Why Are Some Masses More Solemn Than Others?

You may have noticed that some Masses are celebrated with more candles, chanting, vestments, readings, or incense than others. Why is that?

In the Church's liturgical theology, there's a guiding principle called "progressive solemnity." This means that the more important or solemn the liturgical day we are celebrating, the more beautiful and solemn our celebration of the Mass should be.

For example:
On a weekday Mass where no saint is commemorated (called a ferial day), the liturgy is kept simple—usually without chanting, incense, or special vestments.

On an optional memorial, such as the feast of St. Peter Chrysologus, the priest may choose to honor the saint with slightly more solemnity—perhaps wearing white or red vestments (if the saint was a martyr) and adding some chanting.

An obligatory memorial commemorates a saint whose impact on the Church is so significant that their feast must be celebrated. The Mass may include additional chants, special vestments, and a greater sense of reverence.

A feast is even more solemn, celebrating major saints like the Apostles or great events like the Visitation or the Transfiguration. The Mass would include the Gloria, more candles, more beautiful vestments, and additional chanting.

At the highest level are solemnities—the most important liturgical celebrations in the Church. On these days, the Mass is marked by incense, special vestments, more candles, chanting, the Gloria, the Creed, and often an additional reading from the New Testament. Examples include the Assumption of Mary, the Immaculate Conception, the Solemnity of St. Joseph, and every Sunday, which is itself a solemnity.

This is also why many solemnities are Holy Days of Obligation—they are central to the life of the Church and are meant to be celebrated with full reverence and joy.

In short, the Church invites us to honor the sacred rhythms of the liturgical year with fitting beauty and reverence—lifting our hearts and minds to God as we worship together.