

THE CHRISTIAN'S OBLIGATIONS

*As to Worship, Fasting and
Abstinence, and the Six Precepts
set forth on the basis of the
Book of Common Prayer, Canon Law,
and general Catholic Usage*

The Church's Discipline as to Worship

The Catholic Church requires regular attendance at its chief act of worship, the Holy Eucharist. In the United States the following feasts are generally recognized as days upon which the faithful are expected, as a matter of Christian duty and obligation, to worship at the Eucharist, that is to say:

Holy Days of Obligation

1. Sundays throughout the year. (Each Sunday is the weekly Feast of the Lord, in recognition of his resurrection, i.e., the Lord's Day.)
2. Christmas Day—December 25th—(the Feast of his Nativity, in recognition of the beginning of his redemptive work).
3. The Circumcision—January 1st—(the Octave of Christmas, and itself a Feast of

the Incarnation. Also the dedication of the New Year).

4. Ascension Day (in honor of the final glorification of our humanity in Christ's Person).

5. All Saints' Day—November 1st—(in honor of Christ's triumphs in redeemed humanity).

Other festivals, formerly Holy Days of Obligation and still generally recognized as Feasts on which the instructed Churchman will naturally be impelled to worship at the Eucharist, are:

Special Days of Devotion

1. The Annunciation of the B.V.M.—March 25th—(in recognition of God becoming Man by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary).

2. Corpus Christi—the Thursday after Trinity Sunday—(in thanksgiving for the Bread of Life).

3. and 4. The Assumption—August 15th—and the Conception of the B.V.M.—December 8th—(being the chief Feasts of our Lady, the former her "heavenly birthday," the latter a feast early introduced from the East into the West by the Church of England).

The above Days of Obligation binding on all (with the Special Days of Devotion for

those who are cognizant of their impelling character) constitute a normal minimum of eucharistic worship, although special circumstances may in special cases excuse the individual therefrom, and growth in the spiritual life will lead to a more frequent attendance, even daily when possible. In particular the Prayer-Book Holy Days and others of similar character (that is, all Holy Days of sufficient note to merit the formal title "Days of Devotion") are marked out for us by Catholic usage as specially appropriate occasions for eucharistic worship.

The Church's Discipline as to Fasting and Abstinence

Fasting is a Christian duty. In modern times it is customary to distinguish between abstinence (in which the quality of food is lowered, usually by not eating meat) and fasting (in which the quantity of food is reduced as well) although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. The discipline "which the Church requires" is widely recognized to be the following:

Rules of Fasting and Abstinence

1. Abstinence from flesh meat on Fridays throughout the year (except those falling on Christmas or Epiphany or between those feasts).

2. Fasting, usually meaning not more than a light breakfast, one full meal, and one half meal, on the forty days of Lent.*

3. Fasting with abstinence on Ember Days and on Fridays in Lent.

Those who cannot choose their food (soldiers, certain employees, etc.) should eat what is set before them, although they should welcome the opportunity to observe abstinence. (It is understood, however, that in tropical countries, where meat is hard to obtain and therefore not an ordinary part of the diet, abstinence is commuted to some other form of discipline than going without flesh meat.) Illness, old age, extreme youth, and heavy manual work excuse from fasting, but the major Fast Days of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as the American Prayer Book indicates, are stricter in obligation, though not in observance, than the other Fast Days, and therefore should not be neglected except in cases of serious illness or other necessity of an absolute character.

The desire to imitate the stricter fasts of

* Lent consists of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Even, exclusive of the Sundays which fall within this period. Because Sunday is the weekly feast of Christ's resurrection, the rule of fasting has never applied to this day of the week under any circumstances.

previous ages, or of saintly ascetics such as the Tractarians, may be a moving of divine love, or sometimes it may be a love of singularity. But since the practice may be unwise, it should never be undertaken without consultation with a competent spiritual guide.

However, certain Vigils, formerly of obligation but no longer listed in the American Prayer Book, may commendably be observed by fasting and abstinence, in honor of the labors of our Lord and His Saints, as:

Fasts of Devotion

1. Christmas Eve.
2. Vigil of Pentecost.
3. Vigil of All Saints.

Easter Even is a Vigil, but is not listed as a Fast of Devotion because it is normally observed as a Lenten day of fasting.

The Eucharistic Fast

The traditional fast before Communion has never been primarily an act of penance, but one of homage to our Lord, its purpose being that of receiving the Blessed Sacrament as the first food of the day. Thus from early days the Communion fast has been an absolute prohibition of anything in the way of food or drink from the previous midnight. In our day, however, it has been realized that

this strict fast impedes the realization of the aims of the Liturgical Movement in restoring the reception of Communion as an element in the normal participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in adjusting the hours of Mass to modern conditions, in the restoration of Communion late in the day during Holy Week, etc. This has tended to a re-emphasis upon Communion as a primary consideration with the preparatory fast as secondary. It is therefore widely held that, in cases where the observance of the strict fast would make impossible the reception of Holy Communion, enough food or drink may be taken to make full Eucharistic participation possible. Some bishops have promulgated a mitigated fast in definite terms, and those living in such jurisdictions should abide by these rules. Generally, the drinking of water and the taking of medicine is today almost universally considered to have no effect upon this fast, and the sick are widely considered to be exempted from the fast entirely. Where there is any question about this fast, the faithful should consult their pastor, for the Priest who dispenses the sacrament is the guardian of the Church's requirements; but the principle that reception of Communion is more important than any fast in preparation for it should always guide in this matter.

The Ordinary Catholic Duties

Churchmen need a clear knowledge of the fundamental rules of discipline which are part of the Catholic heritage of the Episcopal Church, and these are to be found in a simple summary which, in contrast to the Ten Commandments of God, are known as:

The Six Precepts of the Church

Being the Irreducible Minimum of Catholic Practice

1. Of Mass. To assist at Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation.
2. Of Fast and Abstinence. To keep the fasts and abstinences, prescribed in the Prayer Book, according to normal Catholic custom.
3. Of Confession. To seek sacramental absolution when needed for mortal sin, and at Easter time to do so as a matter of obedience to normal Catholic custom.
4. Of Communion. To receive Holy Communion at least once a year, during Easter-tide.
5. Of Almsgiving. To give regularly to the support of the Church and the ministry.
6. Of Marriage. To keep the Church's law of marriage.