



February 2022

Dear Friends,

I am sure you are aware that Bishop Lucia lifted the dispensation from the *obligation* to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days last June 6th, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi). Along with the Bishops of the U.S., Bishop Lucia granted a general dispensation for obvious reasons at the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic. By June, with the plentiful supply of the vaccines and the assurance from public health officials that it was safe for people to gather indoors as long as they wore masks and used common sense, the lifting of the dispensation was expected. Understandably some people were still hesitant to attend Mass during the "Omicron" variant.

Having said that, I can't help but wonder how much *obligation* has to do with people attending Mass. Is it a prime motivator? I am hoping not. My sense is that most of us look upon *Sunday Mass* as something we want to do and wouldn't consider not doing except in extraordinary circumstances. And what has been more extraordinary than the pandemic! During the early days of the outbreak, many of you shared with me about the sense of loss you experienced not being able to gather in the Church for Mass - and the genuine hunger and longing you felt for the Eucharist. I don't believe that obligation can prompt such feelings! I know that we priests also experienced similar feelings as we were unable to lead the community in the celebration of the Eucharist each week.

At this point, we have been able to be in Church for Mass for over a year-and-a-half, and many of you have availed yourselves of the opportunity. Initially, in order to maintain safe social distancing, there were rather severe limitations on the number of people we could accommodate, and this meant having to register ahead of time for Mass. It was cumbersome, for sure, and off-putting for many, but necessary. Along with many other obvious concerns, how the financial support of the parish would fare was anyone's guess. I must say that you, the good people of I.C., have continued to support I.C. throughout these many months, whether you were present or not. For that, I am extremely grateful. Your responsible support allowed us to keep our campus open and maintained, all employees of the Church and School continued to have employment, and most of our pastoral and spiritual services continued, though some in new and creative ways.

Eventually, the need for registration was eliminated and people could simply come – as long as they were wearing a mask. And increasing numbers did show up. Those who did, loved being able to experience once again what it means to be a community of faith gathered around the table of the Word and the Eucharist. There were fits and starts, of course – as Covid cases rose and fell in the County and State. Sometimes we could do congregational singing; other times we couldn't. There was some frustration and disappointment with all this, but at least we were able to celebrate the Eucharist together.

Looking over those many months, I can only be grateful to God for keeping our community together and I am grateful to all of you for the different ways you participated: some of you by being present in the Church; others of you by joining the community via live-stream; and all of you, I'm sure, praying for the day when things would return to normal. Now, I'm not so naïve as to think that we've arrived at normal. In fact, I'm not so sure what 'normal' is anymore! And since the variants are still with us, though considerably waning, some precautions still need to be taken. But, we are at a new moment, and even if the Bishop hadn't decided to lift the dispensation, I'm thinking, hoping, that those of you who have yet to return to the Church are giving serious thought to doing so. *With Lent almost upon us, this holy season would be a perfect opportunity to join the community again.*

To be clear, I am not speaking, of course, to those of you who have health conditions that keep you from being in crowds, or those of you who, for medical reasons, have not been able to get vaccinated. You have every good reason to continue doing exactly what you have been doing for the past months; namely, joining with the community each Sunday and Holy Day via the miracle of live-stream which will continue.

But what about the rest of us who have been vaccinated – most, even with the booster shot – and who enjoy good health? You are the ones I am eager to welcome back to the Church for Sunday Mass. Not because you are obligated to do so but because you are privileged to do so and, from the perspective of faith, we all need to do so. And, speaking for the community that gathers in the Church each weekend, I would add that *we need you!* Our worship is lacking something essential when you are not there, and you are depriving yourself of the nourishment that can only come from the sacramental encounter with Christ in the Eucharist. As good as the live-stream experience has been for so many (and I can't count the number of people who have told me it has saved their sanity!), and as comfortable as it has been to be able to participate in Sunday Mass from the comfort of home, and as easy as it is to hear, to concentrate and perhaps even to feel quite involved in the Mass without the usual distractions and occasional disturbances that are part of life in Church -- still, the *live-stream Mass is no substitute for the experience of participating at Mass.*

Friends, I hope you will see this as an **invitation, a gentle invitation to rejoin the community in person**, an invitation to experience once again the joy that comes from being together in our beautiful Church and celebrating and receiving the Eucharist.

Let me return to where I started -- to that business of obligation. As you've probably picked up, I prefer not to speak about that when it comes to something as important and life-giving as Sunday Mass. I'd prefer we simply want to be here and I'm hoping you agree. So, for all of you who are able, I look forward to seeing you soon; and for those who cannot and should not, I continue to hold you in my heart and in my prayers each day, looking forward, as I know you do, to the day when Covid-19 is but a painful and distant memory. What a blessed and happy day that will be!

Sincerely,



Rev. Thomas J. Ryan, Pastor