



Things to Ponder

- [About the Author](#)
- [Order](#)
- [About the Book](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Readers' Comments](#)
- [News & Events](#)
- [A Prayer for the Day](#)
- [Things To Shout Out!](#)
- [Things to Ponder](#)
- [My Favorite Quotes](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Home](#)

Obligation or Privilege (Based on John 6:24-35)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Whether you're at a restaurant or preparing a dinner for friends at home, the meal usually begins with various kinds of appetizers. I look forward to Saturday evenings--variety of cheeses, cold shrimp, pot-stickers, chips and salsa, and maybe even a little pate. The appetizers are intended only to whet our appetite for the main course. But because they are served when we are at our hungriest, we have a tendency to fill up on them. When the main course is served we may not be hungry at all. Getting through the main course then seems like an obligation because our hunger has already been satisfied.

Today's Gospel (John 6:24-35) depicts the crowd following Jesus immediately after He had fed them with the loaves and fishes, as related in last Sunday's Gospel. That Gospel counted only the men--about 5,000. Adding the women and children, the crowd was probably closer to 15,000. In writing that story, St. John was prefiguring the real meal that Jesus came to serve: Himself, the real Jesus that we receive in the Eucharist.

But in today's Gospel, the crowd appears to be satisfied merely with more appetizers. They want more of the loaves and fishes and so ask Jesus to repeat this miracle. But He reminds them that the "main course" is not the appetizers, but the Bread of Life--the bread that satisfies a hunger far deeper than a merely physical one. In the course of the next few Sundays, Jesus will teach the crowds much about the Bread of Life that He identifies with Himself. "Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you cannot have life within you." At this point, most of the crowds and disciples of Jesus will leave Him. He is speaking about a hunger and a life that they do not understand, and that, consequently, has no appeal for them. They would have been far more satisfied with a Jesus who just served appetizers.

What do we hunger for in life? Physical food, of course. But we also hunger for money, for a good job, for security, for recognition, for affirmation, for a nice home, a classy car, and a family we can be proud of. All of these are, of course, good things. But Jesus reminds us today that these are the appetizers. They are intended to whet our appetite, through our gratitude to God for all these good things and for the real meal and the only meal that will satisfy our deepest hunger: the Eucharist, the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation.

But like the crowds in today's Gospel, we must admit that the appetizers often have far more appeal than the "main course" that Jesus wants us to feast on: Himself. "Take me," He says, "and become me, and experience the happiness and fulfillment that you will find only in me." We find it hard, like the crowds, to understand how only Jesus can bring us real happiness,

and so we find it easy to turn away and return to the appetizers of this earthly life.

The Church recognizes this tendency we have to devalue the importance of coming to Mass on Sunday and receiving the Eucharist. We are obliged to attend Mass on Sunday. There are holy days like Christmas, the feasts of the Assumption, the Ascension, All Saints Day, and the Immaculate Conception. We call them holydays of obligation. The term obligation usually connotes something distasteful or difficult, something that we would not do willingly. Do we sometimes have that feeling? Do we find excuses like sleeping late, going to brunch, attending a sports event, or a trip to the beach as far more appealing than going to Mass?

Would we use the term “obligation” to describe these and other things that keep us from participating in the Eucharist every Sunday? No, we see such activities not as obligations, but as some kind of privilege, as something that’s far more interesting and fun. Today’s Gospel reminds us that in these instances, we are like the crowds in the Gospel whose hunger is shallow and can be satisfied merely by filling up on appetizers.

For the next few Sundays, Jesus will be speaking constantly about our real hunger, and how only He can fill it. Let’s keep our ears and our hearts open to His words, so that we can see that participating in Mass and receiving the Eucharist are hardly an obligation, but the greatest privilege we could ever enjoy.

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