

Rights and Obligations of the Lay Faithful in the Catholic Church

Compiled & Edited

by
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Code of Canon Law was translated by the Canon Law Society of America. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* were translated by the United States Catholic Conference, Inc. Other Vatican documents were translated by *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

Purpose of this work

The Catholic Church is one of the most wonderful communities on Earth. It is full of loving people of God striving to put into their daily lives the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. As we respond to Jesus, we soon discover that there are certain obligations connected with discipleship. We learn we are not free to do whatever we desire but are called to respond to others and God as Jesus would have us do.

For the most part, regardless of the specific kind of ministry the faithful are called to, Jesus would be proud of the selfless efforts of many disciples. As a lay person, and then as a pastor, I have met thousands of them over the years. Most people trust that what their pastor, local priest or lay minister has told them is “gospel truth.” Rightly so, as most pastors, priest and lay people involved in ministering to the local faith community, strive to serve their community’s needs honestly without regard to popularity.

Sometimes, however, mistakes may be made by some who may not strive to serve in the example of Jesus. Just as we sometimes fail in our obligations, ministers can fail in recognizing the rights of the faithful. This book has come about as a result of people bumping into pastors, priest, and lay ministers who promote a different agenda than the one outlined by the Church. Many times I have had someone say, “Well Father So-and-so told me thus and so,” when in fact, to my knowledge, neither canon law nor liturgical law coincides with what they were told.

In deciding to write a book and include both rights and obligations, my purpose is to provide a balance in helping people understand both. We need to recognize we are all sinners and make mistakes. The key to fixing mistakes is communicating properly, fairly, honestly, with integrity and above all with Christian Charity. When we follow the command to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and spirit; and our neighbor as ourselves, there is no end to our obligations or their rights.

When asked, “What can I do if the local pastor has denied me my rights?” The first reply should always be, “Have you talked with him?” Often there are miscommunications among even people

of good will. Make sure the facts are correct and the issues to be addressed are clear and simple. Keep in mind the pastor has many people and issues to deal with simultaneously. It may take time for him to respond appropriately, or to change things that may not be correct. If you communicate with the pastor patiently and lovingly and are still dissatisfied with the results, one is always free to communicate with the proper Chancery office or the Bishop's office directly. Please remember that patience is a virtue, and that things move slowly sometimes because of the sensitive nature of many issues.

If all your efforts fail and you feel no one has listened to you, take heart and remember Jesus on the Cross -- to the world it seemed as if he had failed too. Remember that your faith in Jesus is of paramount importance. Recognize that human beings are sinful and make mistakes, which sometimes take centuries to unveil. We should never allow anyone or any institution to come between us and our God. Live your faith to the best that you are able. Remain faithful, and continue to love the Church, just as God loves us when we are unfaithful.

Lastly, please keep in mind that this work is not intended to be a complete listing of all rights and responsibilities, nor has it been approved by the Church as a reference work. I do not claim to be an expert in either area, I am a pastor trying to assist my people to understand and love their Church. For help with a specific issue, you should contact an expert in canon law or liturgical law or the Judicial Vicar in your Diocese.

If I have helped you to understand what the church officially says so that you can better exercise your obligations and rights in a manner that shows love and Christian Charity, this book will have accomplished the purpose for which it was written.

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Introduction

This work attempts to cross reference numerous sources. Canon law is the primary official law of the Church; it is not the only law of the Church. In addition to Canon Law there is Liturgical Law, as well as local laws unique to individual countries or dioceses. While the Pope is the primary giver of both sets of laws for the universal church, the local bishop (or Ordinary) also has the authority to issue laws for the effective governing of his Diocese and the right ordering of the liturgies. As with any body of laws there are issues of contention among people of good will. When conflicts occur they are appealed to a tribunal for clarification and a ruling. Official interpretations when handed down join the original law as having effect.

Many of the universal liturgical laws are found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM). In addition to the GIRM, there are many other decrees or instructions have been issued by the Congregation responsible for guiding the Church in the myriad of details. In many cases local bishops have amended or added to the local laws, (usually with the Vatican's permission), modifying the universal norms to better serve the local church. Just because the laws are not all collected together does not mean they are not of equal importance.

Keep in mind that this work is intended for informational purposes only and is not intended to be used to support one position or another. I make no pretence of being an expert in either canon or liturgical law. If you have specific issues or questions, as with civil law, it is best to contact an expert in canon law or liturgical law.

Canon Law and Liturgical Law

Every organization has rules, officially or unofficially. Oftentimes rules are made solely to support the person with power and secure their power. Dictators have for years reinforced their reigns with oppressive laws and rules. In a democracy the theory is that the laws are designed by those who are subject to the laws for the benefit of those subject to the laws on a more equal basis. The

Catholic Church, as with any other organization also has its rules and laws, which are changed from time to time to meet the current needs. The Code of Canon Law of the Church has one primary purpose:

The purpose of the Code is not in any way to replace faith, grace, charisms and above all charity in the life of the Church or of Christ's faithful. On the contrary, the Code rather looks towards the achievement of order in the ecclesial society, such that while attributing a primacy to love, grace and the charisms, it facilitates at the same time an orderly development in the life both of the ecclesial society and of the individual persons who belong to it. And in fact a Code of Canon Law is absolutely necessary for the Church. Since the Church is established in the form of a social and visible unit, it needs rules, so that its hierarchical and organic structure may be visible; that its exercise of the functions divinely entrusted to it, particularly of sacred power and of the administration of the sacraments, is properly ordered; that the mutual relationships of Christ's faithful are reconciled in justice based on charity, with the rights of each safeguarded and defined; and lastly, that the common initiatives which are undertaken so that Christian life may be ever more perfectly carried out, are supported strengthened and promoted by canonical laws. (*Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*)

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) explains the importance of the Eucharistic celebration and how important it is for the entire faithful to be able to participate fully and actively. If the celebration is disjointed or not done in the prescribed manner, it becomes impossible for them to fulfill their duty and exercise their rights.

It is therefore of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass—that is, the Lord's Supper—be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful taking part in it, according to the proper state of each, may derive from it more abundantly those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and

Blood and entrusted it to the Church, his beloved Bride, as the memorial of his Passion and Resurrection.

This will best be accomplished if, with due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and in mind, a participation burning with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and demanded by the very nature of the celebration, and to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism.¹

Who is a member of the Church?

Sometimes people ask the questions “who have to follow the rules?” and “who have rights?” In a nutshell, the Church’s laws: “bind those who were baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it, and who have a sufficient use of reason and, unless the law expressly provides otherwise, who have completed their seventh year of age.”²

People have “dropped” out of the Church by failing to attend on a regular basis, or perhaps have been absent for years; they may even have attended another denomination’s church for years. These people are usually still considered members of the Catholic Church. While they would want to consider participating in the sacrament of Penance prior to receiving Holy Eucharist, they are, nonetheless, still valid members. Only those who have left the church by formal act are considered non-Catholic, (for example accepting ordination in a non-Catholic church).

Two kinds of membership

The membership of the church is divided into two basic groups: “By divine institution, among Christ’s faithful, there are in the Church sacred ministers, who in law are also called clerics -- the others are called lay people.”³ Clerics are all those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders. This work will be focusing primarily on the rights and responsibilities of lay persons only.

What about religious order brothers, sisters, nuns, and monks? These people have a somewhat unique status in the church. Some religious orders are comprised of both lay persons AND clerics, while other religious orders are exclusively lay OR cleric. “Drawn from both groups are those of Christ's faithful who, professing the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, obedience) through vows or other sacred bonds recognized and approved by the Church, are consecrated to God in their own special way and promote the salvific mission of the Church. Their state, although it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, does pertain to its life and holiness.”⁴ Depending upon their individual community’s rule of life and other issues, their status could vary depending upon the specific issue.

Other Rites of the Church

The Catholic Church is composed of several branches or Rites. Often when people think of the Catholic Church, the presupposition is that of the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church. Traditionally the pope has been a member of this Rite. The church, however, as a worldwide organization has developed differently in different parts of the world. Some of these are commonly called “Eastern Catholic,” or “Oriental Catholic,” they include: Ambrosian, Byzantine, Alexandrian or Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Maronite, and Chaldean rites. Because of the different cultures represented by these Rites, they have a distinct liturgy and have their own Canon Law and Liturgical Law.

While there is much overlap between the sets of law this work will focus exclusively on the rights and privileges in the Latin Rite of the church.

Where do you belong?

Children: If either parent has membership in one of the other rites, then the following applies regarding membership for the child. The child is only a member of the Latin Rite if the parents agree and desire that their child be baptized a member the Latin Church: if that common consent is lacking, the child becomes a

member of the ritual Church to which the father belongs. For example, the father of a child is a member of Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic Church, and the mother is a member of the Latin Catholic Church. In the part of the US where the family lives there is no local church of the father's rite, so the child will be baptized at the local Latin Rite Catholic Church. The child, if the father desires or there is no agreement, - even though baptized and raised in the local Latin Rite church -- is still a member of the Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic subject to their Eastern Canon Law rather than the Latin Canon Law.⁵

Children over 14 and Adults: Any candidate for baptism who has completed the fourteenth year of age may freely choose to be baptized either in the Latin Church or in another autonomous ritual Church; in which case the person belongs to the Church that he or she has chosen.⁶

Special cases: After the reception of baptism, the following become members of another autonomous ritual Church: those who have obtained permission from the Apostolic See; a spouse who, on entering marriage or during its course, has declared that he or she is transferring to the autonomous ritual Church of the other spouse; on the dissolution of the marriage, however, that person may freely return to the Latin Church; the children of those mentioned above who have not completed their fourteenth year, and likewise in a mixed marriage the children of a Catholic party who has lawfully transferred to another ritual Church; on completion of their fourteenth year, however, they may return to the Latin Church.⁷

Non-Catholics Issues

There are a few areas where the Church recognize something as equally binding on non-Catholic Christians and may even provide non-Catholics with rights. For example, we recognize the valid baptism in other Christian churches, and would consider subsequent baptisms to be invalid. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out: "Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those who are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church."⁸

Furthermore, it states in the catechism: "All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church."⁹

We recognize the validity and sacramental nature of a marriage between two baptized persons, even if their non-Catholic denomination does not, and consider it to binding. Thus, a divorced non-Catholic would be impeded from contracting a subsequent marriage recognized by the Church unless they were able to obtain a Declaration of Nullity from the appropriate Catholic tribunal.

Non-Catholics may also have certain rights, even if they have not been received into the Church. For example:

If there is a danger of death or if, in the judgment of the diocesan Bishop or of the Episcopal Conference, there is some other grave and pressing need, Catholic ministers may lawfully administer these same sacraments [of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick] to other Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who spontaneously ask for them, provided that they demonstrate the Catholic faith in respect of these sacraments and are properly disposed.¹⁰

So, while the rules of the Church usually only apply to Catholics, there are a few exceptions.

Rights and Obligations of All Christ's Faithful

Christ's faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason they participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They are called, each according to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission, which God entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world.¹¹

These rights and obligations are for the most part generic and seen as belonging to everyone member of Christ's body. It is prudent to note that the definition for the faithful does not necessarily exclude those who were baptized but are not Catholic. The Church seeks to incorporate all of God's children, wherever they may be, and assist them in responding to God's call in their lives.

Obligation to unity: One of the first obligations that all Catholics have is to remain in communion with the Church at all times and to fulfill our responsibilities to the Church.¹² Throughout history there have been those who have challenged the Church, rightly or wrongly, by sometimes stepping over the boundaries of unity. Such actions should be seen as a severe and drastic measure. All of our actions, private and public, should be within the realm of unity. The church has long had the practice of striving to reconcile those whom have strayed from the teachings of Jesus and the Church. The ultimate declaration that a break has occurred, excommunication, is reserved for those who stubbornly refuse to be reconciled. Excommunication is not really as much an act of the Church as it is a declaration that the actions of a person so severely break a person from unity with the Church that they have placed themselves outside of unity with her. The action taken by an individual, or group, rendered the break, all the Church did was to acknowledge the break. The primary purpose of declaring the excommunication is not to punish a person or group but to challenge

them to review their actions and reconcile themselves with the Church and with Jesus Christ.

Obligation to Holiness: Everyone has a responsibility to strive to live a holy life. We each respond to God uniquely, yet the nature of being holy is a common one. Entering into relationship with God and with our neighbors involves the ongoing tasks of seeking the ultimate best for our neighbors and ourselves. By living a holy life we promote the growth of the Church through our personal sanctification.¹³ In observing our way of life, each day and wherever we are, others see the message of salvation being lived out and are more inclined to accept the message of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Obligation to Obedience: In order for any society to function, people need to obey the rules set out for the harmonious working of the community. Each person has different functions and roles in a society, and life in the Church is no different. Jesus once instructed to his listeners to do all the leaders instructed them to do, because they sat on the chair of Moses... but to not follow their example. We too have the responsibility of obedience to our pastors, “who represent Christ [and] declare as teachers of the faith and prescribe as rulers of the Church.”¹⁵

Right and Obligation to communicate: Obedience is not blind however. Good communication is important so that the pastors are better able to discern the good of the church and the spiritual needs of the faithful. As such the faithful are “at liberty to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their wishes to the Pastors of the Church.” In fact the faithful also have right and a duty or obligation to share such, not only with their pastors but also with other members of the faithful, provided they take into “account both the common good and the dignity of individuals.”¹⁶

Right to spiritual guidance: The people of God do not make their journey alone. Throughout our life we are assisted by many. We have a right to spiritual assistance by virtue of our baptism. We come to know who Jesus is by the teaching of others; we grow in our faith through continued formation offered by

members of the community who see to it that our needs are met. Pastors, for their part, have an obligation to assist us from the spiritual riches deposited in the Church. This is especially true for assistance that comes from the word of God and the Sacraments.¹⁷

Right to participate liturgically: Each culture throughout history has expressed itself in unique ways. The formation of the Church into different styles and forms of ritual helps people to express their love and relationship with God in a manner that has meaning and purpose within their culture. Thus the faithful have “the right to worship God according to the provisions of their own rite approved by the lawful Pastors of the Church.”¹⁸

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Pt 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their Baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit, and therefore, pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.¹⁹

Right to a proper liturgy: Here there are sometimes problems as certain priests tend to “do their own thing”. The Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacrament has written in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*; “The Mystery of the Eucharist ‘is too great for anyone to permit himself to treat it according to his own whim, so that its sacredness and its universal ordering would be obscured’ [27]. On the contrary, anyone who acts thus by giving free reign to his own inclinations, even if he is a Priest, injures the substantial unity of the Roman Rite.” Such actions contrary to the official rubrics violate “the right of Christ’s faithful to

a liturgical celebration that is an expression of the Church's life in accordance with her tradition and discipline"²⁰

The Congregation goes on to say:

"it is the right of all of Christ's faithful that the Liturgy, and in particular the celebration of Holy Mass, should truly be as the Church wishes, according to her stipulations as prescribed in the liturgical books and in the other laws and norms. Likewise, the Catholic people have the right that the Sacrifice of the Holy Mass should be celebrated for them in an integral manner, according to the entire doctrine of the Church's Magisterium. Finally, it is the Catholic community's right that the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist should be carried out for it in such a manner that it truly stands out as a sacrament of unity, to the exclusion of all blemishes and actions that might engender divisions and factions in the Church.[32]"²¹

Right to petition the bishop if the liturgy is not correct:

Because of how much they value the liturgy, most priests try their best to follow the Church's guidelines correctly in planning and celebrating the Eucharist. Sometimes there exist, however, those priests who alter the liturgy to suit their own designs. The mass "should ever seem to be 'anyone's private property, whether of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated' [38]."²² When abuses occur, "any Catholic, whether Priest or Deacon or lay member of Christ's faithful, has the right to lodge a complaint regarding a liturgical abuse to the diocesan Bishop."²³

Right to foster their own piety: In different times and places people have found that, while they have much in common because of faith, culture, language, etc., they have also have unique differences of self expression. These unique differences help to provide for the rich diversity of understandings as to how God interacts with humans, and how we respond to God. As such people have "the right to follow their own form of spiritual life, provided it is in accord with Church teaching."²⁴

This is the right of freedom of conscience and religious freedom, the effective acknowledgment of which is among the highest goods and the most serious duties of every people that truly wishes to assure the good of the person and society. "Religious freedom, an essential requirement of the dignity of every person, is a cornerstone of the structure of human rights, and for this reason an irreplaceable factor in the good of individuals and of the whole of society, as well as of the personal fulfillment of each individual. It follows that the freedom of individuals and of communities to profess and practice their religion is an essential element for peaceful human coexistence ... The civil and social right to religious freedom, inasmuch as it touches the most intimate sphere of the spirit, is a point of reference for the other fundamental rights and in some way becomes a measure of them"²⁵

Right to a common expression: The old saying that “birds of a feather flock together;” expresses the lived observation that we humans have a tendency to cluster together for common causes or expressions. There are times when we need to work in a communal nature to accomplish tasks that are for the good of everyone people form associations and organizations to facilitate the effective and efficient use of resources – financial and material, as well as human. The Church sees people as having a right to freely form such groups, unhampered by hierarchical restraint, to accomplish the charitable and pious works their baptism has called them to.²⁶

In his work called “*Christifideles Laici*” Pope John Paul II emphasized that this right is not concession of the Church, but a right inherent in their baptismal commitment.

First of all, the freedom for lay people in the Church to form such groups is to be acknowledged. Such liberty is a true and proper right that is not derived from any kind of "concession" by authority, but flows from the Sacrament of Baptism, which calls the lay faithful to participate actively in the Church's communion and mission. In this regard the Council is quite clear: "As long as the proper relationship is

kept to Church authority, the lay faithful have the right to found and run such associations and to join those already existing".²⁷

This right is not without its requirements to be considered within the scope of the lay person's mission. John Paul II goes on to list several criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of a lay group and its attachment to the Church.

- The primacy given to the call of every Christian to holiness, as it is manifested "in the fruits of grace which the spirit produces in the faithful" and in a growth towards the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity.
In this sense whatever association of the lay faithful there might be, it is always called to be more of an instrument leading to holiness in the Church, through fostering and promoting "a more intimate unity between the everyday life of its members and their faith".
- The responsibility of professing the Catholic faith, embracing and proclaiming the truth about Christ, the Church and humanity, in obedience to the Church's Magisterium, as the Church interprets it. For this reason every association of the lay faithful must be a forum where the faith is proclaimed as well as taught in its total content.
- The witness to a strong and authentic communion in filial relationship to the Pope, in total adherence to the belief that he is the perpetual and visible center of unity of the universal Church, and with the local Bishop, "the visible principle and foundation of unity" in the particular Church, and in "mutual esteem for all forms of the Church's apostolate". The communion with Pope and Bishop must be expressed in loyal readiness to embrace the doctrinal teachings and pastoral initiatives of both Pope and Bishop. Moreover, Church communion demands

both an acknowledgment of a legitimate plurality of forms in the associations of the lay faithful in the Church and at the same time, a willingness to cooperate in working together.

- Conformity to and participation in the Church's apostolic goals, that is, "the evangelization and sanctification of humanity and the Christian formation of people's conscience, so as to enable them to infuse the spirit of the gospel into the various communities and spheres of life".

From this perspective, every one of the group forms of the lay faithful is asked to have a missionary zeal which will increase their effectiveness as participants in a re-evangelization.

- A commitment to a presence in human society, which in light of the Church's social doctrine, places it at the service of the total dignity of the person. Therefore, associations of the lay faithful must become fruitful outlets for participation and solidarity in bringing about conditions that are more just and loving within society.²⁸

Christifideles Laici points out that according to scripture it is by the fruit of a tree you shall know the tree. Groups are no different. It mentions some of the fruits that have surfaced in the years since Vatican II as new groups have surfaced breathing new energy and vitality into the Church. These include:

“the renewed appreciation for prayer, contemplation, liturgical and sacramental life, the reawakening of vocations to Christian marriage, the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life; a readiness to participate in programmes and Church activities at the local, national and international levels; a commitment to catechesis and a capacity for teaching and forming Christians; a desire to be present as Christians in various settings of social life and the creation and awakening of charitable, cultural and spiritual works; the spirit of detachment and evangelical poverty leading to a

greater generosity in charity towards all; conversion to the Christian life or the return to Church communion of those baptized members who have fallen away from the faith.²⁹

Right to change the World: In challenging the world to be more reflective of its created intention the lay faithful exercise their primary mission. In order to accomplish their mission, the laity has “the right to promote and support apostolic action, by their own initiative, undertaken according to their state and condition.” There is no need for them to wait around until their pastor points out issues and directs them toward a cause. They have their own authority to do such by virtue of their baptism. It must be noted however, that just because those involved are members of the Church, no organization or association or action may use the title “catholic” without the proper ecclesial authority’s permission.³⁰

Right to learn the Truth: It is not possible for the faithful to know how to fulfill their mission without education. One aspect of tyranny is when one is deprived of the opportunity to advance in knowledge and skill. This is as true of our spiritual journey as it is of our academic and political journey. If one is called to live as a Christian and to transform the world, how can this be done if there is no access to a Christian education. Because education is essential in the mission of the laity in living a life in unison with the gospel message, all the faithful “have the right to a Christian education, which genuinely teaches them to strive for the maturity of the human person and at the same time to know and live the mystery of salvation.”³¹

The term “academic freedom” is sometimes used to justify saying anything about anything within an academic environment. Such however is a denial of the truest freedom... to know and to enter into a deeper relationship with our creator. Real academic freedom is always directed toward the truth, which inherently enters upon the area of faith, as Jesus IS the truth. In the study of God, there will always be a diversity of approaches and expressions of how best to express in human language the experience of God and how he is responding to humans as they approach him. Because

there are people at various levels of faith and education, it is always important that while scholars have a just freedom to research, they must express themselves prudently to avoid misleading those who may not be on par with their spiritual development or academic skills. Because of this potential for scandal, it is important for scholars of sacred study maintain due allegiance to the Magisterium of the Church.³²

Right to discern a vocation: In living out the Christian life, there are various vocations to which people are called. Most people are called to married life, some are called to be an unmarried single, some are called to be members of a religious community, and some are called to ordained ministry. Each person must respond to the call from God as they hear God calling them. Since God calls each person uniquely, it only stands to reason that only the individual person can truly discern the call of God. Others may assist and guide them, as would be natural in a community where there is love and the genuine desire for each person to respond to God's call fully. Because of the need for personal commitment as a response to God's call "all Christ's faithful have the right to immunity from any kind of coercion in choosing a state in life."³³

Right to a good reputation: The most treasured possession of a person is something that cannot be purchased, sold, or manufactured – their good name or reputation. Therefore "No one may unlawfully harm the good reputation which a person enjoys, or violate the right of every person to protect his or her privacy."³⁴

Right of fair treatment by Church leaders: As with any right or privilege, there are those who from time to time get caught up in their own causes and issues. Sometimes the human condition of sinfulness leads to one stepping on the rights or privileges of others, either intentionally or unintentionally. Self defense is always justifiable, as long as it is done with Christian charity. On those occasions where the rights of one have been abridged, the faithful have a right to defend themselves in the proper forum.

While a tribunal process involving the laity, outside of marriage issues, is rare, there are provisions in law for certain

processes of justice. If summoned to a tribunal process, the faithful “have the right to be judged according to the provisions of the law, to be applied with equity.” And that “no canonical penalties be inflicted upon them except in accordance with the law.”³⁵

Obligation to support the Church: Places of worship are the most common evidence of a viable community of believers. Throughout history people have come together to construct sacred spaces in which they can worship God, and share fellowship with each other. In addition, since not everyone is always available to serve the community at the same time, or in the same way, it is oftentimes necessary to employ certain members of the faithful to carry out the day to day duties of the community. Such efforts, if they are to survive, depend on the support of the local community. Scripture says that a “laborer is worth their wages”, thus those who work on behalf of the community are entitled to be supported by the community. Without such support many charitable works and ministries would surely fail.³⁶

Obligation to uphold social justice: Assisting the poor and others in genuine need is not just a nice thing to do. Helping others to survive is seen as a work of mercy. In addition, working to end injustice is also necessary as part of our loving our sisters and brothers. We are our brothers’ keeper, so to speak, and what hurts them ultimately will also hurt us. Discrimination, in its many forms, is to be worked against as well as political and financial oppression. Since not all can be active in each instance, we are called upon to support those who are with our financial contributions.³⁷

In the right to life and to integrity, the right to a house and to work, the right to a family and responsible parenthood, the right to participation in public and political life, the right to freedom of conscience and the practice of religion.

Pope John Paul II mentions several rights that should always be defended: “the right to life and to integrity, the right to a house and to work, the right to a family and responsible parenthood, the right to participation in public and political life, the right to freedom of conscience and the practice of religion.”³⁸

Such rights especially the “right to life” come directly from God and affect the personal dignity of people. “In effect the acknowledgment of the personal dignity of every human being demands the respect, the defense and the promotion of the rights of the human person. It is a question of inherent, universal and inviolable rights. No one, no individual, no group, no authority, no State, can change - let alone eliminate - them because such rights find their source in God himself.”³⁹

Sharing and distributing the goods of the earth in an equitable manner is also an issue of justice. “The basis for the social doctrine of the Church is the principle of the universal destination of goods.”⁴⁰

Obligation to respect the rights of others and the common good: It is important to avoid becoming overzealous in our efforts to obtain social justice so that injustices do not occur in reverse. There is the old saying that “two wrongs do not make a right”. One of the basic principles of moral theology is that you can never do an evil to accomplish a good. Within this context, for example, killing a physician who performs abortions is never justified. While defending the rights of the unborn, we must also respect the rights of the person doing the evil.

As members of a faith organization, we must acknowledge the proper regulation of social justice activities by the competent Church authority. While we have an obligation and a right to function on our own, we also should be listening to our shepherds, whose concern may be broader than ours, so as to avoid doing more damage to the whole.⁴¹

Rights and Obligations of the Lay Members of Christ's Faithful

Right and Obligation to evangelize: By virtue of our baptism and confirmation we have a right and an obligation to spread the Good News to the entire world. Jesus said to go and make disciples of all the nations; this cannot be accomplished unless the lay faithful are at the forefront of its movement. Most people who come to the Church requesting to be baptized heard about Jesus, not from a priest or religious, but from a family member, or co-worker, or fellow citizen. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. This duty is the more pressing when it is only through them that men can hear the Gospel and know Christ. Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.⁴²

The foot soldiers in the evangelization effort are those who go about making the world a better place, each in their own way. In observing them, others come to see Jesus in action in the world. Such actions, pave the way for others to inquire as to how Jesus makes a difference. In many parts of the world it is illegal for priest or religious to proclaim the Gospel message publicly. In these places the local population can only come to know Jesus, through the life, action and expression of faith of the laity.

By impacting the secular world with solid spirit of Gospel values the lay people strive to perfect the world, serving as a leavening. In business, in recreation, in politics, in family life one finds the primary mission of the laity.⁴³

Obligation and Right of the married to build up the people of God: The vocation of married life brings special obligations to enhance the community by the way they live out their marriage and raise their family. By virtue of the fact that they gave life to their children, parents have a unique right and primary obligation to see to it that their children are properly educated, particularly in the area of faith and the teachings of the Church.⁴⁴ “Catholic parents have also the duty and the right to choose those means and institutes which, in their local circumstances, can best promote the catholic education of their children.”⁴⁵ This primary right of the parents, is mentioned by John Paul II, “Christian parents are the primary and irreplaceable catechists of their children.”⁴⁶

It is above all the lay faithful's duty in the apostolate to make the family aware of its identity as the primary social nucleus, and its basic role in society, so that it might itself become always a more active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life. In such a way the family can and must require from all, beginning with public authority, the respect for those rights which in saving the family, will save society itself.⁴⁷

Right to be involved in secular activities: While maintaining adherence to the teachings of the Church and the Gospel, the lay faithful have a special freedom to be involved in those activities open to all citizens. In fact they have a virtual obligation to interact in civil affairs so as to permeate the events of government and civic life with the Christian message. While they must take care to avoid putting forth their opinion as that of the Church,⁴⁸ they must be ready to defend the faith if necessary as they exercise their rightful role in secular affairs.⁴⁹

In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in "public life", that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and

cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good. The Synod Fathers have repeatedly affirmed that every person has a right and duty to participate in public life, albeit in a diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks and responsibilities. Charges of careerism, idolatry of power, egoism and corruption that are oftentimes directed at persons in government, parliaments, the ruling classes, or political parties, as well as the common opinion that participating in politics is an absolute moral danger, does not in the least justify either skepticism or an absence on the part of Christians in public life.⁵⁰

Right to knowledge: As with the generic right to education, the laity also has a right to learn and proclaim and defend the faith and the Church's teaching as they live out their ministry.

"Formation is not the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all."⁵¹ This right extends to those subjects taught in Church universities or colleges and includes a right to attend lectures and acquire academic degrees. While there are a large number of places of higher education that serve both the lay and those studying for priesthood in the sacred sciences, this does not mean the laity have a right to enter seminaries which may be reserved exclusively for the specific formation of clergy.⁵² In fact those who are committed to serve the Church in special ministries are obligated to acquire the proper education and formation necessary to fulfill their ministry.

What if a pastor refuses to let a child attend the parish religious education classes? Religious education is a right for all people. I have heard of cases where the local pastor has denied this right to children because of their parent's marriage status, lack of registration, or lack of church attendance. Such is clearly a violation of this statute. Regardless of the parents' status the children themselves have rights.

Right to a just wage: While those who enter certain ministries do so to fulfill their time/talent/treasure commitment to the community, there are those who are hired to accomplish certain

tasks. Those hired by the Church have the right to fair pay and benefits as they serve the community. Fair pay would be such that permits the person to live appropriately according to the community's standards and would include insurance, social security and medical benefits.⁵³

This right is also a part of the Church's position in social justice for all workers. Everyone, regardless of their employer, have a right to be paid fairly, and sufficiently to provide for themselves and their families.

Right and obligation to express their opinion to their pastors: Pastors, like everyone else are in need of good information to make good decisions. When the people are afraid to express themselves honestly, the communication process becomes dysfunctional and poorer decisions are ultimately made. For the good of all the community the church recognizes that it is important for pastors to hear and learn from the experiences of the lay faithful. The CCC states:

In accord with the knowledge, competence, and preeminence which they possess, [lay people] have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful, with due regard to the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons.⁵⁴

Sacramental Rights and Responsibilities

Canon Law and Liturgical Law

In General:

The sacraments of the New Testament were instituted by Christ the Lord and entrusted to the Church. As actions of Christ and of the Church, they are signs and means by which faith is expressed and strengthened, worship is offered to God and our sanctification is brought about. Thus they contribute in the most effective manner to establishing, strengthening and manifesting ecclesiastical communion. Accordingly, in the celebration of the sacraments both the sacred ministers and all the other members of Christ's faithful must show great reverence and due care.⁵⁵

From time to time there are various groups, both to the right and to the left, which have argued certain sacramental acts are invalid because of x, y, or z. However, because the sacraments belong to the whole Church, *only* the supreme authority “can approve or define what is needed for their validity.” It also remains for the Holy See alone to “determine what is required for their lawful celebration, administration and reception and for the order to be observed in their celebration.”⁵⁶ For example those who say the mass of Paul VI is invalid or unlawful are denying the authority of the Pope. On the opposite side, those who rephrase the baptismal formula to say, “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” in order to be politically correct are equally in error.

Right to receive the sacraments: The lay faithful have an inherent right to receive the sacraments, provided they are properly

disposed and not prohibited by Church Law. This right is not without its counterbalance, in that the pastor has a duty to ensure this disposition. Catechetical instructions to receive the sacraments may be required by the proper authority.⁵⁷

Right to non-Catholic valid sacraments: Because of the value the Church places on the sacramental life, there are certain occasions when a Catholic can approach a non-Catholic minister for the sacraments. When it is “physically or morally impossible to approach a catholic minister” one may receive penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick but only if these sacraments are validly administered.⁵⁸

Right of non-Catholics to request sacraments: “If they spontaneously ask for them and are properly disposed” members of the eastern Churches may receive the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick from a Catholic priest.⁵⁹

In addition, if in “danger of death or the judgment of the diocesan bishop there is a grave and pressing need” any Christian, who cannot approach a minister of their own community may receive the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick, provided they spontaneously ask for them, they demonstrate the catholic faith in respect of these sacraments and are properly disposed.⁶⁰

Baptism

Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments, is necessary for salvation, either by actual reception or at least by desire. By it people are freed from sins, are born again as children of God and, made like to Christ by an indelible character, are incorporated into the Church. It is validly conferred only by a washing in real water with the proper form of words.⁶¹

Obligation of parents to have infants baptized: Since infant baptism is considered normal within the Catholic Church, it is important for the parents to plan ahead for the baptism of their child.

Because the obligation is expected to be fulfilled within the first few weeks of the child's life, parents should be in communication with their pastor so they may be suitably prepared.⁶²

The advance time frame is important as pastors also have obligations: 1) to verify that at least one of the parents gives consent; and 2) there must also "be a well-founded hope that the child will be brought up in the catholic religion."⁶³

What if the pastor refuses to baptize the baby? In

the latter case above (2) there are sometimes problems, especially if the parents are not married, not registered, or have not practiced the faith themselves. According to law, "If such hope is truly lacking, the baptism is, in accordance with the provisions of particular law, to be deferred and the parents advised of the reason for this."⁶⁴ Here is where pastors will disagree widely. What constitutes "well-founded hope"? For some pastors the fact that the parents request baptism and attend the proper formation classes, is sufficient. Other pastors insist parents be validly married first, or that the family be registered in the parish, or in attendance for a period of time prior to the baptism. In such a case the pastor must advise the parents as to his reasons to delay a baptism. Delaying a baptism can only be done for a specific cause.

Unmarried parents: The fact that the parents are not married is not usually an impediment to the baptism of a child. According to the law "in the case of a child of an unmarried mother, the mother's name is to be entered if her maternity is publicly known or if, either in writing or before two witnesses, she freely asks that this be done. Similarly, the name of the father is to be entered, if his paternity is established either by some public document or by his own declaration in the presence of the parish priest and two witnesses."⁶⁵ The fact that Canon Law makes provision for the registration of a baby's baptism when the parents are not married, would indicate, that while it would be preferred they be married, they do not have to be married to have a child baptized.

In addition, if the couple should get married simply to appease the pastor in order to have the child baptized the marriage itself could be invalid by reason that the person did not intend marriage.⁶⁶ If they cannot be validly married because of a prior valid marriage, they should consult the pastor as to options they may have to petition for a Declaration of Nullity so that their current marriage might be validated. Such people while not able to receive the sacraments themselves are still considered members of the Church. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

“Toward Christians who live in this situation, and who often keep the faith and desire to bring up their children in a Christian manner, priests and the whole community must manifest an attentive solicitude, so that they do not consider themselves separated from the Church, in whose life they can and must participate as baptized persons: They should be encouraged to listen to the Word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts for justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace.
⁶⁷

How can a parent bring up a child in the Christian faith if the pastor will not allow the child to be baptized?

If however the parents are living together in a state of mortal sin with no intent or desire to change the situation, what is that saying to the child and the very community they want to baptize their child into? Is baptism nothing more than a social event for the family, or because a grandparent is pressuring them? There may be good grounds for delaying the baptism. Here however the pastor should be solicitous of the couple's spiritual life and engage them into considering their behavior and invite them to reconcile their lifestyle with the faith they claim to be professing in requesting the child to be baptized.

Not registered in the parish: Some pastors insist they will only baptize babies of parents who are registered in a parish. There is no universal Church law that requires a person to be registered in a parish; however it is possible some local bishops have stipulated such. According to Church law you are automatically a member of a parish based on your residence – where you live. Who your pastor is, is determined by your domicile or quasi-domicile – “everyone acquires his or her own parish priest and Ordinary.”⁶⁸ The terms “domicile” or “quasi-domicile” are used in law. Quasi-domicile means you intend to stay in that location for at least three months, Domicile means you intend to remain permanently or for at least 5 years.⁶⁹ Thus even if unregistered you are a member of a parish by law and entitled to all the benefits of a registered parishioner.

If however you choose a parish other than where you live then the pastor may well require registration in order to give him jurisdiction, because by your domicile you “belong” to another pastor. This then makes your parish a “personal” parish rather than a territorial parish. While not in unison with the territorial concept, in parts of the world where people can travel distances easily in a few minutes, it has become a reality where people choose to belong to a faith community in which they feel personally connected rather than the local one.

Not practicing the faith: This is perhaps the more challenging issue, because children learn the faith primarily from their parents. If the parents do not practice the faith, how can the child? Having said this, Bishops are “to show an apostolic spirit also to those who, because of their condition of life, are not sufficiently able to benefit from ordinary pastoral care, and to those who have lapsed from religious practice.”⁷⁰ If a Bishop is required to show care to those who have lapsed, why not the local pastor? In addition, the parish priest “is to have a special care for the catholic education of children and young people. With the collaboration of the faithful, he is to make every effort to bring the gospel message to those also who have given up

religious practice or who do not profess the true faith.”⁷¹ Lastly, in the diocese I am living, the Bishop has defined an “active Catholic” as one who attends church at least once per year. As such most “lapsed” Catholics would still be considered active.

Confirmation

The sacrament of confirmation confers a character. By it the baptized continue their path of Christian initiation. They are enriched with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and are more closely linked to the Church. They are made strong and more firmly obliged by word and deed to witness to Christ and to spread and defend the faith.⁷²

Right to be confirmed: “Every baptized person” has a right to be confirmed, provided they have been baptized, not previously confirmed, and reasonably request it of their bishop. If the local Bishop has granted faculties to a priest he must use it for those in whose favor it was granted.⁷³ Those to be confirmed must have “the use of reason must be suitably instructed, properly disposed and able to renew the baptismal promises.” The “sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion [seven (7) years of age] unless the local Episcopal Conference has decided upon a different age”.⁷⁴ In the United States the bishops’ conference has stated this is between seven (7) and sixteen (16) years of age. Some bishops have returned confirmation to its theological and historical location prior to blessed Eucharist. Other bishops have maintained the more recent tradition of delaying confirmation until after blessed Eucharist making confirmation the summit of initiation. By Liturgical Law (Rite of RCIC) a child over the age of seven being baptized is to be confirmed in the same ceremony prior to receiving blessed Eucharist.⁷⁵

Obligation to be confirmed: Everyone who has been baptized has an obligation to seek confirmation. Pastors and parents “are to see that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the

sacrament and come to it at the opportune time.”⁷⁶ As mentioned above the “opportune time” can vary widely depending upon the local bishop’s mandate. In danger of death the unconfirmed should receive confirmation immediately regardless of age.

Blessed Eucharist

The most venerable sacrament is the blessed Eucharist, in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered and received, and by which the Church continually lives and grows. The eucharistic Sacrifice, the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in which the Sacrifice of the cross is forever perpetuated, is the summit and the source of all worship and Christian life. By means of it the unity of God’s people is signified and brought about, and the building up of the body of Christ is perfected. The other sacraments and all the apostolic works of Christ are bound up with, and directed to, the blessed Eucharist.⁷⁷

Obligation to attend mass: “On Sundays and other holydays of obligation, the faithful are obliged to assist at Mass.” They are also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body.⁷⁸

Right to receive Holy Communion: All the baptized not forbidden by law – such as baptized non-Catholics and as noted elsewhere – “may and must be admitted to holy communion.”⁷⁹ Here is restated the basic right to receive the sacraments as noted above under the “General” section of sacraments. This right is not unrestricted and without limitations. For example: “those upon whom the penalty of excommunication or interdict has been imposed or declared, and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin, are not to be admitted to Holy Communion.”⁸⁰ One example of those who are not to be admitted would be those who are in an invalid marriage.

Obligation to hold the blessed Eucharist in highest honor: Unfortunately many in the world do not respect the greatest of values present in the most holy Eucharist. The blessed Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus and is always deserving of devotion, reverence and adoration.⁸¹

Obligation to fast prior to receiving Holy Communion: For many years there has been the requirement to fast from food and drink prior to receiving Holy Communion. Over the years the length of time for the fast has varied. Many living today recall a twelve hour fast or a three hour fast requirement. The fast is currently set at one hour prior to receiving Holy Communion. There is the exception however for water and medicines. In addition “the elderly and those who are suffering from some illness, as well as those who care for them, may receive the blessed Eucharist even if within the preceding hour they have consumed something.” For example those who are homebound or in a hospital who may not be able to control the time of their meals, or know when the minister of the Eucharist will arrive, they are not expected to fast.⁸²

Obligation of parents to prepare children: In the normal baptismal ritual there is a place where the priest or deacon asks the parents if they are ready to undertake the task of bringing their child up in the faith. While a pastor has the obligation to see that children not ready to receive Holy Communion do not do so, it is primarily the obligation of parents to ensure their children who have acquired the age of reason are prepared to be “nourished by this divine food”.⁸³ For the child to be prepared means “that according to their capacity they understand what the mystery of Christ means, and are able to receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion.”⁸⁴

Obligation to receive Holy Communion yearly: After one has received Holy Communion for the first time, there is an obligation to receive it at least yearly during the paschal time (Easter Season).⁸⁵ This law was enacted to counter a false teaching that was spread stating that because no one is worthy, no one should receive.

Obligation to refrain from Holy Communion: If one has been excommunicated or if they “obstinately persist in manifest grave sin,”⁸⁶ or if one is conscious of unconfessed grave sins.⁸⁷

Right to receive in other Rites: Different cultures and expressions of faith have developed over the years. Some of the branches of the Church had been Orthodox and reunited with the Holy See. When this happened they were given permission to retain their customs and traditions. Catholics may participate and receive Holy Communion in any Catholic Rite.⁸⁸

Right to receive only one species: There are those who have certain diseases which prevent them from consuming the Body or the Blood of Christ. Gluten, a natural ingredient in bread products, can be harmful to certain people. While it is normal to receive the host first, because of this disease, such persons may receive the Precious Blood alone. Likewise those who suffer from an addiction to alcohol may receive the Sacred Body alone. Should the local priest distribute Holy Communion by intinction, he is to make the proper accommodations for such persons, if notified in advance.

Right to receive on the tongue or in the hand: It is the recipient of Holy Communion who makes the decision whether to receive the Body of Christ on the hand or on the tongue. No priest may violate this decision, even if he usually distributes by intinction. This may only be abrogated “if there is a risk of profanation, then Holy Communion should not be given in the hand to the faithful”⁸⁹

Right to have the Eucharist celebrated: Baring the physical and canonical limitations a pastor has an obligation to celebrate the Eucharist for their faith community. The Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacrament writes “it is the Christian people’s right to have the Eucharist celebrated for them on Sunday, and whenever holydays of obligation or other major feasts occur.”⁹⁰

What if all the mass times are impossible: Have you ever noticed that if there are three or four parishes in an area, they

seem to schedule masses at the same time of day? Today's businesses do not seem to care about a person's faith life. Hospitals, hotels, manufacturing plants, and other places of employment, often schedule their staff in a way that is convenient for them, (24/7/365) without regard to the employee's other needs. Some priests insist that they only may say one mass per day, regardless of the needs. While Canon Law states that "a priest may not celebrate more than once a day." It also states that "the local Ordinary may for a good reason allow priests to celebrate twice in one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holydays of obligation."⁹¹

In the work "Redemptionis Sacramentum" it is written:

What All Priests, to whom the Priesthood and the Eucharist are entrusted for the sake of others, should remember that they are enjoined to provide the faithful with the opportunity to satisfy the obligation of participating at Mass on Sundays. For their part, *the lay faithful have the right*, barring a case of real impossibility, *that no Priest should ever refuse either to celebrate Mass for the people or to have it celebrated by another Priest if the people otherwise would not be able to satisfy the obligation of participating at Mass on Sunday* or the other days of precept.⁹² (Emphasis is mine)

Given the above notations one could argue that the priest has an obligation to schedule the masses so as to meet the needs of the community, even if this means more than one mass per day.

Right to a Eucharistic celebration that is well prepared and celebrated: "It is the right of the community of Christ's faithful that especially in the Sunday celebration there should customarily be true and suitable sacred music, and that there should always be an altar, vestments and sacred linens that are dignified, proper, and clean, in accordance with the norms."⁹³ This includes the right "that their faith is duly safeguarded and nourished by the words that are sung in the celebration of the Liturgy"⁹⁴

Penance

In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, receive from God, through the absolution given by that minister, forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church, which by sinning they wounded.⁹⁵

Right to choose a confessor: Each person has the right to discern which confessor is appropriate for them. Just because one belongs to this parish or that, one is not obligated to go to that particular priest for confession. They may also, if they choose, go to a priest in another Rite.⁹⁶

Obligation to confess at least once a year: Frequent confession of sins, even weekly, is a tremendous advantage for those seeking to live a holy life. However after the age of reason, usually seven, all the faithful are obligated to confess their grave sins at least yearly.⁹⁷ Confessing even venial sins are helpful on the journey to holiness, however “the faithful are bound to confess, in kind and in number, all grave sins committed after baptism, of which after careful examination of conscience they are aware, which have not yet been directly pardoned by the keys of the Church, and which have not been confessed in an individual confession.”⁹⁸

Obligation to be repentant: Many of us remember what some call a litany of sins – a list formulated long ago that gets rattled off without thinking. It is important that we take time to reflect on the sins we have committed and sincerely intend to amend our lives. To reconcile with God means being open and honest, not just babbling things long ago memorized. We must intend that having repudiated our sins we will turn back to God, asking his forgiveness and help to live a better life.⁹⁹

Obligation to fulfill our penance: Most priest listen sincerely to those who have come to celebrate the sacrament of penance. After listening, they try to provide a penance that they feel is in fitting with the needs, age, and capacity of the person to reform their lives. After receiving the penance from the priest, we have an obligation to fulfill the penance as soon as practical. Sometimes the penance includes items such as restitution or other actions. Completing the penance should be a high priority if one sincerely seeks to be fully reconciled with God.¹⁰⁰

Anointing of the Sick

The anointing of the sick, by which the Church commends to the suffering and glorified Lord the faithful who are dangerously ill so that he may support and save them, is conferred by anointing them with oil and pronouncing the words prescribed in the liturgical books.¹⁰¹

Right to be anointed: This sacrament is sometimes called the forgotten sacrament, because it is reserved for those who begin to “be in danger of death by reason of illness or old age”. It is often seen as or erroneously called “last rights”.¹⁰²

The right to this sacrament is not unlimited as it “is not to be conferred upon those who obstinately persist in a manifestly grave sin.”¹⁰³

Marriage

The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.¹⁰⁴

Right to marry: Unless prohibited by Church law everyone is free to be married.¹⁰⁵ This right is not without its exception clause “prohibited by law” -- a key factor in this right.

Obligation to be truthful in preparation for marriage: Since there are a myriad of reasons that would make a marriage invalid or illicit (impediments), it is important to be honest with your fiancé and your pastor.¹⁰⁶ No priest enjoys watching marriages fail, and will strive to assist couples to the best of their ability to enter into a happy, loving, lasting marriage. According to law “Pastors of souls are obliged to ensure that their own church community provides for Christ's faithful the assistance by which the married state is preserved in its Christian character and develops in perfection.”¹⁰⁷ Some marriages require special permission from the local bishop.¹⁰⁸

Right to know why you cannot get married: There are occasionally those circumstances in which a person, who may deem themselves free to marry, may be told they cannot be. The local bishop in special cases can “forbid a marriage of his own subjects, wherever they are residing, or of any person actually present in his territory; he can do this only for a time, for a grave reason and while that reason persists.”¹⁰⁹

Additional rights if your fiancé is in danger of death: Sometimes as people prepare to marry the clock of their life is ticking faster than the normal rounds of paperwork can be processed. If death is eminent “the local Ordinary (and sometimes the parish priest) can dispense his own subjects, wherever they are residing, and all who are actually present in his territory, both from the form to be observed in the celebration of marriage, and from each and every impediment of ecclesiastical law, whether public or occult, with the exception of the impediment arising from the sacred order of priesthood.”¹¹⁰

Obligation and Right to enter marriage validly: As stated above there are a number of reasons why a marriage would not be

valid. Should any of the following be true for a given couple it is possible or probable the marriage would be invalid:

- 1) marriage prior to 16 for a man and 14 for a woman (US law is 18)
- 2) antecedent and perpetual impotence whether absolute or relative
- 3) a person bound by the bond of a previous marriage
- 4) one of the two persons was baptized in the catholic Church or received into it and has not by a formal act defected from it, and the other was not baptized
- 5) the man is in sacred orders
- 6) someone bound by a public perpetual vow of chastity in a religious institute
- 7) between a man and a woman who has been abducted, or at least detained
- 8) one who, with a view to entering marriage with a particular person, has killed that person's spouse, or his or her own spouse
- 9) between those related by consanguinity in all degrees of the direct line, whether ascending or descending, legitimate or natural
- 10) affinity in any degree of the direct line invalidates marriage
- 11) when a couple live together after an invalid marriage, or from a notorious or public concubinage
- 12) legally related by reason of adoption
- 13) those who lack sufficient use of reason
- 14) those who suffer from a grave lack of discretionary judgment concerning the essential matrimonial rights and obligations to be mutually given and accepted
- 15) those who, because of causes of a psychological nature, are unable to assume the essential obligations of marriage
- 16) those ignorant of the fact that marriage is a permanent partnership between a man and a woman, ordered to the procreation of children through some form of sexual cooperation
- 17) error about a person renders a marriage invalid

- 18) error about a quality of the person if the quality is directly and principally intended
- 19) who enters marriage inveigled by deceit, perpetrated in order to secure consent, concerning some quality of the other party, which of its very nature can seriously disrupt the partnership of conjugal life
- 20) if either or both of the parties should by a positive act of will exclude marriage itself or any essential element of marriage or any essential property, such party contracts invalidly
- 21) marriage subject to a condition concerning the future
- 22) marriage subject to a condition concerning the past or the present is valid or not, according as whatever is the basis of the condition exists or not
- 23) marriage entered into by reason of force or of grave fear imposed from outside, even if not purposely, from which the person has no escape other than by choosing marriage
- 24) contracting parties be present together, either personally or by proxy
- 25) only those marriages are valid which are contracted in the presence of the local Ordinary or parish priest or of the priest or deacon delegated by either of them, who, in the presence of two witnesses, assists

Obligation to be married in their parish church: The norm is for a marriage to take place in the parish church of one of the fiancés, unless the bishop or proper pastor has given permission.¹¹¹

Obligation to marry a Catholic: When two people of different Christian heritages marry there are additional inherent difficulties to a marriage. Therefore one has the obligation to marry someone in full communion with the Catholic Church.

Right to petition the Bishop to marry a non-Catholic: The reality of today is that many times people meet and fall in love and decide to marry without considering the additional challenges they face as a couple. The Church recognizes that this is possible,

especially in areas where there may be a limited number of potential catholic spouses. Therefore the faithful have a right to request permission to marry outside the faith.¹¹²

Obligation to remain faithful: Because of the potential challenges to one's faith and the frequency in which one ceases to practice the faith the bishop, prior to granting permission request that "the catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith, and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power in order that all the children be baptized and brought up in the catholic Church." The fiancé is to be "informed of these promises to be made by the catholic party, so that it is certain that he or she is truly aware of the promise and of the obligation of the catholic party."

Holy Orders

It may seem strange to place Holy Orders in a discussion about laity; however, the laity do have some obligations and rights with regard to this subject.

Obligation to pray for priestly and religious vocations: "Everyone, beginning with the Christian family, must feel the responsibility to foster the birth and growth of vocations, both priestly and religious as well as in the lay state... This should be done by relying on every appropriate means, but without ever neglecting the privileged means of prayer, according to the very words of the Lord Jesus: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest!" (Mt 9:37, 38)."¹¹³

Obligation to foster vocations in family life: It is important to keep in mind that priests are not self-generated like amebas or protozoa. The priests of tomorrow come from a family, and were lay faithful prior to ordination. If we are to have good priest in the

future, there is much about life and God that needs to be learned in the family prior to seminary.

In his letter *Christifideles Laici*, John Paul II writes:
The Christian family, as the "domestic Church", also makes up a natural and fundamental school for formation in the faith: father and mother receive from the Sacrament of Matrimony the grace and the ministry of the Christian education of their children, before whom they bear witness and to whom they transmit both human and religious values. While learning their first words, children learn also the praise of God, whom they feel is near them as a loving and providential Father; while learning the first acts of love, children also learn to open themselves to others, and through the gift of self receive the sense of living as a human being. The daily life itself of a truly Christian family makes up the first "experience of Church", intended to find confirmation and development in an active and responsible process of the children's introduction into the wider ecclesial community and civil society. The more that Christian spouses and parents grow in the awareness that their "domestic church" participates in the life and mission of the universal Church, so much the more will their sons and daughters be able to be formed in a "sense of the Church" and will perceive all the beauty of dedicating their energies to the service of the Kingdom of God.¹¹⁴

Tribunal Issues

Church law provides for its tribunals to handle a wide variety of issues that naturally result from human interaction, both in the secular and church spheres. Unfortunately the overwhelming majority of cases to be brought to the Church's tribunals are petitions for the declaration of nullity, regarding a marriage. Due to many issues, marriages today do not "appear" to survive as well as they did years ago. It is a blemish on the Church and faith that almost 1/3 of marriages fail. (While the national average in the US is 50% the number can be misleading. For every person, such as certain celebrities, who has several marriages there are greater number of marriages that remain intact to maintain the 50% number. For example if one person divorces 7 times, 7 marriages must remain intact for the average to be 50 %.)

Right to challenge the validity of a marriage: Any of the faithful have the right to petition for a declaration of nullity regarding their failed marriage. Normally only a spouse to the marriage may petition the tribunal.¹¹⁵ A petition can only be filed after a civil decree of divorce has been issued.

Right to challenge a tribunal ruling: Either party to a case may appeal the decision of the primary tribunal.¹¹⁶

End Notes

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- 1 General Instruction of the Roman Missal, #17 & #18
 - 2 Code of Canon Law, Can. 11, Can. 96, Can. 97
 - 3 Code of Canon Law, #207
 - 4 Code of Canon Law, #207
 - 5 Code of Canon Law, #111
 - 6 Code of Canon Law, #111
 - 7 Code of Canon Law, #112
 - 8 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1271
 - 9 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #818
 - 10 Code of Canon Law, #844
 - 11 Code of Canon Law, #204
 - 12 Code of Canon Law, #209
 - 13 Code of Canon Law, #210
 - 14 Code of Canon Law, #211
 - 15 Code of Canon Law, #212
 - 16 Code of Canon Law, #212
 - 17 Code of Canon Law, #213
 - 18 Code of Canon Law, #214
 - 19 Sacrosanctum Concilium, #14
 - 20 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #11
 - 21 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #12
 - 22 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #18, #24
 - 23 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #184
 - 24 Code of Canon Law, #214
 - 25 Christifideles Laici, #39
 - 26 Code of Canon Law, #215
 - 27 Christifideles Laici, #29
 - 28 Christifideles Laici, #29
 - 29 Christifideles Laici, #30
 - 30 Code of Canon Law, #216
 - 31 Code of Canon Law, #217
 - 32 Code of Canon Law, #218
 - 33 Code of Canon Law, #219
 - 34 Code of Canon Law, #220
 - 35 Code of Canon Law, #221
 - 36 Code of Canon Law, #222
 - 37 Code of Canon Law, #222

38 Christifideles Laici, #5
39 Christifideles Laici, #38
40 Christifideles Laici, #43
41 Code of Canon Law, #223
42 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #900
43 Code of Canon Law, #225
44 Code of Canon Law, #226
45 Code of Canon Law, #793
46 Christifideles Laici, #34
47 Christifideles Laici, #40
48 Code of Canon Law, #227
49 Code of Canon Law, #229
50 Christifideles Laici, #42
51 Christifideles Laici, #63
52 Code of Canon Law, #229
53 Code of Canon Law, #231
54 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #907
55 Code of Canon Law, #840
56 Code of Canon Law, #841
57 Code of Canon Law, #843
58 Code of Canon Law, #844
59 Code of Canon Law, #844
60 Code of Canon Law, #844
61 Code of Canon Law, #849
62 Code of Canon Law, #867
63 Code of Canon Law, #868
64 Code of Canon Law, #868
65 Code of Canon Law, #877
66 Code of Canon Law, #1103
67 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1651
68 Code of Canon Law, #107
69 Code of Canon Law, #102
70 Code of Canon Law, #383
71 Code of Canon Law, #525
72 Code of Canon Law, #879
73 Code of Canon Law, #885, #889
74 Code of Canon Law, #891
75 RCIC # xxxx
76 Code of Canon Law, #890
77 Code of Canon Law, #897
78 Code of Canon Law, #1247
79 Code of Canon Law, #912

80 Code of Canon Law, #915
81 Code of Canon Law, #898
82 Code of Canon Law, #919
83 Code of Canon Law, #914
84 Code of Canon Law, #913
85 Code of Canon Law, #920
86 Code of Canon Law, #915
87 Code of Canon Law, #916
88 Code of Canon Law, #923
89 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #92
90 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #162
91 Code of Canon Law, #905
92 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #163
93 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #57
94 Redemptionis Sacramentum, #58
95 Code of Canon Law, #959
96 Code of Canon Law, #991
97 Code of Canon Law, #989
98 Code of Canon Law, #988
99 Code of Canon Law, #987
100 Code of Canon Law, #981
101 Code of Canon Law, #998
102 Code of Canon Law, #1004
103 Code of Canon Law, #1007
104 Code of Canon Law, #1055
105 Code of Canon Law, #1058
106 Code of Canon Law, #1069
107 Code of Canon Law, #1063
108 Code of Canon Law, #1071
109 Code of Canon Law, #1077
110 Code of Canon Law, #1079
111 Code of Canon Law, #1115, #1118
112 Code of Canon Law, #1125
113 Christifideles Laici, #35
114 Christifideles Laici, #62
115 Code of Canon Law, #1674
116 Code of Canon Law, #1687

Code of Canon Law was translated by the Canon Law Society of America and taken from the Vatican Website

General Instruction of the Roman Missal was translated by the USCCB and taken from the USCCB Website

Redemptionis Sacramentum was translated by the Vatican and taken from the Vatican Website

Christifideles Laici was translated by the Vatican and taken from the Vatican Website

Catechism of the Catholic Church was translated by the Vatican and the USCCB and ICEL and taken from the Vatican Website