

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Sacred Scriptures tell us that during the course of his earthly ministry Jesus declared to St. Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19;18:18). In theological terms, this is called the "power of the keys," the authority to loose and to bind, to unlock and to lock. Jesus also gave the other apostles a share in the same authority that he gave to Peter. This authority was passed down from Peter and the original apostles to their successors, the popes and bishops of the Church, and remains with the Church to this day by means of apostolic succession.

Using this "power of the keys" the Church has established certain laws or commandments called "precepts," the purpose of which is the salvation and sanctification of souls. These precepts are universally binding upon all the members of the Church, and they specify the minimum moral and ecclesiastical duties that are expected of all the faithful. There are currently five precepts of the Church enumerated in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §. 432:

1. to attend Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation and to refrain from work and activities which could impede the sanctification of those days;
2. to confess one's sins, receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation at least once each year;
3. to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season;
4. to abstain from eating meat, and to observe the days of fasting, as established by the Church.
5. to help to provide for the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability.

These precepts inform us that our life in Christ involves a responsibility to participate fully in prayer, in worship and the sacred liturgy, in the sacraments, in the discipline and piety of the Church and in the generous contribution of our time, talents and financial resources in support of the Church's work, both local and beyond. The precepts of the Church, along with the Ten Commandments, should be considered the absolute bare minimum as Catholics of our commitment and duty to God in grateful response to the graces that He has generously given to us. In fact, they should rightly be understood as the foundation upon which we build our Christian life and "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). To deliberately ignore and fail to fulfill the precepts without a good and legitimate reason - such as sickness, infirmity, caring for someone who is sick, the lack of availability of a church to attend Mass while traveling, and so forth - constitutes grave matter, and if done with full knowledge and full and free consent of the will results in mortal sin.

Next week we will consider each of the precepts and how they can be fulfilled.

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