

Hierarchy of Beliefs

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A common misconception among many Catholics—and not just those who suffer with scrupulosity—is that all Church beliefs are of equal weight. Many seem to believe that all disciplines, practices, doctrines, and dogmas of the Church are revealed truths we should follow. Many think every Catholic belief has flowed from the teaching ministry of Jesus and (after his resurrection and ascension) his Twelve Apostles.

That's pretty unbelievable when you understand the outcomes of what is being accepted as Truth. It is no wonder many Catholics are confused. It is no wonder that many attach "grave and serious" to thoughts or actions that are neither grave nor serious. A result is that many people believe Catholicism is burdensome, an everyday struggle of trying to keep life balanced and simultaneously live with a sense of freedom and purpose instead of dread and anxiety.

In Catholicism, there is a hierarchy to our beliefs and practices. At the top are "revealed truths" (doctrines) found in our Creed that were revealed during the ministry of Jesus and include belief in the Holy Trinity; the Incarnation; Christ's passion, resurrection, ascension, Second Coming, and Last Judgment; the remission of sins; the Church; and eternal life.

In addition to the doctrines are dogmas revealed within the constant teaching tradition

**CANON LAW
DOCTRINE
DOGMA LAWS
PRECEPTS
PRACTICES
INTERPRETATIONS
DISCIPLINES**



of the Church and in sacred Scripture, both of which have been clarified and explained primarily through Church ecumenical councils. A way to approach the Church's 250-plus dogmas is through the magisterium, or teaching authority of the Church. The teaching authority includes the pope and bishops.

Certain precepts, practices, laws, and disciplines of the Church have emerged from its doctrinal and dogmatic traditions and have been clarified by the magisterium over the centuries. These are deemed as central to our understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Collectively they are the "pastoral application" of the Christian faith. They are applied by teachers, pastors, and individuals who engage in the practice of the Catholic faith in their day-to-day lives.

Pastoral practice is dependent on the individual interpretation and experience of the person who is applying it. The faithful hope these pastoral practices are evenly applied, but that does not always happen. The reality is that many different interpretations are often possible. Whenever people engage in interpretation, differences are inevitable. We need not necessarily classify different interpretations as right or wrong. Of course, some might insist a certain interpretation is correct, but such a conclusion is not necessarily so. No less a saint and doctor of the Church than the Redemptorists' own St. Alphonsus Liguori correctly argued that it is not unusual to have two "equally probable" interpretations. In such instances, we may feel free to make our own choice.

Practices, interpretations, and disciplines change and often mirror the experience of the local people of God. For example, the holy days of obligation can vary from country to country. Moreover, in the United States there is no uniformity. Six ecclesiastical provinces celebrate the solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord on

a Thursday (forty days after the resurrection), while the rest of the country celebrates it on the following Sunday. The six that celebrate the ascension on Thursday are Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Omaha, and Philadelphia. If this fluidity meets the needs of the people of faith, so be it.

Canon law, the universal codification of the practice of discipline within the Church, also allows for interpretation. For example, canon law states that the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is paramount in the life of the Church and central to who we are as Catholics. But the law was written with the understanding that when there are times when its application is impossible, Catholics are excused from the obligation. These times include when a Catholic is: ill, injured, or caring for the incapacitated; in a disaster area; far from a place where the Eucharist is celebrated; and so on.

Navigating, applying, and living the complete belief system of the Church demands maturity. The Church understands that adults may, at times, need to apply in a different way what is required and recommended. Of course, children cannot be expected to apply the beliefs in the same manner that adults do. The Church also understands that experiences can severely limit the application of the beliefs. As a result, the Catholic belief system is not static. It is animated, alive, and grace-filled.

Unfortunately, scrupulosity often limits the freedom people need in order to fully engage and practice Church beliefs. Through no fault of their own, they experience "diminished capacity." This means the afflicted person does not possess the necessary maturity to live out the hierarchical system of beliefs, despite deep desires to do so. Thus, it is important for those of you with scrupulosity to take care when applying Catholic beliefs in your lives. Please direct any concerns you may have to your spiritual director. He or she will help you navigate. ✨

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Thou Shalt Not Be Unhappy: Living the Ninth and Tenth Commandments

We are seekers of happiness. And God's commandments are our most trustworthy guides. But wait. Don't we normally think more commandments mean less happiness and fewer commandments mean more happiness? Don't we picture laws and commands as hindrances to happiness, not pathways to happiness? The Ten Commandments tutor us in the ways of happiness by moving us toward God, our most excellent and exquisite good, and by teaching us how to rightly seek and love everything else in the light of God.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments call our attention to mistaken paths to happiness. Rather earthy and straightforward, and perhaps embarrassingly honest, they remind us we will not find bliss by feverishly coveting things that do not belong to us, whether it's a neighbor's spouse, wealth, material possessions, "or anything that belongs to [our] neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). Did God have to be so forthright about the more sordid possibilities of human behavior? We may be seekers of happiness, but we are also seekers who commonly go astray.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments recognize that desires are part of our nature. But they also remind us that misguided desires can not only dominate and control us but can harm us—and others—in ways we often only discover belatedly. We cannot live without desires and longings. But we have to be honest about what and how we desire because our desires shape our character and direct our lives. If we are not to end up strangers to happiness, we need to heed what these last two commandments can teach us about learning to desire good things in the right way.

Through fantasy we nurture desires we should

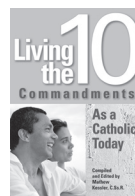
avoid and picture ourselves in relationships and situations that, far from assuring the happiness we imagine, can only end badly. In this respect, the Ninth Commandment bids us to know ourselves well and to be honest about the misguided stirrings of our hearts. It counsels us to be alert to the dangers of unhealthy curiosity.

Ninth Commandment:
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

Tenth Commandment:
You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Do our musings take us out of our commitments or root us more deeply in them? Do they help us see our spouse, families, friends, and communities more graciously and compassionately, or do they lure us away from them in ways that render us deceived and unfaithful?

When we are restless and dissatisfied, instead of seeking refuge in fantasy, we should probe our discontent to discern what is missing in our lives and what will really bring us peace. And we should not be afraid to ask some potentially difficult questions: Do we need a better relationship with God? Do we need to be more aware of, and honest about, our own shortcomings and imperfections instead of being experts in the shortcomings of those we've promised to love? ✨



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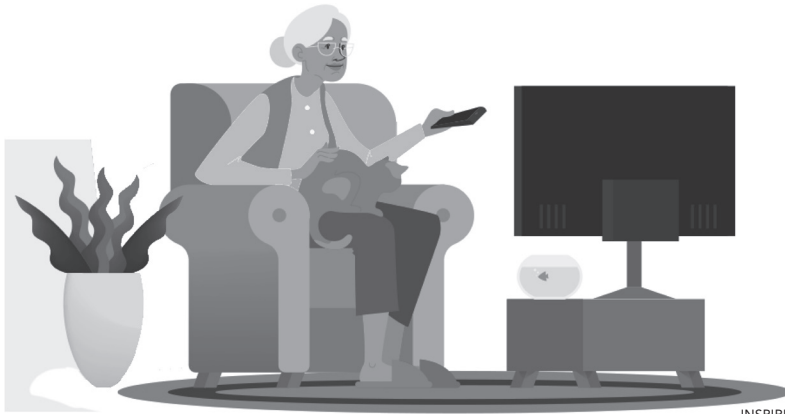
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Q. *Pharmacies now fill “morning-after pill” and other abortion prescriptions. I am cooperating in a moral evil of great consequence if I continue to have my prescriptions filled by these stores. Should I find another option?*

A. You are not cooperating with a moral evil when you have your prescriptions filled by these stores. You may continue to do so. If, on the other hand, you know of a pharmacy that does not fill such prescriptions, you might switch to that store as a way of promoting the culture of life.

Q. *I am getting up in years, as the saying goes. I turned ninety-three on my last birthday. I find the broadcast of the Sunday Mass by my local parish a great comfort. May I continue to watch the broadcast instead of going to church? I cannot attend without great difficulty.*

A. Yes, that is the intention of the broadcast. Also, contact your local parish and arrange for a minister of the holy Eucharist to visit you so you may receive holy Communion. God bless you for your faithfulness.



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