

'Getting to Know - our Faith and our Church'

Moving on from our regular series 'Getting to Know You' which has been such an interesting feature in our magazine, this new series will explore the questions about faith and church that readers and others ask. There may be occasional re-appearances of 'Getting to Know You' from time to time but Maurice Dobbs who has put such care and effort into the series for a long time deserves a rest!

The first question that has been raised is this:

"Which are the three days of obligation? I know that Christmas and Easter are two of them and that there is debate about whether Ascension Day is the third."

The concept of 'days of obligation' is that there are certain days in the year when all communicant members of the church should make their communion. In the Roman Catholic church there is a clear answer to the question: Alongside the duty of the faithful to attend mass every Sunday the Roman Catholic church in England and Wales regard Epiphany, the Ascension, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, All Saint's Day and Christmas Day as days of obligation. The exact list does vary from country to country and has varied through history: In 1911 Pope Pius XI reduced the list from 36 non-Sunday holy days to 8.

Protestant churches have tended to simply focus on Sunday as the day of worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it as follows: *"This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy."*

The Anglican church has its own variety of approaches. In the Diocese of Nassau and the Bahamas, which has a strong Anglo-Catholic tradition, it is indicated that church members have a duty:

- 1 to be present at Mass on all Sundays and the chief Holy Days, and to keep Sunday as a day of worship, rest and recreation.
- 2 To receive Holy Communion at least three times a year, of which Eastertide shall be one.
- 3 To go to Confession at least once a year.
- 4 To fast in Lent, and to eat no meat on Fridays.
- 5 To uphold the Church's marriage law.
- 6 To give regularly to the support of the Church and the Ministry.

Their list of holy days of obligation includes Christmas Day, New Year's Day, the Epiphany, the Ascension, Corpus Christi, The Assumption of our Lady and All Saint's Day.

One important note at this point is that many historic rules distinguish between attending church and receiving communion. The rule above from Nassau and the Bahamas includes being present at Mass on all Sundays but only requires receiving Holy Communion at least three times a year. This may seem a strange distinction in the modern context. One reminder of that distinction is present in the Book of Common Prayer where there is to be found in the Exhortations provided to be used within the service of Holy Communion.

There is an Exhortation to be used at least on the first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday in Lent and on Trinity Sunday which reminds the people to engage in self-examination before coming to communion, to repent of past sins and to be 'in perfect charity' with others. Another Exhortation is provided for the minister to use when giving 'warning' that they will be celebrating Holy Communion on a forthcoming date: As an alternative to this latter Exhortation there is one to be used where the priest finds "*the People negligent to come to the Holy Communion*" which includes the following stern passage: "*it is your duty to receive the Communion in remembrance of the sacrifice of his death, as he himself hath commanded: which if ye shall neglect to do, consider with yourselves how great is your ingratitude to God, and how sore punishment hangeth over your heads for the same; when ye wilfully abstain from the Lord's Table, and separate from your brethren, who come to feed on the banquet of that most heavenly food.*"

These Exhortations come from a context where Communion was not celebrated every week whilst modern Canon Law provides that "*The Holy Communion shall be celebrated in every parish church at least on all Sundays and principal Feast Days, and on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. It shall be celebrated distinctly, reverently, and in an audible voice.*"

Within the Book of Common Prayer a number of rules relating to communion may be found:

"And note, that every Parishioner shall communicate at the least three times in the year, of which Easter to be one. And yearly at Easter every Parishioner shall reckon with the Parson, Vicar, or Curate or his or their Deputy or Deputies; and pay to them or him all Ecclesiastical Duties, accustomedly due, then and at that time to be paid."

The principle of three times a year including Easter is clearly evident; The parts about Ecclesiastical Duties are no longer relevant as Tithes, Church Rates, Pew Rents are no longer payable and all giving is freely given.

"So many as intend to be partakers of the holy Communion shall signify their names to the Curate, at least some time the day before."

This rule is (thankfully!) obsolete and we welcome to communion all who are present and desire to receive on the day.

There are also rules about there being a minimum number present for there to be communion, and about whether any one who is an '*open and notorious evil liver*', who has '*done any wrong to his neighbours by word or deed, so that the Congregation is thereby*

offended', and those *'betwixt whom he [the Curate] perceiveth malice and hatred to reign'* should be admitted to communion or not.

A stronger rule for members of the Church of England is found, not in the Book of Common Prayer or subsequent liturgies and orders of service but in Canon Law. Canon B15 states that it is *"the duty of all who have been confirmed to receive the Holy Communion regularly, and especially at the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun or Pentecost"* with the additional statement that *"The minister shall teach the people from time to time, and especially before the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun or Pentecost, that they come to this holy sacrament with such preparation as is required by The Book of Common Prayer"*.

In as much as we have 'days of obligation' therefore, they are Christmas, Easter and Whitsun/Pentecost.