Ultimate happiness, however, comes from a relationship with God. This gives us the peace and joy that all other things cannot give. Aren't we all longing for this?

26. I am reminded of the Samaritan woman (John 4), who went to the well for water every day but spiritually remained thirsty. When she encountered Jesus, she left her water jars at the well. Is there something missing in your life? Are you longing for more? Have all the latest gadgets and toys really fulfilled your deepest longing? The only thing that can fill that deepest longing in your life is a person, and His name is Jesus! He desires you and is longing to fill your heart with His love and peace.

³ I Sacrosanctum Concilium 2: SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, 4 December 1963, in AAS, 56 (1964), pp. 97-134, English translation on www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

Sin and Reconciliation

27. We are all sinners in need of God's mercy. I want to emphasize what Bishop Fitzsimmons said in his pastoral letter that he wrote 15 years ago: Missing Mass is a serious sin. Why? Because we are choosing not to be in communion with Jesus. I know some people do not want to hear this. But would you rather have your doctor tell you that you are fine when you have cancer? Or would you rather have him tell you that you are ill and show you the remedy.

28. The remedy for sin and death is the Sacraments, specifically the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. A year or so after becoming a priest, I went to McDonald's for lunch. While I was standing in line wondering what I was going to order, a man came up to me. He was a truckdriver. He asked if I could hear his confession. It had been more than 40 years. I listened to his confession and His sins were forgiven before the Lord.

29. Some people have asked, "Do I need to go to confession before returning to Mass?" The quick answer is "Yes" and "No." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession" (CCC 1457). Basically, if you are aware of a mortal sin on your soul after examining your conscience and have the opportunity to confess your sins to a priest, then it is your duty to seek sacramental absolution. Please remember that God never tires of forgiving us and that His desire to forgive you is greater than your desire to be forgiven.

30. If you have been away from the Sacrament of Reconciliation, if you have missed Mass deliberately in the past, I urge you to please go to confession before receiving Holy Communion. This mortal sin⁴ "results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back" (CCC 1861).

⁴ For a sin to be mortal, one has to know it is a serious sin, have full knowledge and still choose it.

Holy Days: Missing Mass Is A Big Deal

31. I also want to mention that there are holy days of obligation throughout the year. One could say these are like attending family anniversaries and birthdays at different times. They are special days. Holy days of obligation are:

- *Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God* : January 1
- *Feast of the Ascension* : 40 days after Easter, typically celebrated on the closest Sunday
- *Assumption of Mary into Heaven* : August 15
- *All Saints Day* : November 1
- *Birth of Jesus* : December 25

These are special days in the Church when we celebrate important events in the life of Jesus, His Mother Mary and the saints. I encourage you to see these days as a way of celebrating special events in the lives of those whom we love—and who love us!!!

How to Dress for Mass

32. I also want to discuss appropriate “dress” at Mass. Firstly, Jesus accepts you as you are, but at the same time, if you are attending a wedding banquet, you would likely try to wear something nice. How would you dress if someone famous came to your house? God, the King of the Universe, is the most important person ever to exist, and He comes to us at every Mass.

33. Secondly, it is important to strive for modesty in the way we dress. Our bodies are gifts from God and are temples of the Holy Spirit. I understand that fashion trends change with the times, but it is important to honor the sacredness of our physical bodies and dress in a way that respects this truth.



Persevering in the Faith

34. St. John Vianney, the patron saint of priests, used to beg his people to keep the faith and not miss Mass because he feared they would separate themselves from God for all eternity. I want each one of you to go to heaven. I beg you, please keep the faith by saying “yes” to God and attending Mass each Sunday and the holy days of obligation. As St. John Vianney said, “If people knew how important Mass is, they would die with joy.”

35. Jesus Himself said that those who persevere in the faith will be saved. Attending Mass is persevering in the faith. We also have countless saints who remind us of Christ’s words. St. Teresa of Calcutta tells us, “God doesn’t ask us to be successful, but faithful.” The courageous martyr St. Joan of Arc said, “One life is all we have, and we live it as we believe in living it, and then it's gone. But to surrender what you are and live without belief - that's more terrible than dying - more terrible than dying young.” One life is all we have. Will we live for God? Will we say yes to His love for us?



Those Fallen Away

36. We all know people who have left the Catholic faith—our children, grandchildren or siblings. When I was a pastor in Michigan, the diocese encouraged us to pray the following prayer for the return of those who have left the faith. Prayer works wonders, and I witnessed many people returning after being away for a long time. I invite you to pray this prayer for your loved ones and those away from God.

Prayer for the Return of Non-Practicing Catholics

O Good Shepherd, you never cease to
seek out the lost, to call home the stray,
to comfort the frightened
and to build up the wounded.

I ask you to bring them back to the practice
of the faith and to remove all obstacles that
prevent them from receiving your abundant
mercy, which flows sacramentally through
the heart of your holy Church.

Through the intercession of Mary, the
Mother of God, St. Joseph, their Guardian
Angels, their patron saints and the ever-
prayerful St. Monica, may you pardon their
sins and unshackle them from whatever
hinders their freedom to come home.

For you, O Good Shepherd, have loved us to
the end and offered yourself to the Father
for the salvation of all. Amen!

As your bishop and shepherd of the Diocese of Salina, I care for you deeply and desire no one to be lost. Perhaps there are some who have not been faithful to God. Jesus misses you! Please go to confession, begin again and come back to Mass. It will be the best decision you have ever made. For those faithful to the Mass obligations, thank you. I pray for your continued courage and faithfulness. May each one of us strive every day to choose God and surrender ourselves to His merciful love!

God bless you, your families and everyone in our Diocese of Salina!

In Christ's service,

+ Gerald L. Vincke

Most Reverend Gerald L. Vincke
Bishop of Salina





CATHOLIC DIOCESE
of SALINA



WITNESSING BY
FAITH, HOPE & LOVE