

## HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION

In August, we celebrate one of several feasts so special that the Church calls us to participate in the Eucharist and refrain from work, just as on Sundays. These feasts are known as holy days of obligation, since we are obliged to observe these practices.

During the Middle Ages, when Europe consisted of various Catholic kingdoms that were often at war with one another, the Church was the only authority that might command at least temporary breaks in these conflicts. One way was to prohibit fighting on Sundays and feast days. By declaring more feast days, the Church was effectively able to insert “timeouts,” giving a break to both the soldiers and the peasants who farmed the lands on which the battles often raged.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in addition to Sundays, there were 36 holy days of obligation in the Latin Church, although many countries had received approval from Rome to reduce that number locally. In 1911, Pope St. Pius X cut the number to 8, but in 1917 it was raised to 10: Mary, Mother of God (Jan. 1), Epiphany (Jan. 6), St. Joseph (Mar. 19), Ascension (Thursday of the 6<sup>th</sup> week of Easter), Body and Blood of Christ (Thursday after Trinity Sunday), Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29), Assumption of Mary (Aug. 15), All Saints (Nov. 1), Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), and Christmas (Dec. 25).

Countries were permitted to reduce or amend that list and virtually all have; only Vatican City and the Swiss Canton of Ticino observe all 10 holy days listed in Canon 1246. Most countries have at least two holy days – one feast of Christ and one of Mary. A few have added national feasts, e.g., St. Patrick’s Day in Ireland.

The United States has six holy days: Mary, Mother of God, Ascension, Assumption, All Saints, Immaculate Conception and Christmas. After the post-Vatican II calendar reforms, Epiphany and the Body and Blood of Christ were transferred to Sundays in places where they were not holy days. In 1992, Hawaii was given permission to align its holy days with the South Pacific Bishops Conference, and it now has just two – the Immaculate Conception and Christmas.

The U.S. Bishops Conference decreed that, beginning in 1993, when Jan. 1, Aug. 15, or Nov. 1 falls on a Saturday or Monday, the obligation to attend Mass does not apply. In 1999, the Conference decreed that each Ecclesiastical Province may decide to transfer the Ascension to the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter; only Nebraska and the northeastern states from Pennsylvania through Maine have not done so.

Since a Sunday of Advent takes precedence over a feast falling on that day, when Dec. 8 is a Sunday, the feast – but not the Mass obligation – is usually transferred to Dec. 9.

Although ideally all holy days would be days off from work, the reality is that only when a holy day is also a public holiday (e.g., Christmas and Jan. 1) are most workers likely to get this break.

The Eastern Rite Churches have their own rules for holy days, and five are observed by all: the Lord’s Nativity, Epiphany, and Ascension, the Dormition of Mary (Aug. 15), and Sts. Peter and Paul.