

The Catholic Church: Rules, Guilt and Love

By Stephen Gabriel

Many disaffected Catholics complain that the Catholic Church is all about rules and guilt. They say that the Church has established all kinds of rules for us to obey at the risk of committing sin, sometimes serious sin. And it's a sense of guilt that is used by the Church to coerce us to toe the line. In addressing these concerns, concerns that are raised by not just a few people, I'd like to first provide some context within which to evaluate their merits.

For Christians, who are self-proclaimed followers of Jesus Christ, the only context within which to view the Church and the demands it places on us is the teaching of Christ himself. After all, the Church was established by Christ to help us to follow him as he wished to be followed.

How does God want us to love him?

Let us consider what Jesus asked of his followers. First, Jesus asks for our love—not just a little love, but *all* of our love. He tells us the first commandment is:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:30-31)

Our Lord doesn't leave much wiggle room here. He wants us to give him our heart — ALL of it. This is a very tall order and Jesus knew it. He did not promise us an easy time. He asked us to strive for perfection (Matt 5: 48). He said we must carry our cross daily, if we are to follow him (Luke 9: 23). We should expect persecution (John 15:20). And he made it clear that the gate to Heaven is narrow (Luke 13:23-24).

This is impossible, you may think—difficult maybe, but not impossible. God would not ask us to do the impossible. This is why he gave us the Church and the Sacraments. He did not leave us orphans (John 14:18).

So, how does one give one's entire heart to God? Of course, one might enter a monastery as a cloistered nun or monk. Or one could devote one's life to God as a parish priest or a teaching nun. But, most of us certainly are not called to these vocations. Most of us are called to married life, raising families and working in the middle of the world. This is the life that the vast majority of us are called to sanctify. Jesus has called us to follow him while rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people in the workplace, while changing diapers, driving our kids to school and sporting events, and sitting in traffic jams. Just the thought of these activities makes you want to levitate in an ecstasy of prayer, doesn't it? Well, we may not actually levitate, but we certainly can convert those activities into prayer by offering them to God and doing them with love and to the best of our abilities.

How do lovers love?

Before we consider how we can love God with our entire heart, let's think about how two lovers express their love for each other. Lovers think about their beloved all the time and they go out of their way to spend time with each other. They spend hours talking and getting to know each other, sharing the details of their day. They perform little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness for the other. Most importantly, they are willing to sacrifice for the one they love—doing chores they don't particularly enjoy doing and going out of their way to help them.

Showing our love for God is really not much different. Many ordinary laypeople do, in fact, strive to give their entire heart to God. That is, they struggle to grow in holiness, putting God at the center of their lives, thinking of him always, conversing with him in prayer. They do this by utilizing the means made available to us by Christ and his Church—regular reception of the sacraments (daily Mass, and frequent confession), daily reading of Scripture and some spiritual book (maybe 15 minutes per day), mental prayer each day and praying the Rosary. This is no checklist spirituality. It's a spirituality of love. It constitutes a struggle every day to grow closer to God and to foster a friendship with Jesus through prayer. It's important to remember that love is not a feeling. Love is a choice! We choose to love our spouse and we choose to love God.

This is merely idealism, you say? Maybe so, but it's attainable. Indeed, many very busy people—businessmen, teachers, and housewives with a number of children—struggle to grow closer to God in just this way.

The point is—Jesus set the bar very high for us. If we are truly his followers, if we want to be with him forever in Paradise, we will struggle in this life to love him as he wants to be loved.

Those pesky rules! What good are they?

What does this have to do with rules and guilt? Our Lord wants our love. But, he wants us to give him our hearts freely. A coerced love is no love at all. And his Church also leaves us free to choose to give our entire heart to God. But, as a loving shepherd, it provides us with guidelines. It urges us to give Christ our all and provides the means to do so. But, it also gives us a starting point, the minimum expression of love. It tells us the least we can do and reasonably still call ourselves Christians.

So, we might ask ourselves, are the rules the Church gives us truly oppressive? Or are they simply a help, a set of guidelines from a mother who wants her children to do what is right? Are they rules from a mother who wants to save us from mediocrity and urge us to follow the Master and freely love him as he wants to be loved? If you think about it the Church's rules about Mass attendance, fasting and the like are really quite minimal compared to Our Lord's desire that we love him with *all* our heart, mind, soul and strength. She couldn't *require* us to do much less. And her rules regarding the moral law are simply the guidance of a mother who wants us to respect our dignity as human beings. Ignoring the moral law does violence to ourselves and our society. There is nothing arbitrary here. This is guidance from one who loves us.

Guilt is good!

What about the guilt we feel when we ignore these rules? Guilt is like nerve endings that communicate pain to our brain and prompt us to withdraw our hand from a hot surface. For those with a well formed conscience, guilt is a warning that we've done something wrong. Guilt is the first step towards repentance and reconciliation. Hence, guilt is a good thing. We should pay attention when we have pangs of guilt. It's a message that we ignore at our own peril. Frequently, if we ignore feelings of guilt, we damage relationships. When we ignore feelings of guilt and deny any basis for the guilty feelings, it is usually due to our pride. Our pride tells us that it's the other guy's problem. We've done nothing wrong. Pride will tear apart our relationships with our friends, our colleagues, and our spouse. Pride will also form a wedge between the prideful soul and God and his Church.

So if we are tempted to resent the rules the Church has established as minimal expressions of our love for God, we might think about where our heart really is and consider the kind of love Our Lord is looking for—the kind of love that he wants us to give him freely and generously. And if we feel a bit of guilt for having overlooked the Eucharistic fast or having willfully missed Mass on a holy day of obligation, let's take heed and push our pride to the background and acknowledge how stingy we're being to the one who suffered everything for love of us.

This is an unpublished essay, written in the summer of 2010.

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