

On holydays of obligation the canon law of the church obliges us to participate at mass and to abstain from those works and affairs that hinder worship, joy and relaxation. That's how the law is worded: we're supposed to be prayerful, happy and relaxed on Sundays and holydays.

We used to have six holydays: the Immaculate Conception, Christmas and New Year's during the winter, and then Ascension, Assumption and All Saints through the rest of the year. Now it's a little different.

Holydays are not the same in every country. You can have up to ten holydays. The additional ones are Epiphany, St. Joseph, Corpus Christi and Sts. Peter and Paul. In Mexico, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a holyday, even though canon law doesn't explicitly say it can be. The determination of holydays is made by conferences of bishops.

Several years ago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops removed the obligation on 3 holydays whenever they fall on a Saturday or a Monday: Mary the Mother of God on New Year's, the Assumption of Mary in August and All Saints in November. At the time, Ascension always fell on a Thursday, so it was not included. Christmas, of course, is Christmas, and the bishops thought people should go to church no matter the day of the week. Mary, the Immaculate Conception, is the patron saint of the United States, so they kept the obligation on December 8, even when it falls on a Saturday or a Monday. This past year, December 8 fell on a Sunday, when we had the Second Sunday of Advent. The celebration of the Immaculate Conception moved to Monday the 9th, but the obligation to attend mass did not transfer. The obligation pertains to December 8th, not the 9th in those years when the 8th falls on a Sunday. You see why holydays confuse people.

There's more. A few years ago the American bishops discussed eliminating Ascension from our list of holydays. Any conference of bishops may do this, but if they do, Ascension moves from Thursday to Sunday in that country. Our bishops could not agree on this, so they let each region within the United States decide. Most regions, including ours, moved Ascension to Sunday, but some did not. If you were in Massachusetts this past Thursday, for example, you would have celebrated Ascension and been obliged to go to mass. But not here. It is confusing, but there are people who celebrate Memorial Day on May 30 every year, even though it has shifted to a Monday.

In today's first reading, Luke says the risen Jesus was with the apostles for 40 days, and then he ascended. But in the gospels, there is no reference to 40 days. The gospels assume Jesus ascended very shortly after he rose from the dead, even on Easter itself. It's true the Catholic Church moves Ascension around, but even the bible doesn't agree as to when it actually took place.

But everybody agrees to this: The Ascension of Jesus deserves our devotion. Jesus left the earth in order to be more present to us. The ascended Jesus sits on the right hand of God where he reigns on high and hears our prayers. That is worth celebrating any day of the week.