

Pastor' Pen: Beyond A Cultural Catholicism

In the United States, according to a study published in 2017, there are approximately 74.3 million Catholics in the United States and another 30 million who identify as former Catholics. In the same study, about 23% of the 74.3 million who those who self-identify as Roman Catholics, go to Mass on a weekly basis. It has become a norm in this country, as well as in the Western cultures for Catholics to identify as Catholics without a real regular practice of the Catholic Faith. They might show up a few times a year. They might show for Christmas and Easter. They might show for funerals and weddings. They might get their children baptized. They might send their kids to Catholic schools even. However a disconnect exists between how people live Catholic faith and what it means to actually be Catholic.

Being Catholic is more than belonging to a subgroup. Being Catholic is a way of life that permeates every aspect of life. The Church does not leave us to figure out what it means to be a 'good' Catholic on our own. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church teaches as one of its precepts that Catholics:

“Participate in the Sunday Eucharist every week and Holy Days of Obligation with their family (if not Catholic, support their children’s participation in the Church of Baptism), include prayer in their daily life, and form their children in the faith.”

Catholicism is not a cultural phenomenon; it is a relationship with God and His people. It is a sacramental bond we share. For there to be a sacramental bond, both parties have to enter into the sacrament in question. Catholicism without the Eucharist is a lifeless body! Christ, Himself, intimates as much when He says in John 6:52, “If you do not eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life within you.” A Catholic who does not regularly go to Mass starves his or her soul to death.

Precepts for Membership/ Precepts for Life

Like any group, the Church does determine what constitutes a member in good standing. Many bristle at this as they have fallen into a grievous error that faith is a personalized mishmash of what is convenient and comfortable. Too many times, people take the attitude of, “How dare the Church tell me I am not a good Catholic because I don’t...” When the Church sets standards (based on the teachings of Christ and divine self-revelation of the Father), it isn’t to make life difficult, but to hold her members to a standard of excellence that the Gospel itself call us to live.

These standards that determine a MINIMUM to which we are held are called precepts. Any pastor of souls worth his calling holds his flock to these precepts (again as a minimum) by which they grow closer to God. He is like the parent that tells their children to eat their vegetables, clean their room, and quit fighting with their siblings. He wants to raise responsible and well-developed adults. A true pastor wants to raise Catholics who will be found awake to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Over the summer, I wish to write about these precepts. Depending upon who you talk to, there are 5 to 7 precepts. Five of them are found in the Catechism grouped as the Precepts of the Church. The other two are found elsewhere in the catechism. I have touched briefly on one of the precepts in talking about the necessary attendance of Sunday Mass.

I am putting these out there because I want people to understand that if the Church holds these as the criteria, I do as well. I do this because it is intolerable that one wants all the benefits of being Catholic without the actual practice of the Catholic faith. Furthermore, we live in a diocese in which parochial school tuition is waived for parishioners. This is done on the understanding that those who place their children in our schools are obeying the precepts of the Church. When they or anyone else fail to live up to the standards set by the Church, it becomes an act of fraud to demand the benefits without living the life it requires. I write these columns to call to action and repentance so that my entire flock reaches the Kingdom of Heaven!

Over the summer months, I will write a column on each of these precepts (a general rule to regulate behavior) so that everyone understands the criteria I am using to determine the status of families who use our programs. I am not looking to throw people out. I would be a poor shepherd were I to do so. By the same token, I would be a poor and neglectful shepherd were I to leave my flock wandering astray from Christ.

The Precepts of the Church are:

1. Go to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days and refrain from unnecessary and servile works.
2. Observe the laws of fasting and abstinence.
3. Confess our sins to a priest at least once a year.
4. Receive Holy Communion at least once a year during the Easter Season.
5. Contribute to the support and mission of the Church.
6. Obey the laws of the Church in regards to marriage.
7. Participate in the Church's Mission of evangelization.