

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 19 – THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Having now dealt with the commandments of God, we turn our attention to what are usually called ‘the Commandments of the Church’ (or ‘Precepts of the Church’ as they are referred to in the Catechism of the Catholic Church paras.2041-2043). The law of the Church is enshrined in a book called the Code of Canon Law. There are one thousand seven hundred and fifty-two ‘canons’ or rules, governing every aspect of church life. Among these, there are six which are of universal application and it is these that are called the Commandments (or Precepts) of the Church.

Before we embark on them, however, I think it might be advisable to recall that Our Lord gave His Church the command to teach all nations: “.....TEACHING THEM TO OBSERVE ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I HAVE COMMANDED YOU...” (Mt.28: 19-20). In addition He gave them the right to make whatever laws they felt necessary and promised to back them with His divine authority. His actual words were, “WHATSOEVER YOU SHALL BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND ALSO IN HEAVEN...” (Mt.18:18). People are apt to think that something is ‘only a law of the Church’ as if it meant that it needn’t be taken seriously. If, however, He gave His Church the right to make whatever laws they deemed to be necessary and gave His divine backing for those laws, then we most emphatically MUST take them seriously and if we do not do so, we shall be answerable to HIM. So what are these Commandments of the Church?

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

The First Commandment binds us to attend Mass every Sunday and Holyday of Obligation. Where the Sunday Masses are concerned (and that, of course, includes the Saturday Vigil Masses) we have an example of the Church taking a Commandment of God (in this case the Third Commandment) and spelling out how it should be fulfilled. It is as though the Church is saying: ‘God says keep the Sabbath holy - that means worshipping Him in His way on His day - so that means Mass on Sundays.’

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

The Second Commandment binds us to Confess our sins at least once a year. You may remember that I covered this point when talking about the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation) but it would do no harm to repeat what I said then. Anyone conscious of mortal sin which has not yet been confessed, SHOULD go as soon as possible and is BOUND by this law to go at least once a year. Those not in mortal sin, strictly speaking, do not have to confess; nevertheless, to neglect a sacrament we are encouraged to receive REGULARLY to the extent that we do not even go once a year is ‘pushing our luck’ to say the least. It indicates a conscience that is so lax that it is hardly functioning at all and, remember, we are responsible for this state. Sooner or later, such people lapse into mortal sin. Often, indeed, they ARE in it already but appear unconcerned about it.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

The Third Commandment binds us to receive Holy Communion at least once a year ‘during the Easter season’ – that is, between Ash Wednesday and Trinity Sunday. This law together with the second commandment are often called ‘Easter Duties’. Once again, to go so seldom is to court disaster and is usually a sign of a very lax conscience or, perhaps, awareness of mortal sin but a lack of will to get out of that state. I say ‘usually’ because, in some country districts, customs going back two and three hundred years can be found. In those days, it was the NORM to receive Holy Communion once a year after a most careful period of preparation including, of course, confession. I found this myself in Banffshire - a part of Scotland that never lost the faith. Sadly, of course, there are some who cannot keep this law such as those who have made a so-called second marriage when their previous spouse is still living. If they were to go to Holy Communion, they would be committing a sin of sacrilege and, of course, they are unable to confess either. Clearly, therefore, these unhappy souls are not bound by these two laws. The vast majority, however, are not in this unhappy state and are encouraged to receive Holy Communion as often as possible – provided, of course, that they are in a state of grace.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

The Fourth Commandment deals specifically with holy days of obligation. Over and above the Sundays there are liturgical feasts (holy days) that the Church considers of such importance that we should go to Mass on these days as well. They may vary from country to country because this is one of the matters about which the bishops of a particular country may be permitted to exercise their right collectively to make laws for their own people. The saying, 'when in Rome do as the Romans do' applies here, so one follows the laws of a country when one is in that country. Incidentally, 'attending Mass' or 'assisting at Mass' does mean the WHOLE Mass. This is for our own spiritual benefit. If one arrives so late that the readings are over, how can one say one has been to Mass? We haven't seen a play if we come in after the interval!

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

The Fifth Commandment binds us to keep the laws of FASTING and ABSTINENCE. These laws have changed recently too. Now, FASTING, (that is limiting one's eating to one full meal a day) binds all those between 21 and 59 years of age. The DAYS of FASTING are now reduced to two - Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. ABSTINENCE (that is abstaining from meat) binds all those over the age of 14. The DAYS OF ABSTINENCE are the same as in the case of fasting that is Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

What about Fridays throughout the year? We are bound to do some form of penance EVERY Friday. Abstaining from meat still fulfills the LETTER of the law though we are encouraged to "fast" in some way - for example, no cigarettes, no drink, no sweets, or no television. Alternatively, or perhaps as well as, some extra prayers. In whatever way we fulfill this obligation one thing is quite clear - we are obliged to do SOMETHING. Is anyone out there feeling uneasy.....?

The faithful also have the duty of providing for the material needs of the Church, each according to their abilities. Money has to be found and so, of course, the Church makes a law (can.222) to ensure it gets sufficient funds to function properly. So, we all have an obligation to contribute to the Church and its pastors. How much? It is quite impossible to give a figure or even a percentage of income as no two people have exactly the same financial commitments, or the same income.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that your contribution is NOT just to help with the paying of the parish bills but it is also the outward, visible sign of your gift of yourself to God. So strictly speaking, one should give just as much in a 'well-heeled' parish as if one was in a parish that was struggling to pay off a debt. It is my gift to God, therefore, that we are considering here NOT the state of the parish accounts! In a word, my contribution should be linked to my ability to pay! Remember the story of the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4): Our Lord and his disciples were in the temple when they saw people putting money into the treasury (collection box) and it says that some rich people 'put in a great deal' whereas the poor widow put in two small coins. Our Lord's comment was that she was the most generous. The rich gave of their abundance but she gave all she had. Times change: people do not. We still have our 'rich people' and our 'poor widows'.

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

The Sixth Commandment (as contained in Canon Law) binds one not to marry within certain degrees of kindred nor to solemnise marriage at the forbidden times. There are many other laws the Church makes concerning marriage so I mention only the main ones here. The Church has always been very strict about close relationships of either CONSANGUINITY (blood relationship) or of AFFINITY (relationship through marriage). Thus, for example, to marry a second cousin one requires a dispensation. One result of close relations marrying can be mental disorder in the children.

The laws governing WHERE and HOW a marriage takes place have altered in recent years. Once upon a time you would be married in the sacristy if you chose to marry a non-Catholic, even a BAPTISED one! Now, though the NORM is unchanged - Catholics are still supposed to marry Catholics - nevertheless you can get permission to marry a non-Catholic Christian and a dispensation to marry a non-Christian. In such cases, the Catholic must promise to do all he or she can to bring up the children in the Catholic Church alone. The non-Catholic must be informed of the promise, and the priest presenting the petition to the bishop, has to be able to say that he thinks the promise will be kept. Now do you see why I have said on various occasions "lapsed Catholics who are engaged to non-Catholics and want to be married in a Catholic church, have GOT PROBLEMS." They won't get the necessary permission since I cannot truthfully say that I think the promise will be kept.

The normal place for a Catholic to be married is, of course, a Catholic church but here again there has been a relaxation of the rule. When the non-Catholic has some specially strong attachment to a church, for example if his or her father happens to be the minister, or if they sing in the choir or are regular attenders, then permission can be granted for the wedding to take place in the Protestant Church. But even if this is permitted the promise regarding the children must, of course, still be made.

Always and everywhere, the Church's concern is the same - the faith of the Catholic and the faith of the children. If that is NOT threatened, She is content. If it IS threatened then, like any concerned mother, She must do all She can to protect it even though those efforts may not be appreciated! Finally, marriages can be celebrated at any time but it is better to avoid Advent and Lent because of the subdued, penitential nature of these seasons.