PRAECEPTA ECCLESIAE

The Precepts of the Church

Holy Mother Church, by the authority given her by Christ, binds her children to these few duties, so that every Catholic keeps the indispensable minimum of prayer, penance and moral effort in love of God and neighbor (CCC 2041). The traditional catechisms count six.

"He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me." — Luke 10:16

I To assist at Mass on all Sundays and holy days of obligation

Keeping the Lord's Day holy by attending the whole Mass and resting from servile work. To miss Mass deliberately without a grave reason is a mortal sin.

II To fast and to abstain on the days appointed

Abstinence means no meat; fasting means one full meal and two smaller ones that together do not equal it. Traditionally, Catholics abstained on every Friday and fasted on the weekdays of Lent, the Ember Days and certain vigils. Today's minimum: fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstinence on Fridays (or another penance where the bishops allow).

III To confess our sins at least once a year

Binding on all who have reached the age of reason and are conscious of mortal sin. This is the bare minimum; the Church warmly urges frequent confession, even of venial sins, as a powerful means of growth in holiness.

IV To receive Holy Communion during the Easter time

The "Easter duty": to receive the Blessed Sacrament worthily, in the state of grace, at least once in Paschaltide. In many countries the period runs from the First Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday.

V To contribute to the support of the Church

Each according to his means, providing for divine worship, the clergy, Catholic schools, missions and the poor. "The labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7).

VI To observe the laws of the Church concerning marriage

To marry before a priest and two witnesses; not to marry a non-Catholic, or a relative within the forbidden degrees, without dispensation; and not to celebrate weddings with solemnity in the closed times of Advent and Lent.

WHY THE CHURCH COMMANDS

Christ gave His Church power to bind and loose (Matthew 16:19). Her precepts apply God's law to daily life: they bind under sin because obeying her is obeying Him who sent her.

FIVE OR SIX?

Older catechisms such as St. Peter Canisius's list five; the Baltimore Catechism lists six, adding marriage. The present Catechism (CCC 2042–43) names five and adds support of the Church as a duty.