

From the desk of Fr. Jim

Precepts of the Church Part 1: Church Law

Taking up the subject of Church law is done with a certain degree of trepidation. We have to gain an entirely different way of looking at ourselves and our world in order for a discussion of rules and laws to be effective. Most people would claim that the days of even considering the subject are gone. They are quite proud of their sophistication. How much our present situation reminds us of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve is quite shocking. The tempter's argument that encouraged their fall from grace was simple:

"4 But the serpent said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! 5 No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad."

Genesis 3:4-5

In other words, the tempter led them to believe that they could establish their own moral code, or ignore the one God had established.

This is a serious situation for us. Imagine, for example that your child comes to you with the announcement that they are going to ride their bicycle up Central Expressway. If you are a thoroughly modern parent you might be tempted

to say, "Well, honey, you are just as capable as anyone of knowing what is the right thing for you. You have a right to do whatever you like with your body. It is yours, after all. God gave you a mind and you know what is best for you." The plan that their child has will, of course, lead to their destruction. Now, imagine kneeling down for prayer and informing God that the old moral code is no longer useful and we have, for a trial period, replaced His commandments with suggestions. And, that we expect to drop them altogether in the near future. The consequences of our choices are very grave. The fool says "I have no need of God."

Let's just imagine, for the sake of argument, that we have decided that our way of organizing the universe is not working. War, it turns out, is not a solution. Greed will not satisfy our appetite for importance. Physical pleasure is both passing, and leads to all kinds of messes. The devil has deceived us and we are paying the price. One of the things that we have to admit is that our reason has been affected in all this. We are not thinking straight, and we have to return to something that has been tried and proved true. Our experiment has not worked. We cannot do without God and His law.

THE PRECEPTS OF THE CHURCH (see CCC, NOS. 2041-2043)

In addition to presenting the foundations for Christian morality, the Catechism of the Catholic Church includes a section on the Precepts of the Church. These are rules set in the context of a moral life, bound to and nourished by liturgical life. The obligatory character of these positive laws decreed by the pastoral authorities is meant to encourage on the part of the faithful the indispensable foundations for their lives as Catholics. The precepts are as follows:

You shall attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, should be treated differently from the other days of the week. We do that in making the day holy by attending Mass and refraining from doing unnecessary work. Holy Days of Obligation, when we celebrate special feasts of Jesus, the Blessed Mother, and the saints, should be marked in the same way.

You shall confess your sins at least once a year. This obliges in particular those who are conscious of serious sin. Regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation helps to prepare us not only to receive the Eucharist but also to continue the process of conversion begun in Baptism.

You shall receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season. In the United States, this extends from the First Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday. Because the Holy Eucharist is both the source and summit of life for all in the Church, the Church teaches that every member for his or her own good must receive Communion minimally at least once a year.

You shall observe the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence. Fasting is refraining from food or drink to some degree. Abstinence is refraining from eating meat. The Church identifies specific days and times of fasting and abstinence to prepare the faithful for certain special feasts; such actions of sacrifice can also help us to grow in self-discipline and in holiness.

You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church. This means contributing to the support of the activities of the Church with time, talent, and financial resources, each according to their ability.

Once we have stepped toward that, we have to be very careful. There are pitfalls! With every “gone mad” period of history the pendulum swings hard in the opposite direction. People fall to the temptation of exaggerating law and rule. They become detailed to the point of losing any sense of joy. They become extreme and severe in their demand for obedience. This is not God’s way. He is merciful and loving. He gently guides us along His way. His path is absolutely certain, unwavering, but His pointing us along the way is the gesture of a loving father. This is not to be confused with something soft or without consequence. If we choose to act recklessly and pay the price by falling from a great height, the laws of gravity will not be suspended for us, no matter how pitiable the situation. There are consequences for our foolishness and our rebellion. Those will not be altered simply because we fail to understand the truth. The prodigal son in Jesus’ parable lost half of his father’s estate. His father, in an act of overwhelming mercy, forgave him and restored him to his status as son, but the inheritance was still gone. There are consequences for our behavior.

It is true that there are those who love the law not as a means, but as an end, and they love to impose it on others. This is potentially a kind of sickness, but in most cases it is motivated by cruelty. Because of insecurity or even deception (deflecting attention away from their own sins) they loudly proclaim the guilt of others. The saints teach us another way, the way of humility. We are all sinners. We are like sheep who have gone astray. The insistence on obedience to law or rule is a matter of charity for others, not establishing one person as more holy than another.

One final preface in this discussion. One could easily say at this point, “Well, let’s get on with it. Just show me the laws so that I can tell you if I agree.” Of course, that is the Adam and Eve thing all over again, with only the slightest variation. If I agree with the law, find them easy to accomplish, then I will go along with the idea that laws are good or necessary. It is not even on the principal of law that one has to agree first. This might be true for society or physics, but it is different in our religion. It has first to do with acknowledging the right of the Father to establish law. He is the creator and therefore, He has this right. The Son bears the law of the cross into the world. This is the law upon which heaven is organized and to which earth is called to be obedient. Underneath it all is love. Our experience of God’s love for us is the spark that moves us to love Him in return. That love is shown by our obedience.

9 As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in His love. 11 “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. 12 This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:9-14