

In the previous Pastor's Notes, I began discussing the first three precepts of the Church. In this Pastor's Notes, I would like to continue this discussion. As a reminder, the Precepts of the Church can be abbreviated by saying:

1. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligations 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 once 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.

There also was traditionally a sixth precept, that stated:

6. You shall obey the marriage laws of the Church.

Continuing the discussion of the first three precepts, I would like to highlight that the obligation to attend Mass is a *moral obligation*, the willful violation of which results in a mortal sin that must be confessed — UNLESS there are circumstances that make it *impossible*, such as being at the North Pole for work or being bedridden with illness, or even getting a flat tire on the way to Mass. All of these automatically exempt one from the obligation. Now, there is some gray area in this precept. It is a matter of conscience which the individual must judge for himself, with full knowledge that this is serious matter. For instance, you may only be halfway to the North Pole and could have made other plans, making the missing of Mass a matter of negligence rather than impossibility. Or perhaps the illness is just the common cold or (God forbid) a hangover, which does not constitute a grave enough reason to absent oneself from the Sacred Mysteries.

This leads into the necessity of going to Confession when conscious of a grave sin — and of refraining from Holy Communion until you have done so. Now, this moral precept is complicated by the undue expectation in our day that everyone receives Holy Communion at every Mass, which is very unfortunate. It places people in a situation where they feel obliged to commit sacrilege rather than suffer the embarrassment of not approaching Holy Communion for one week, or they feel they have somehow not fulfilled their obligation to attend Mass because they did not receive Holy Communion. People forget that the obligation for reception of Holy Communion is only once a year, at a minimum. This practice of refraining from Holy Communion when conscious of unconfessed grave sin becomes an aid to virtue when contemplating one's future actions. The prospect of having to refrain from Holy Communion and confess a mortal sin might encourage you to incorporate Sunday Mass into your travel plans — or to obtain the necessary dispensations from your pastor when it is foreseen that it will be either impossible or gravely inconvenient.

The Catechism states: “§2043 The fourth precept (‘You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church’) 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.”

The fourth precept reminds us that we are obliged to participate in the way of the Cross with the Lord, that we can't only be a people that feasts without fasting. The way to the Resurrection goes through the Cross. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are the only official fast days that the Church asks of you, a bare minimum. Besides fast days, there are days of abstinence from meat as a common penance. The Church has established that this is only *obligatory* on Fridays during Lent (six times a year). However, **every Friday is a day of penance and abstinence**, with the **recommended** abstinence from meat. The Church has very clearly taught that this common penance should be done by the faithful, even outside of Lent, as a matter of free choice, rather than obligation. However, the Church in her wisdom has given us the option as individuals to substitute some other penance on Fridays outside of Lent for practical reasons of conscience. It does not mean we are exempt from penance and abstinence on Fridays. There is an exception to this rule, of course, during high holy days and solemnities such as the Octaves of Easter and Christmas. On Fridays that fall during those weeks, one should *not* fast, nor do abstinence, because the Church has commanded us to rejoice and celebrate!

Beyond the two obligatory fast days of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and the Friday penance and abstinence — both during Lent and outside of Lent, the Church has also traditionally had quarterly fast days, called the “Ember Days”. The name comes from the Latin “*quatuor tempora*,” and was shortened in the German to “*quatember*.” This was then shortened further into English as “ember.” Just like businesses pay quarterly taxes as a way of marking the fiscal year, the Church traditionally marked the liturgical year by these quarterly fasting reset periods. Each set of Ember Days consisted of a Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, set aside each season for prayer and fasting. While they are no longer obligatory, nor currently widely celebrated in the universal Church, perhaps now is the time for us to remember them and put them into practice as a way of growing in personal holiness and detachment from this world, but also as a way of making reparation for the many sins of all of us who fail to live the Christian ideals.

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