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Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum.

Q: At what point in time during Mass it is considered too late for anyone coming into the Mass to receive Communion? ?E.M., Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

A: Like most priests, I am loath to give a straight answer to this question because, in a way, it is a catch-22 question for which there is no straight answer.

It is true that before the Second Vatican Council some moral theology manuals placed arrival before the offertory as the dividing line in deciding whether one fulfilled the Sunday obligation of assistance at Mass. But after the liturgical reform, with its emphasis on the overall unity of the Mass, modern theologians shy away from such exactitude.

Mass begins with the entrance procession and ends after the final dismissal and we should be there from beginning to end. Each part of the Mass relates and complements the others in a single act of worship even though some parts, such as the consecration, are essential while others are merely important.

To say that there is a particular moment before or after which we are either "out" or "safe," so to speak, is to give the wrong message and hint that, in the long run, some parts of the Mass are really not all that important. It may also give some less fervent souls a yardstick for arriving in a tardy manner.

Although I prefer not to hazard giving a precise cutoff moment, certainly someone who arrives after the consecration has not attended Mass, should not receive Communion, and if it is a Sunday, go to another Mass.

Arriving on time is not just a question of obligation but of love and respect for Our Lord who has gathered us together to share his gifts, and who has some grace to communicate to us in each part of the Mass.

It is also a sign of respect for the community with whom we worship and who deserves our presence and the contribution of our prayers in each moment. The liturgy is essentially the worship of Christ's body, the Church. Each assembly is called upon to represent and manifest the whole body but this can hardly happen if it forms itself in drips and drabs after the celebration has begun.

Thus people who arrive late to Mass have to honestly ask themselves, Why? If they arrive late because of some justified reason or unforeseen event, such as blocked traffic due to an accident, they have acted in good conscience and are not strictly obliged to assist at a later Mass (although they would do well to do so if they arrive very late and it is possible for them). If people arrive late due to culpable negligence, and especially if they do so habitually, then they need to seriously reflect on their attitudes, amend their ways, and if necessary seek the sacrament of reconciliation.