

# THE SIX COMMANDMENTS OF THE CHURCH

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*He that heareth you heareth me (Luke 10:16).*

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, being a society, has a right to legislate for the spiritual welfare of her members in order to secure their eternal interests. Moreover, her divine Founder bade His Apostles go and teach all nations, and gave them the power to make laws, when He said to them: Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt. 18:18). The Catholic Church, therefore, has authority to regulate all matters pertaining to the worship of God and the salvation of souls. She is guided by the Holy Spirit, who rules and governs her. "As Christ is the Head of the Church," said Pope Leo XIII, "so is the Holy Spirit her soul."

The purpose of the Commandments of the Church is to explain more precisely how Christians should observe the Commandments of God. There is a close connection between the divine and ecclesiastical laws inasmuch as the Church determines how and when the Ten Commandments must be kept in order to secure eternal salvation. Still, there is an important difference: the Commandments of God can never be changed because they enjoin moral obligations; whereas the Commandments of the Church can be changed or dispensed for a good reason. Thus, for instance, if a Catholic robs or murders someone, he does what is wrong in itself; but if he eats meat on a day of abstinence, or misses Mass on Sunday without a just reason, he commits a grave sin, not because he does anything wrong in itself, but because he disobeys a lawful command of the Church. Hence, whilst the Church can dispense the faithful from fasting and abstinence, she can never allow anyone to steal, or to deny an article of Faith.

By her Commandments the Holy Church fixes, for example, how and when the faithful must keep holy the Sabbath day, and the days they must fast and abstain in order to do penance for their sins. Christ having instituted the Sacraments of Penance and of Holy Eucharist, the Church bids her children receive them at least once a year. Matrimony, having been raised by our Lord to a Sacrament, must be received by Catholics according to the conditions made by the Church.

From Apostolic times the pastors of the Church have made many ecclesiastical laws. With the invention of printing the decrees of the Council of Trent and of successive Popes have been more easily preserved. In 1904 St Pius X ordered to be made a complete code of the Church's laws. This arduous task was entrusted to a commission of cardinals, and was only completed in 1917, being promulgated as the new Code of Canon Law. From this vast body of legislation are taken SIX LAWS, which refer particularly to the laity in their everyday spiritual obligations.

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First: To keep Sundays and Holidays of Obligation holy, by hearing Mass and resting from servile work.

Second: To keep the days of fasting and abstinence appointed by the Church.

Third: To go to Confession at least once a year.

Fourth: To receive the Blessed Sacrament at least once a year, and that about Easter time.

Fifth: To contribute to the support of our pastors.

Sixth: Not to marry within certain degrees of kindred, nor to solemnize marriage at the forbidden times.

As the Holy Church has the power to make laws, her members have a serious obligation to obey them. To disobey a Commandment of the Church is a grave sin. Our divine Lord declared: *He that despiseth you despiseth me.* He also said: *If he will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as the heathen and the publican* (Matt. 18:17).

## FIRST COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH

**To keep the Sundays and Holidays of Obligation holy by hearing Mass and resting from servile works.**

Under the Old Law the people of God honoured Him, as He commanded them to do, by different kinds of sacrifices. These were but types of the sacrifice of the New Law, instituted by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. St

Alphonsus, a Doctor of the Church, speaking of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, says : “In the Mass God is honoured as much as He deserves to be honoured; since the same infinite honour is paid to Him again that Jesus Christ paid to Him when He sacrificed Himself upon the Cross”. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is by far the best and the most profitable of all devotions, because through the offering of Jesus Christ at Mass God the Father receives infinite honour and worship. For this reason the Church bids us hear Mass on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation.

The Church instituted these Holidays to remind the faithful of the great mysteries of their Faith, the chief events of our Lord’s life, and the rewards of the saints.

The Holidays of Obligation in England and Wales are: Christmas Day, the Octave Day of Christmas (January 1), the Epiphany, the Ascension, Corpus Christi, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Saints Peter and Paul, and All Saints.

In Scotland, the Immaculate Conception, and the Feast of St Joseph; and in Ireland, the Immaculate Conception, and the Feast of St Patrick are also kept.

The Sacrifice of the Mass was prefigured by the Sacrifice of Melchisedech, who offered to the Lord bread and wine; it was foretold by the prophet Malachias, who said: From the rising of the sun even to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place there is sacrifice and there is offered to my name a clean oblation (Mal. 1:11).

Up to the time of our Lord, sacrifice was offered only in one place, namely, at Jerusalem. Jesus Christ replaced this sacrifice of the body and blood of animals by the sacrifice of His own Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine, and said : Do this for a commemoration of me.

In the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachias there is sacrifice in the Catholic Church in every part of the world from the rising to the setting of the sun. The clean Oblation offered to God in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass never ceases. It is estimated today that the Sacred Host and the Chalice are elevated five times every second.

This Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered for four ends: to give honour and glory to God; to thank Him for all His benefits; to beg His pardon and to make atonement for the sins of the world; and to obtain all the graces and blessings we need through Jesus Christ.

The obligation of assisting at Mass on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation binds all Catholics who have come to the use of reason. It is a grave duty for them to be present at this Sacrifice on the days appointed by the Church. Parents and guardians are bound to see that those under their care go to Mass on Sundays and Holidays.

The obligation of hearing Mass does not bind when there is serious inconvenience, such as sickness or the care of the sick, old age, great distance from church, very bad weather, or work that must be done during the times of Mass.

To fulfil the obligation of hearing Mass, one must be present at the principal parts of the sacrifice, namely, the Offertory, the Consecration and the priest’s Communion. To come late to Mass or to leave before it is finished is a venial sin, unless there is a good reason for doing so.

As children of God, our Father, we are bound to honour and worship Him on the day He has prescribed as a day of rest. Now in the Sacrifice of the Mass Jesus Christ has provided us with a perfect form of giving supreme worship to our Heavenly Father. It was for this reason He said, when He instituted this Sacrifice of the New Law: *Do this for a commemoration of me*. The Holy Church, therefore, commands her children to assist at Mass with attention and devotion on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation under pain of mortal sin. It is a grave sin for a Catholic deliberately to miss Mass on these days without a just reason, because in neglecting the public worship of God, he neglects to recognize his Creator as his Sovereign Lord and Master.

What pertains to the obligation of abstaining from servile work on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation has been already explained under the Third Commandment of the Decalogue. (Cf. “Commandments of God”.) We may add that one of the reasons why Catholics are allowed to go to work on Holidays of Obligation is because they might be dismissed, if they absented themselves from work. But Catholics should then remember that although they may do servile work on these Holidays without sin, they should not do manual labour for themselves afterwards.

## **SECOND COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH**

**To keep the days of fasting and abstinence appointed by the Church.**

Under the Old Law days of penance were sanctified by fasting and abstinence. Fasting is a part of the penance to be done to atone for sin: Be converted to me, saith the Lord, with all your heart in fasting (Joel 2:12). Moses and Elias fasted for forty days. The royal prophet David often mentions his fasting, and Daniel, Esdras, and Esther speak of their fasting. In the law of Moses, abstinence also had a prominent place; the Jews were not allowed to eat the flesh of several animals. Daniel and his companions, when at court in Babylon, chose rather to live on vegetables and water than eat forbidden meats.

Our divine Lord Himself gives us a striking example of fasting, for He fasted forty days and forty nights before beginning His public ministry. He told His disciples that certain devils are only cast out by prayer and fasting. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that, when they ordained priests, they fasted and prayed. Abstinence was also enjoined on the early Christians by St Peter, who told them that they must refrain from eating things sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29).

The Church commands the faithful to fast and abstain in order to mortify themselves, to make atonement for their sins, and to strengthen them against temptations of the flesh. Without self-denial one's natural inclinations lead to sin, owing to original sin, and so our Lord said : If any man will come after me, let him deny himself (Luke 9:23).

Fasting. The law of fasting limits the quantity of food which may be taken. It consists in taking but one full meal in twenty-four hours, and that after midday. Fasting does not forbid some food being taken in the morning and evening, according to the approved custom of the country as regards the quantity and kind of food. Those who are bound to fast may take two to three ounces of bread in the morning, and a collation or small supper in the evening, consisting of eight to ten ounces of food. Drinks, such as coffee, tea, beer, wine, do not come under the law of fasting.

Fasting only binds the faithful after they have attained the age of twenty-one, up to their sixtieth year, unless they are dispensed or excused on account of sickness, poverty, hard work, or some other good reason.

The fast days are the weekdays of Lent, the Ember days and the Vigils of Pentecost, the Assumption, All Saints and Christmas.

Abstinence. The law of abstinence, which restricts the quality of food, forbids the eating of flesh meat and meat soups, or food made from meat; but eggs, milk products and condiments of any kind made from animal fats are allowed.

All Catholics who have come to the use of reason are subject to the law of abstinence, unless they are dispensed or excused on account of illness or some other good reason. This precept binds under pain of grave sin, but a violation of it would not be considered serious unless an appreciable quantity of unlawful food were taken.

### **The Present Regulations**

Note: Since January, 1949, Pope Pius XII allowed the Bishops to dispense most of the pre-war discipline of the Church on fasting and abstinence. In view of this mitigation the Holy Father urged the faithful to add other works, especially those of charity towards the poor and sick.

The present regulations in England and Wales require:

(1) Abstinence only on all Fridays, except when Holidays of Obligation and December 26th fall on a Friday, when there is no abstinence.

(2) Fasting and abstinence are to be observed only on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Vigils of the Immaculate Conception and of Christmas.

When a Vigil falls on a Sunday, there is no fasting or abstinence. If the Vigil of the Immaculate Conception or of Christmas falls on a Saturday, there is fasting, but no abstinence.

Whilst the Church can dispense from the laws of fasting and abstinence, she cannot free the faithful from the obligation of doing penance, because Jesus Christ said: Unless you do penance you shall all likewise perish (Luke 13:3). The Church recommends us to do penance by prayer, fasting and alms deeds.

### **THIRD COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH**

#### **To go to Confession at least once a year.**

The Sacrament of Penance, often called Confession, is the means appointed by our Lord for the remission of the

sins committed after baptism. The obligation of going to Confession is implied in the power given by Christ to the Apostles of forgiving or retaining sins.

Though the divine law enjoins the confession of sin, it does not determine the time for its fulfilment. In the ages of faith it was not necessary for the Church to lay down any law on this subject: the faithful frequented the Sacrament of Penance, knowing the graces they would thereby receive. Later, when many grew lukewarm, the Church found it necessary at the Fourth Council of the Lateran, A.D. 1215, to impose the Commandment - to go to Confession at least once a year.

To fulfil this precept, the yearly Confession must be made within the twelve months following the last good Confession. A bad Confession does not fulfil the obligation. No exact time is named when to go to Confession, but the faithful usually receive the Sacrament of Penance before their Paschal Communion. Any Catholic who misses yearly Confession is bound in conscience to receive this Sacrament as soon as possible.

The words "at least", show that the Church wishes the faithful to go often to Confession. St Bernard used to say: "If you desire interior fitness, love the Sacrament of Penance: it purifies the sinner, and makes the just holier". This wonderful Sacrament gives an increase of sanctifying grace as well as an actual grace to check sin.

One of the conditions to gain a plenary indulgence is usually Confession. It can be made within eight days preceding the day on which the plenary indulgence is granted or within the octave.

Confession is a matter of necessity for those who fall into mortal sin, for Catholics know that, if they die in a state of enmity with God, they would go to hell for ever. For this reason God gives this warning to sinners: Delay not to be converted to the Lord, and defer it not from day to day (Ecclus. 5:8). Just as a person who is taken seriously ill or meets with an accident must see a doctor at once, so a Catholic who falls into serious sin should see as soon as possible a confessor who is a spiritual doctor. St John says: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity (I John 1:9).

#### **FOURTH COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH**

**To receive the Blessed Sacrament at least once a year and that about Easter time.**

Just as bread is the staff of life for the body, so our divine Lord has left Himself under the appearance of bread to be the staff of life for the soul. It is a divine precept to receive Holy Communion: Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you (John 6:54).

No special time was assigned by our Lord for the fulfilment of this precept. He left it to be determined by His Church. The Fourth Council of the Lateran made the universal law that all the faithful should reverently receive the Holy Eucharist at least at Easter, the greatest festival of the Christian year. The time for fulfilling the Paschal Communion begins on Ash Wednesday, and usually extends to Trinity Sunday.

All who have come to the use of reason and have made their First Communion are bound in conscience to receive Holy Communion at Easter time. This precept is not fulfilled by a sacrilegious Communion, and if it has not been complied with at the proper time the obligation still remains, and should be discharged as soon as the occasion offers.

#### **The Decree on Frequent Communion**

It is abundantly clear from the decree issued by St Pius X on December 20, 1905, that the Church does not limit the duty of going to Holy Communion, but the time for fulfilling it.

(1) Frequent and daily Communion, as a thing most earnestly desired by Christ our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be available for all the faithful, of whatever rank and condition of life; so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the Holy Table with the right and devout intention, can lawfully be hindered therefrom.

(2) A right intention consists in this, that he who approaches the Holy Table should do so, not out of routine, or vainglory, or human respect, but for the purpose of pleasing God, of being more closely united with Him by charity, and of seeking this divine remedy for his weakness and defects.

(3) Although it is most expedient that those who communicate frequently or daily should be free from venial sins, especially from such as are fully deliberate, and from any affection thereto, nevertheless it is sufficient that they be

free from mortal sin, with the purpose of never sinning in the future; and if they have this sincere purpose, it is impossible but that daily communicants should gradually emancipate themselves even from venial sins, and from all affection thereto.

(4) But whereas the Sacraments of the New Law, though they may take effect *ex opere operato* (i.e. by their mere reception), nevertheless they produce a greater effect in proportion as the dispositions of the recipient are better; therefore, care is to be taken that Holy Communion be preceded by a serious preparation, and followed by a suitable thanksgiving, according to each one's strength, circumstances, and duties.

(5) That the practice of frequent and daily Communion may be carried out with greater prudence and more abundant merit, the confessor's advice should be asked. Confessors, however, are to be careful not to dissuade anyone from frequent and daily Communion, provided he is in a state of grace, and approaches with a right intention.

St Pius X in 1910 decreed that when children reach the age of reason and can distinguish between ordinary bread and our Lord coming to them in the form of bread, they should then make their First Communion. Parents and all who are responsible for children must see that they fulfil their Easter duties.

Pope Pius XII, anxious to facilitate frequent Communion for the faithful who were unable to observe the strict fast from midnight, issued a decree on March 25, 1957, replacing the rules of fasting before Communion hitherto in force.

### **The New Law of the Eucharist Fast**

- (1) Water may be taken at any time.
- (2) Solid food and alcoholic drinks may be taken three hours before Communion.
- (3) Non-alcoholic drinks may be taken up to one hour before Communion.
- (4) The sick, who need not necessarily be bed-ridden, may take medicines, solid or liquid, as well as non-alcoholic drinks at any time before receiving Holy Communion.

These new rules apply at whatever time of the day Holy Communion is given. The Blessed Sacrament may not be received a second time on the same day, except as Holy Viaticum.

## **FIFTH COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH**

### **To contribute to the support of our pastors.**

Under the Old Law there was special provision made by God for the support of the priests of the Temple and the maintenance of religion. Under the New Law our divine Lord commanded that His ministers should be supported by those to whom they gave their services. Know you not, says St Paul, that they who work in the holy place, eat the things that are of the holy place; and they that serve the altar, partake with the altar? So also the Lord ordained that they who preach the gospel, should live by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:13). The faithful then are bound by divine precept to contribute according to their means to the support of their pastors.

The method of fulfilling this duty has varied at different times; nowadays the offerings of the people are almost the only source of church revenue, as they were in the first ages of Christianity. Moreover, priests, being ordained for the things that appertain to God and the care of souls, are forbidden to occupy themselves in secular employment for their maintenance. So the Church in her Fifth Commandment reminds the faithful of a duty given by her divine Founder.

The clergy have a right in justice to their people's support, because priests, having been put by lawful authority in charge of the spiritual interests of a parish, help the faithful in all their needs.

This Commandment of the Church is a grave one, but it is difficult to determine when mortal sin is committed in particular cases by failing to observe this precept. Much depends on the degree of necessity in which a pastor is placed as well as on the means of the parishioner. But it is clear that careless Catholics, who neglect their religious duties for years, not only give bad example to their neighbours, but also commit a grave sin of omission against the Fifth Commandment of the Church.

The purpose of this ecclesiastical precept is not merely that her pastors may be maintained, churches and schools built, and everything connected with the divine worship worthily carried out, but also that the Kingdom of Christ the King upon earth may be extended for the salvation of souls. This precept is also meant to unite both clergy and people in the bonds of charity, for wherever this mutual love is strong, there the Catholic Faith flourishes. Do not priests well

repay their parishioners for their support, for do they not devote their lives to help them in all their spiritual needs? Whatever contribution the faithful bestow upon the Church, benefits not only those who receive, but also those who give, because it is for the interests of the people that the Church, and all she has, exists.

## SIXTH COMMANDMENT OF THE CHURCH

### **Not to marry within certain degrees of kindred, nor to solemnize marriage at the forbidden times.**

Marriage is a contract made by man and woman, who take each other for husband and wife with the obligation to live together as long as life shall last. The chief law of marriage is that marriage can never be undone by human power. Jesus Christ made this clear, when He said : *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder* (Matt. 19:6).

Jesus Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a Sacrament. St Paul calls matrimony a great Sacrament. As matrimony is a Sacrament of the Living, it must be received in a state of grace, that is, both man and woman about to marry must be free from mortal sin. The Sacrament of Matrimony gives to husband and wife the grace to fulfil their duties and to bring up their children in the love and fear of God.

Just as the State has power to make null and void a contract in which the legal formalities have not been observed, so the Church has power to declare invalid the contract of marriage of a Catholic man or woman who has not complied with the conditions for the reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

For a valid Catholic marriage, it is necessary that the man and woman in the presence of two witnesses exchange their consent before the parish priest, or a priest duly delegated by him. A Catholic, therefore, who goes to be married before a civil authority or a non-Catholic minister is not married in the sight of God because he or she has not complied with the conditions made by the Catholic Church for the Sacrament of Matrimony.

Next, for a valid marriage a man and woman must be free to marry, and freely give their consent. A person who is divorced, or separated from his or her partner, is not free to marry.

Finally, there must be no impediments which would make a marriage null and void. There are two kinds of impediments, namely, prohibitive impediment, and diriment impediment.

A prohibitive impediment renders the contract of marriage unlawful, unless a dispensation is obtained. It is unlawful to contract marriage, if one or both of the parties are under vow, such as a vow of virginity or a vow of taking Sacred Orders or of entering the Religious State.

Another prohibitive impediment is a mixed marriage. The Church most seriously forbids marriage between two persons, one of whom is a Catholic and the other a baptized member of an heretical or schismatic sect. The Church forbids mixed marriages because they generally lead to indifference, the loss of faith, and the neglect of the religious training of the children. The Church will only grant a dispensation from this impediment under certain conditions. There must be just and grave reason for a mixed marriage; the non-Catholic must give a guarantee not to prevent the Catholic party practising the faith, and both parties must promise that all the children of the marriage will receive only Catholic baptism and Catholic education.

A diriment impediment renders the contract of marriage invalid. The chief diriment impediments that make a marriage null and void are: insufficient age, existing marriage bond, disparity of worship, sacred orders, abduction, consanguinity (i.e. relationship by blood), affinity (i.e. relationship by marriage), and spiritual relationship between god-parent and god-child at baptism.

As the parish priest must publish the banns of marriage on three successive Sundays before the marriage ceremony takes place, those who intend with the blessing of God to be joined in holy matrimony should notify their pastor some weeks before they are to be married. In this country the State requires that the local marriage registrar is notified twenty-one days before the intended marriage takes place. After the marriage ceremony in the church, the registrar usually sees the married couple in the sacristy, where they renew their consent in his presence so as to ensure the civil effects of the law.

Catholics may marry at any time of the year, but the Church forbids the solemnization of marriage during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, that is, from the first Sunday of Advent to Christmas Day inclusive, and from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday inclusive. To solemnize marriage means to have the Nuptial Mass with its

accompanying nuptial blessing.

The effects of the Sacrament of Matrimony contracted in a state of grace are an increase of sanctifying grace and a right to the actual graces that are necessary in the married state. The latter graces are necessary for the fostering of mutual love, the keeping of mutual faith, the education of their children, and the bearing of the daily trials of married life.

The Holy Catholic Church has made these six Commandments in order to secure the observance of the divine laws; to raise a barrier against the inconstancy of man; to help him in his weakness; to remind him of his duties to his Creator, his neighbour and himself; to make known to him the means he must take to ensure his eternal salvation.

All who hear the Church and labour as good soldiers of Christ, being obedient unto death, will receive the crown of life which God hath promised to those who love him (James 1:12).

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