

## What is a 'Day of Obligation'?

This is a term used primarily in the Roman Catholic Church. It refers to Christian observances throughout the year on which the faithful are to "abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body." In the Anglican church, we refer instead to "Principal Holy Days" or "Principal Feasts," and these include: The Epiphany, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas), The Annunciation of Our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Day of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Ash Wednesday. Historically, these celebrations and observances have been considered mandatory for Christians.

Now, you might be surprised by this list. You might also be surprised by the suggestion that we are *required* to participate in these things. Let me say a little more on both fronts. I can tell you, for example, that I have only ever celebrated the Annunciation a handful of times, and all of those times have happened since being ordained. I can also tell you that many of these celebrations have so far fallen away from being considered main events in the life of a Christian that many of them were never part of my Christian upbringing at all.

But I also want to say that I like the term 'Obligation.' I like it because Christianity is a choice. Whereas a few generations ago, most Canadians went to church, whether they wanted to or not, now becoming a practising Christian is increasingly a counter-cultural choice, and a serious one at that, because it involves devoting time and energy and service to a thing that is very much different from the 'business as usual' that is now most common in our secular world. I like the word 'obligation' because it speaks of how, when we give ourselves to walking in faith with a church community, we are *claimed* for something other than just our own purposes and our own convenience. It makes it clear that our faith life occasionally interrupts the normal flow of life and asks that we set aside other commitments, other busy-ness, in order to come together for the other-centered purpose of worship, to be blessed in finding peace, renewal, strength, possibility, hope, and meaning in doing so.

Ultimately, when Choice and Obligation meet one another, there is an Invitation. I am more than aware of all of the competing demands on the lives of families and individuals. I am deeply opposed to any sort of guilt tactics to get people to church. To participate in a relationship with God through the relationship of the Church is always an act of freedom. But there is this invitation at the heart of our spiritual practice occasionally, on special occasions throughout the year, to suspend the normal hubbub of our lives and to enter into a different kind of space, a life-giving kind of space.

Ash Wednesday has always been regarded as a "Principle Holy Day," or "Day of Obligation." It takes place on February 18<sup>th</sup>, and we offer worship at 12:10pm and 7pm, hoping that these two times will allow most people to be able to attend if they wish. Our office is also open that day from 8am to 4pm. You are welcome to ring our doorbell and come into the church for some quiet time and holy space as your own schedule allows through that day. Ash Wednesday marks the start of the forty days of Lent. The worship is particularly poignant, focusing on the question

of our own mortality and the call to make choices for compassion, generosity, for knowing and making known God's love, each and every day with which we are blessed.