

THE FIVE PRECEPTS OF THE CHURCH

(Duties of a Catholic)

Since ancient times, people who hear the successors of Peter and the apostles preaching Christ instinctively ask, "*What shall we do?*" Throughout the centuries, the Church has given trustworthy answers to this question, adapting the unchangeable elements of the Christian vocation to the pastoral requirements of the current age. In our own day, the core responses to this question are summed up in what have come to be known as "The Precepts of the Church."

The Precepts of the Church are derived from Catholicism's moral and doctrinal foundations, and are reflected in many ways, perhaps most notably in her canon law and liturgical discipline. Our Faith Doctrine (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs [2041-2043](#)) lists the five precepts of the Church, which are discussed below.

Catholics should consult the Precepts of the Church as a sort of "self-assessment" by which their compliance with the minimum criteria for active Church membership can be measured. Non-Catholics can consult the list to see what would be expected of them as Catholics.

SUMMATION

- To attend Mass on Sundays and holy days while resting from servile labor (CCC [1388-9](#), [2042](#), [2043](#), [2177](#), [2180](#), [2185](#); [2187-8](#); [2192-3](#)).
- To receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year (CCC [1457](#); [2042](#)).
- To receive the Eucharist at least once a year, during the Easter Season (CCC [1389](#); [2042](#)).
- To observe the days of fasting and abstinence (CCC [2043](#); [2177](#)).
- To help to provide for the needs of the Church according to one's abilities (CCC [1351](#); [1387](#); [1438](#); [2043](#)).

1. ATTEND MASS ON SUNDAYS AND ON HOLY DAYS WHILE RESTING FROM SERVILE LABOR

Commentary: Weekly Sunday Mass (as distinguished from the reception of the Eucharist, which is *not* required here) is obligatory for all Roman Catholics ([1983 CIC 1247](#); some Eastern Catholics have a slightly different discipline). There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a "dispensation" from the Sunday obligation. There are instead some factors that might *excuse* Sunday Mass attendance. One thinks of personal illness or serious infirmity, or the need to take care of someone suffering from same, significant travel situations, or certain jobs affecting public safety or welfare. Saturday evening Mass (regardless of the "type" of Mass—say, a wedding Mass—it is) satisfies the Sunday obligation ([1983 CIC 1248](#)). Watching televised Masses or joining in other prayer or Communion services do not satisfy the precept, however praiseworthy one's participation in such optional activities might be ([1983 CIC 1248](#)).

Servile labor, which may be thought of as work primarily oriented to sustaining our earthly existence or occupation, is today probably better understood not so much in terms of the physical exertion required, but rather in terms of the orientation of the work. An accountant, for example, might find digging in the garden or cutting the grass (traditionally reckoned servile activities) to be recreational, whereas doing tax returns on Sunday could be servile work for such a person, and should be avoided. For a cashier, playing the guitar is likely recreational, while for a professional musician, practicing on Sunday is probably a work to be avoided.

2. RECEIVE THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR

Commentary: Catholics above the age of discretion, generally held to be about seven years of age, are required to confess their grave sins to a priest, even one of a different rite, at least once per year, at any time during the year ([1983 CIC 989, 991](#)). Strictly speaking, persons free of grave sin are not required to make an annual confession, but all Catholics are strongly encouraged to bring even their venial sins to confession ([1983 CIC 988](#)). Certainly persons conscious of having committed grave sins should not delay in seeking absolution notwithstanding the annual nature of the precept. A well-executed “penance service” is a wholesome activity for Christians, but it is not sacramental confession and does not satisfy this requirement. “General absolution,” even if, as is often the case, it is celebrated illicitly, does satisfy the precept, but persons receiving same are still required to confess their grave sins later in individual confession ([1983 CIC 962](#)).

3. RECEIVE THE SACRAMENT OF THE EUCHARIST AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR

Commentary: This reception of the Eucharist can take place within or outside of Mass. For Catholics in the United States, the period for satisfying this precept has been extended beyond what, liturgically speaking, is the Easter season, to run from the First Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday (after Pentecost). By canon law, though, any just cause allows the precept to be fulfilled at any time of the year ([1983 CIC 920](#)).

4. OBSERVE THE DAYS OF FASTING AND ABSTINENCE ESTABLISHED BY THE CHURCH

Commentary: The Church’s laws of fast and abstinence have probably never been lighter. Most Fridays throughout the year and the season of Lent are penitential times ([1983 CIC 1250](#)), but since shortly after the Second Vatican Council, the external discipline of abstaining from meat on Fridays has been abrogated in favor of the recommendation to perform some other self-imposed penance ([1983 CIC 1253](#)). Only on Fridays in Lent are Catholics, aged 14 and older, bound to abstain from meat. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, moreover, Catholics aged 18 to 59 inclusive, are also bound to fast, by which discipline, however, they may still take one full meal during that day, and two smaller meals ([1983 CIC 1252](#)).

5. HELP PROVIDE FOR THE NEEDS OF THE CHURCH

Commentary: While the Church has the innate right to require from the faithful whatever is necessary to support its legitimate temporal activities ([1983 CIC 1260](#)), in fact it rarely exercises this authority. Rather, it leaves to individual Catholics the right to determine precisely when and how they will assist with the temporal needs of the Church (1983 CIC [222](#), [1261-1262](#), [1266](#)). The obvious lack of specificity in these canons, however, should not be taken as a sign that they may be, for all practical purposes, ignored. Sunday collections, annual appeals, spontaneous offerings, bequests and wills, and so on are all ways that Catholics have to satisfy this precept of support. Note that offerings given for a specific purpose can be used by Church authorities only for that purpose ([1983 CIC 1267](#)).

FAITH DOCTRINE REFERENCES

[Catechism of the Catholic Church #2041- #2043](#)

II. THE PRECEPTS OF THE CHURCH

[2041](#) The precepts of the Church are 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 guarantee to the faithful the very necessary minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbor:

[2042](#) The first precept ("You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor") requires the faithful to sanctify the day commemorating the Resurrection of the Lord as well as the principal liturgical feasts honoring the mysteries of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints; in the first place, by participating in the Eucharistic celebration, in which the Christian community is gathered, and by resting from those works and activities which could impede such a sanctification of these days.⁸²

The second precept ("You shall confess your sins at least once a year") ensures preparation for the Eucharist by the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, which continues Baptism's work of conversion and forgiveness.⁸³

The third precept ("You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season") 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.⁸⁴

[2043](#) The fourth precept ("You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church") 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.⁸⁵

The fifth precept ("You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church") means that the faithful are obliged to assist with the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability.⁸⁶ The faithful also have the duty of providing for the material needs of the Church, each according to his own abilities.⁸⁷

82 Cf. CIC, cann. 1246-1248; CCEO, cann. 881 § 1, § 2, § 4.

83 Cf. CIC, can. 989; CCEO, can. 719.

84 Cf. CIC, can. 920; CCEO, cann. 708; 881 § 3.

85 Cf. CIC, cann. 1249-1251; CCEO, can. 882.

86 Cf. CIC, can. 222; CCEO can. 25; *Furthermore, episcopal conferences can establish other ecclesiastical precepts for their own territories* (Cf. CIC, can. 455).

87 Cf. CIC, can. 222.

PAGE RESOURCES

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a3.htm

http://www.canonlaw.info/precepts_noaudio.htm

<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm>

<http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/charts/5-Precepts-and-Holy-Days.htm>

<http://www.cmvic.net/5-precepts>