

Why do I need to go to church? Can't I worship and praise God wherever and whenever I want?

We've probably all heard this question before, maybe from friends or coworkers – or maybe our own children. So what is the Catholic answer to this common query?

There are many ways to answer this, but let's start by acknowledging some deep truths expressed by this question. Yes, we can absolutely worship and praise God whenever and wherever we want – and we should! St Paul tells us that we can know God from what he has made [Romans 1:20], and that all creation sings of the glory of God [Psalm 19]. Some of my very favorite time spent in prayer happens on our acreage near a little creek on a tucked away spot overlooking a beautiful mountain valley.

So why go to church at all then? And specifically, why go to a Catholic Church? The first reason is simple, but for some perhaps the least satisfying: God has asked us to do this. It is His Commandment, and we should faithfully follow Him in this. Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, Jesus and his Church all call for it: "Remember the Sabbath day—keep it holy" [Ex 20:8]. Heb 4:9 reminds us of this, even today: "So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God". But the context of these verses always involves worshipping God as a community of believers, not just as an individual. The Jews did it, and so did the early Christians, right up to the present.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is also very clear on this matter [see Catechism sections **CCC 2168-2195**], adding that, "those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin" [**CCC 2180-2181**].

But we should observe this day out of our love for God, not because it is some unbending ordinance. This commandment is literally written on our hearts by God Himself [all Ten Commandments are, whether Christian, atheist, whatever], and is made for our good – and to help nourish our friendship with God. In his beautiful encyclical, "Dies Domini, On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy", St. John Paul II summarizes this attitude of heart perfectly: "This commandment *'is a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God.*

Secondly, Jesus founded a Church on earth to guide us, He didn't just write a book or reveal Himself in nature. If his first followers gathered together as a community every Sunday to worship and give thanks to him, shouldn't we do that too? As Christians, St Paul teaches that we're all part of the Body of Christ and called to worship together as a community, not just in solitude.

This is how Jesus set things up, and this is exactly what we see in the early Church. Again, not a bunch of individuals praying in their back yards [good as that is!], but devoting "*themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common... Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area [with the Jews] and to breaking bread in their homes [together as Christians]*" [**Acts 2:42-47**].

A few quotes from the first centuries of the Church will help here as well. "Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the Resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]", writes St Ignatius of Antioch in 110 AD, a disciple of St John the Apostle. "Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because... Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead" (St Justin Martyr, 155 AD).

But now comes a very important distinction. If you should go to "church" to worship and give thanks to God in community, does it matter which Christian church you go to? The answer is a resounding, "yes, it matters!"

In Mat 16:16-20, Jesus builds his church upon Peter: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church". It is an unarguable fact of history that this original church is the Catholic Church. And if Jesus is the wisest of builders then when he builds his house, it will never fall [cf Mat 7:24-25]. And if this is the one Christian church that can trace its priests, bishops, deacons and popes in an unbroken line directly back to the Apostles, shouldn't this be the church you attend? [see my 3 part article on the "Office of Pope".

Additionally, it is through this church, that Jesus left us all seven Sacraments – the main sources of God's grace and help for his followers in this earthly world. If this is true, wouldn't you want to avail yourself of these graces? If, as Scripture and the Catholic Church teach, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved", isn't it critical that you are part of this Church and receive these sacraments?

And along these same sacramental lines comes perhaps one of the most important distinctions of all. Scripture and the Catholic Church teach that, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life... For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink... whoever eats this bread will live forever" [see my 2 part article on Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist]. If Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist –Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity – and the Eucharist is validly consecrated only in the Catholic Church, is it not essential that every Christian, in fact every person in the world, be part of this church and receive the Eucharist?

I'm often saddened when I hear that someone has left the Catholic Church because they didn't like or couldn't understand the priest, had a bad experience in Confession, or because they weren't being "fed". If you truly believe in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist, no matter how bad things get, how could you go anywhere else?

So if someone were to ask us why they should go to Church, the Eucharist is perhaps the most profound, yet understandably difficult, answer that Jesus left us. Recall this is where many of his followers both understood and leave him: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?... As a result... many no longer accompanied him" [John 6:66].

And on a more practical level, Christianity has literally shattered into thousands of different denominations, all with differing and contradictory teachings. How can we as individual believers, know with certainty what Jesus truly taught on all the hard issues we face today: things like abortion, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, how to properly understand Scripture, and hundreds of other **important** Christian doctrines. Jesus taught on all of them, but how can we know what we are to believe and live to be faithful Christians?

Again, Jesus left us his one Church, gave it his teachings and authority, and then sent the Holy Spirit to guide it and protect it from error, leaving us a way to know "all" that he commanded [cf Mat 28:18-20].

Scripture paints a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit's role in protecting the Church's teaching from error: "the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... *the Spirit of truth... will guide you into all the truth.... and he will declare to you the things that are to come.*" Similarly, St Paul, writing to the young Bishop, Timothy, reminds him of these same things: "*Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me... guard the truth that has been entrusted to you **by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us**... and what you have heard from me... entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*"

But some will bring up scandals in the Church, arguing that this can't possibly be the Church Jesus founded, given some of the things that its members have done. This is always a tough question to address. It is desperately saddening when scandals occur – in the Catholic Church, or any organization for that matter. It may shake our faith in humanity, but we should never let it shake our faith in God's ability to work through the Church He founded and sent the Holy Spirit to guard and guide. He promised the gates of Hell would not prevail against it [Mat 16:16-20] and that is exactly what He will do. Even when its members fail in their personal lives, the Church itself will never fail in faithfully teaching what Jesus handed on to it.

Ultimately, what we must keep clearly in mind is that it is **personal sin that is involved** in these scandals we are seeing, and **not the infallibility** of the Church, or the reliability of its teaching – or it's God-given role to be the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). God can work through fallen human beings to accomplish His plan, and there is no doubt of that.

When Jesus spoke of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Mat 23:1-3, he certainly scolded them for their scandalous behavior, but He also admonished His followers to still follow their teachings – because they taught with the authority that God Himself had given to them: "*Jesus spoke... 'The scribes and the Pharisees have taken **their seat on the chair of Moses**. Therefore, **do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example**. For they preach but they do not practice.'*"

This is the Scripture we must keep ever before our hearts when we are tempted to discouragement at the poor example that some in the Church have given, without doubting for a moment that God can still work through this Church, despite it's weak, sometimes sinful, members.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the truth of this is that in 2000 years, the Catholic Church has never contradicted itself in declaring infallible doctrines/dogmas, and it is through this Church that we can know with certainty "all" that Jesus commanded. Again, St Paul calls the Church [not the Bible] "*the pillar and foundation of truth*". If we want to know and follow everything Jesus taught, we need to be part of His Church!

But if you still feel all this is not enough reason to attend "church" – the Catholic Church – here is one final thought. The last thing Jesus taught his Apostles before he was arrested and crucified was that "perfect" Christian unity will be how the world comes to know that the Father sent Him, and that He loves the world as He loves his Son [John 17:23].

Perfect Christian unity will be at the heart of evangelizing the world. For a Christian, could there be a much better reason to go to church? And not just any church, but the original church that Jesus founded on Peter and the Apostles – the Catholic Church!

By Graham Osborne