

# Precepts of the Catholic Church

The *Precepts of the Catholic Church* are a description of the absolute minimum actions required of Catholics regarding the Church.

The Church uses these precepts to remind us that Christian life requires a commitment to prayer and active participation in the liturgy and sacraments. If we fall below this bare-minimum level, we can't rightly consider ourselves to be in full communion with the Catholic Church.

Each of these precepts of the Catholic Church is a requirement. Together with the Ten Commandments, they represent the minimum level of moral living. Intentional violation of the precepts or the Commandments is a *grave matter*, meaning a mortal sin.

(If you're a beginning Catholic, the book you're using to learn the Catholic faith should list these precepts of the Catholic Church. If not, get a different book! I recommend Alan Schreck's *The Essential Catholic Catechism*. It's an outstanding, very readable primer about Catholic Christianity.)

## The Precepts

1. *You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor.*  
We must "sanctify the day commemorating the Resurrection of the Lord" (Sunday), as well as the principal feast days, known as Catholic holy days of obligation. This requires attending Mass, "and by resting from those works and activities which could impede such a sanctification of these days."
2. *You shall confess your sins at least once a year.*  
We must prepare for the Eucharist by means of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). This sacrament "continues Baptism's work of conversion and forgiveness."
3. *You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season.*  
This "guarantees as a minimum the reception of the Lord's Body and Blood in connection with the Paschal feasts, the origin and center of the Christian liturgy."
4. *You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church.*  
"The fourth precept ensures the times of asceticism and penance which prepare us for the liturgical feasts and help us acquire mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart." *See below for more about fasting & abstinence.*
5. *You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.*  
"The fifth precept means that the faithful are obliged to assist with the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability."

(These quotations are from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in its section about the Precepts of the Catholic Church (#2041-3).)

Note that these precepts of the Catholic Church are required, unless you have a legitimate reason for not meeting them. For example:

- If you are sick, tending to a sick child, or camping in the wilderness on Sunday and cannot get to Mass, it is not a grave violation to miss Mass that day.
- Children, the elderly, and pregnant or nursing women do not have to fast on normal fast days (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday).

## More about fasting & abstinence

One of the precepts of the Catholic Church requires fasting & abstinence as signs of repentance. Repentance means to turn away from sin and turn back to God.

Catholic spirituality traditionally includes in repentance some form of penance. Penance means some practice that lets us express sorrow for our sins and helps repair the damage that sin has caused.

Penance gives us important practice in resisting temptation, thereby strengthening us. It greatly strengthens a number of virtues, especially charity, and it greatly enriches life.

The Catholic Church has two official forms of penitential practices: fasting and abstinence. These are so important that they're one of the precepts of the Catholic Church.

Fasting is reducing the amount of food you eat below normal levels. Specifically, on fast days you may eat one full meal and two smaller meals, but those two smaller together should not exceed the amount of the normal meal. Snacking is also prohibited on fast days.

All Catholics age 18 to 59 are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. You are excused from fasting if you have a *legitimate need* to eat a normal amount of food on fast days. This includes:

- The sick or infirm, including handicapped or mentally ill people who need the nourishment or cannot make a free choice to fast
- Pregnant or nursing women
- Some manual laborers

Abstinence means not eating meat (fish is not considered meat in this case). All Catholics 14 and older are required to observe abstinence on these days:

- Ash Wednesday, Good Friday (the Friday before Easter), and all Fridays in Lent.
- Outside the U.S., this is required on all Fridays of the year, in honor of the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday.
- In the U.S., it is still strongly recommended to observe Friday abstinence outside of Lent, but Catholics may choose to substitute another penitential practice or act of charity for these days.

Note that the duty to perform the tasks of your state in life takes precedence over the law of fasting in the precepts of the Catholic Church. If fasting honestly causes you to be unable to fulfill your required tasks, it is uncharitable to fast — the law of fasting would not apply in this case. (Consult with a priest if this is a concern to you.)

## Go beyond the minimum!

Always remember: the precepts of the Catholic Church are *minimum* levels of participation in the life of the Church. Out of love for Christ and a desire to advance in the spiritual life, you will normally try to do far more than they require.

Many people recommend that Catholics:

- Attend Mass at least one *more* time a week. (Most Church parishes celebrate Mass every day of the year!)
- Go to confession at least once a month, and find a regular confessor so he can give you better guidance.
- Find a good *spiritual director* to give you sound guidance for growing in the spiritual life.
- Receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at every Mass, if you meet the guidelines for reception (are free from mortal sin, etc.).
- Make a habit of practicing penitential and charitable acts *beyond* those required by the precepts of the Catholic Church.
- Contribute as much as possible to the material needs of the Church and the needy.