

Living by the Spirit and Following the Rules

Salvation is a free gift – this is something that the Catholic Church has always fiercely defended. From the very beginning, Church leaders have pointed out that we are not saved by following a set of rules, but by trusting Christ and allowing his grace to transform our lives. St. Paul emphasizes this clearly: “[You] know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ . . . because by works of the law shall no one be justified.” (Gal 2:16) Why, then, does the Catholic Church have an elaborate set of laws known as Canon Law? Doesn’t this fly in the face of the fact that Christ has set us free from the law?

Old Testament: “The Law”

First of all, we should point out that the word “law” often has a very specific meaning. When Paul talks about “the law,” he is referring to the Law of Moses which was the centre of the covenant God made with Moses and the Israelites. This set of laws and ordinances was a foreshadowing of the New Covenant that God has made with us in Jesus Christ. Paul says that it had value in that it helped people realize that they were sinful, but it had no power to actually change anybody’s life. All it did was accuse people, without offering any real help (see Rm 7:5-13).

But Christ has changed all that. Through the grace of the New Covenant we are empowered to live transformed lives. Because of Christ’s grace, we are able to actually *be* holy. Some Protestants hold that salvation involves a simple decree by God without actually making us into better people. But this makes a mockery of justification. The question is this: is Christ’s death and resurrection powerful enough to actually make me holy? The Catholic Church says “yes.”

This is one reason that we still have rules in the Church. In fact, we see St. Paul giving various rules to the Churches that he founded (e.g., 1 Cor 5). Salvation happens by God’s grace, but it involves an inner, personal transformation that requires our cooperation. In Romans 7, Paul talks about this inner struggle, where on occasion, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Rm 7:15) Even for those who are justified by God’s grace, laws can serve as a guide to our conscience as we cooperate with this grace. If am tempted to do something that I am fairly sure is wrong, it will be far easier to resist if I know that this action is already condemned by the Church. Laws can be a guide for my conscience.

Law and Society

The fact is, law is fundamental to human existence. As humans, we are inherently relational. In every human relationship, we experience the possibility of acting in a just and right way; we experience the possibility of loving the other person. This *possibility*, in the human conscience, gives rise to *responsibility*. This is basically the point of Karol Wojtyla’s 1960 book *Love and Responsibility* (although that work is limited to sexual ethics). This ‘responsibility’ that we often experience towards others can be formulated into a law. An obvious example would be “you shall not kill.” But at their root, all Christian laws are based on respect for the dignity of the human person. This respect comes from within oneself and is not something imposed from the outside.

Church and Society

The Church is a sacrament. It is a concrete entity made up of real people and organizations. It is thus a society, characterized by human relationships, and therefore by the need for justice. In this way, law is a necessary part of the Church's existence because it regulates the relationships between its members. Also, there are many people whose vocation is to work within this Church. Laws are therefore necessary to ensure that these people are treated fairly.

But shouldn't the Holy Spirit alone be sufficient to guarantee that everyone treats everyone else with justice and love? Well, there is no question that the Holy Spirit is sufficient for the task, but there are a few problems. First, the Church is a community of sinners (the only requirement for membership) who sometimes do not perfectly respond to or understand the call of the Spirit. Laws can provide helpful guidance in these situations. And second, even a saint whose intention is perfectly pure may not always *know* the best way of acting in a given situation. By establishing norms based on millennia of experience and discernment, the Church helps those who want to grow in holiness by outlining ways of acting that will most perfectly respect the dignity of others and best draw them closer to Christ.

Following the Rules

Laws in the Church only have value, of course, so long as they serve to help us achieve our ultimate objective: perfect union with God. Any law that doesn't do this is not only a bad one, but as Catholics we are bound to disobey it. Such a situation could potentially arise in the case of a rule made by a pastor or other person in authority but is pretty much unlikely in the case of Canon Law. According to Church teaching, there are four criteria necessary for a law to be binding:

1. it must be *rational*
2. it must be for the *common good*
3. it must be *made known* to everyone whom it affects (*i.e.*, promulgated)
4. it must be made known *by the one in charge of the community* in question

When these characteristics are present, we have a just law.

Following such laws, however, will not bring anyone salvation. We grow in holiness and are saved through the working of grace, given through faith and the sacraments. Laws in the Church are not like the Law of Moses, which was a system unto itself. Laws in the Church are not opposed to the action of the Holy Spirit, but rather are guides to help us live by the Spirit. These laws help us treat others with dignity, form our consciences, resist temptation, and surrender to God's will. In heaven, the inner law of love will be understood and lived perfectly by everyone. But until then, that inner law is manifested in outer laws to help us on our way to our destination.



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