

Precepts of Our Church

Each of these precepts (Commandment) 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.

The Precepts

1. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor.
2. You shall confess your sins at least once a year.
3. You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season.
4. You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church.
5. You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.

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.”

This 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. Penance means some practice that lets us express sorrow for our sins and helps repair the damage that sin has caused.

5. “You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.”

This precept requires the faithful to contribute to and assist with the material needs of the Church according to their own abilities.

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.

Keep in mind that these 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, we should normally try to do more than they require. For example:

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 good confessor so he can give you better guidance.

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.

Fasting and Abstinence

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

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.

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.

Abstinence means not eating meat (fish is not considered meat in this case). All Catholics 14 and older are required to observe abstinence on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays in Lent. Outside North America, abstinence is also required on all Fridays of the year, in honor of the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday. In North America, 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.