

The Precepts of the Church

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December 15, 2015



Q: I've been reading more about the Church and I've come across something called the "precepts" of the Catholic Church. How important are they? Why these five extra "rules"?

A: Great question. First, they are gravely important (a matter of spiritual life and death). Second, they are not "extra"; they are the absolute minimum. Basically, the Church wants to make things as simple as possible for us. At some point, someone always comes along and asks something like, "What is the absolute least I can do and still be okay?" So, the Church answers the question. Basically, do these five things, strive to follow the Ten Commandments, and assent to the teaching of the Church. If you do these, you are "still okay". Ultimately, they ensure that we are connected to the life and strength given to us through the Church (in the Sacraments and the mission of the Church).

A "precept" could be described as an obligation legitimately placed upon Catholics in order to urge our observance of a law. The five precepts of the Catholic Church are largely unknown (even to most Catholics!). This is strange, don't you think? It is especially strange when we

consider what the Catechism says about the precepts of the Church. “The precepts of the Church are...obligatory...[and are] meant to guarantee to the faithful the indispensable minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbor” (CCC 2041).

The “indispensable minimum”! A person literally cannot do any less and consider one’s self a “living Catholic”. That is why I said that the precepts are a matter of life and death; if a Catholic is not doing these things, they do not have a pulse. If this all I am doing to live out my faith, I have a faint pulse, but a pulse nonetheless.

Furthermore, if I know that these precepts are required (and now you do...ha!), and consciously refuse to fulfill them, this is likely a mortal sin.

Why don’t people know this? Two reasons immediately come to mind. First, I think that they are so basic, that most Catholics far surpass them and therefore don’t need to really examine if they have been fulfilled. Most likely, if you are an active Catholic, you do these (and more!) regularly. I invite us all to examine ourselves and see if we are especially weak in any one area (Do we regularly skip Sunday Mass? Are we getting to Confession? Are we tithing?). The other reason most of us don’t know the precepts is because our teachers want to be sensitive to us. We all know how much strangely more difficult it becomes to do something when it is an obligation. As long as I am choosing this (as in: this is all my own idea), then I do not resent doing anything. The minute someone tells me that this is something that I HAVE to do...even if it is something simple that I would have done anyways...the action takes upon itself the weight of a burden. We are funny like that, aren’t we? I think that our teachers want to spare us from that experience, and so they (unwisely, even though well-intentioned-ly) neglect to mention the necessity of these precepts. (another theory is that the last precept involves money and no one likes to tell someone else what to do with their money...except commercials, and magazine ads, and billboards, and our broker, and the government, and...)

In a positive sense, you are going to be protecting and nourishing your relationship with God and the Church if you keep these five precepts of the Church. You can think of them as some arbitrary obligation placed upon you (they’re not, by the way), or as check-points to make sure your life remains on course. They are a simple test of your spiritual “pulse”. From this perspective, they provide a certain comfort. Have you ever been worried that you were doing enough? It is a good question. How do you answer it? “Well, I feel like I am today...I don’t feel like it this afternoon...”. The Church spares us from this agony, but not from the question (because it is a really good question!). We have a criterion for self-evaluation. The precepts are neither arbitrary nor mysterious. They are practical and concrete. You can trust them.