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What Is A
**PRACTICAL
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*By Rev. James Killgallon and
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Are you a “practicing Catholic”? We’ve all been asked this question at one time or another, either as a potential sponsor for Baptism or Confirmation or as an entrance requirement for a Catholic club. As the term is generally used, it means simply that one who is a “practicing Catholic” goes to Mass on Sunday, eats fish or cheese on Friday and makes his Easter duty.

But what does it really mean to be a “practicing Catholic”? Is it the same as being a “good Catholic”? And what, for that matter, is a “good Catholic”? Is he one who merely keeps the rules — the Ten Commandments and the laws of the Church — a legalist? Or is he one who understands the implications of his incorporation into Christ at Baptism and his vocation to a life of love? In other words, is he a “mature Catholic,” a “Christian”?

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Charlie Williams approached the Pearly Gates with confidence. He should be well known in heaven, he figured. After all, hadn't he been a Catholic all his life? Not a convert, not one of those who come into the Church when half their life is over, but a bona fide "born" Catholic. Meat had never passed his lips on a Friday. Charlie was sure that the celestial books contained an impressive report on all the salmon and tuna fish he had consumed throughout a long and well-regulated life.

Charlie had no fears on the score of his Mass attendance record, either. He had never missed Mass on Sundays or holy days, except on a few occasions when he was sick in bed. And even on these occasions he had been careful to confess that he had missed Mass, "just to be sure." Charlie had been a faithful user of his Sunday envelopes, too. He was confident that his generosity to the Church Militant was duly recorded in the files of the Church Triumphant.

Enter the Villain

"It all sounds so familiar," said a dull, flat voice. Charlie whirled around. He had not been aware that he was thinking out loud. He had not been aware either that anyone else was about. Then he saw the owner of the voice — an old man with a long white beard. He was dressed in a

silk, fur-trimmed robe which extended all the way to his sandaled feet. On his head he wore a white turban, and about his neck a gold chain. He looked for all the world like one of the figures in a Bible illustration, Charlie thought.

“Yes, you are right. You have heard of me,” the bearded man said, as if he had read Charlie’s thoughts. “I appeared in one of the parables of Jesus of Nazareth. I am the Pharisee who was immortalized by a visit I once made to the temple in Jerusalem.”

Immediately into Charlie’s mind leaped some words he had heard long ago. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and began to pray thus within himself: ‘O God, I thank Thee that I am not like the rest of men, robbers, dishonest, adulterers, or even like this publican. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I possess.’ But the publican, standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but kept striking his breast, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me the sinner.’”

Exit the Hero

Charlie saw the point, and he did not like it. This Pharisee was an unbeliever. He had refused to accept Christ. Who was he to compare himself to Charlie, a life-

long member of the one true Church of Jesus Christ?

Once again the Pharisee seemed to have read Charlie's thoughts. He shrugged. "Wait and see what the Lord has to say to you," he said. For the first time Charlie felt a slight stab of fear. "What did He say to you?" he asked, a little anxiously. "Don't you know?" the old Pharisee said. "He told me that I had all the satisfaction I deserved from the way I lived on earth. 'You have already received your reward,' the Lord said."

Charlie Was a Legalist

Charlie felt a stab again, but he quickly reassured himself. After all, the Pharisees were a pretty bad lot, quite different from himself. What could he have in common with a Pharisee? He was a Christian, and he had lived in the 20th century. What is more — he had been a "practical Catholic." He had not only gone to Mass every Sunday, he had been an usher at the eight o'clock Mass for years. Yes, he *had* been in the habit of ducking out for a smoke during the sermon, but after all that was no sin. The sermon was not a principal part of the Mass. "All you have to catch under pain of mortal sin is the Offertory, the Consecration and the Communion," he often said.

Yes, Charlie had been very careful to

keep all the rules — all the rules which bound under sin. “Is it a sin?” he was always asking himself. This was his rule. His aim was to save his soul by keeping all the rules. For Charlie, this is what religion meant. His had been a religion of laws and obligations. God, he figured, kept pretty exact records, and he was determined that his score would be up to par.

In short, Charlie was a legalist, one whose religion was a matter of external observance, nothing more. In this Charlie was like the Pharisees.

But Charlie was right in one respect — the Pharisees as a sect disappeared long ago. Gone are the fur-trimmed robes, the turbans and the phylacteries. The Pharisees are gone, but pharisaism did not depart with them. The spirit of the Pharisees, the spirit against which Christ preached, is still very much with us. It shows up in many ways. Here are just a few of them.

A child in confession: “My mother said that I should go ahead and eat the meat on Friday, then I could go to confession on Saturday.” The mother is not disturbed at the idea of sin, even serious sin. For her, mortal sin is simply a stain on the soul, which can be easily removed by the legal procedures of “going to confession.”

A question about the Lenten fast: "Father, would it be all right if I skipped dessert at my main meal and had a piece of cake or pie as a snack later at night?" The questioner is not concerned with the spirit of the Lenten fast. She is not thinking of the love and spirit of sacrifice which alone makes self-denial meaningful to God. She is preoccupied solely with the law of fasting and with the extent to which it binds her.

One of the mourners at a wake: "I'd like to receive Communion at the funeral tomorrow, but I can't unless I go to confession first, because I had the flu last Sunday and had to miss Mass." The lady thinks that one can somehow become guilty of mortal sin even when one does nothing wrong. It is simply a legal penalty which one incurs for not fulfilling an obligation which one is not expected to fulfill under the circumstances.

The Law That Kills

All the above are examples of something which was of the very essence of pharisaism—legalism. The Pharisees were greatly concerned with the law. They were careful to keep it, down to the smallest detail. But they were so preoccupied with the letter of the law that they lost

sight of its spirit. They came to think that the mere external observance of the laws of God constituted holiness.

Far from seeing the Mosaic Law as God intended it, as a means of showing love of God and grateful fidelity to His covenant, the Pharisees saw it as an end in itself. Hence they dedicated their lives to a punctilious observance of the law, without bothering about their dispositions of heart and soul. They made the fatal mistake of assuming that God would judge a man to be holy merely because he was scrupulously exact about such things as dietary restrictions and ceremonial washings.

The Pharisaical sect had originated as a very praiseworthy movement to bring the Jewish people back to the full observance of God's law. It degenerated into an empty formalism and ridiculous legalism, both of which are fatal to true religion. It was this formalism and legalism of the Pharisees which Jesus continually exposed and attacked.

They Twisted the Truth

The opposition of Our Lord was genuinely shocking to the Pharisees. The keeping of the law as they interpreted it was more important in their eyes than charity and the works of mercy. These men, who regarded swatting a fly as hunting — and therefore an act which was forbidden on

the Sabbath — were deeply scandalized to see Jesus cure the sick on that day.

The height of absurdity to which their legalism led the Pharisees was evident on Good Friday. They did not hesitate to bribe false witnesses to testify at the trial of Jesus. Yet, they would not dream of entering the house of Pilate, because to enter the house of a gentile would have rendered them “legally unclean.” They did not scruple to bring to a shameful death One Whom they knew to be innocent of any crime. Yet they were careful to see that His body was removed from the Cross and that they were all in their homes by sundown, the beginning of the Sabbath, as the law commanded.

Unbelievable, But . . .

Such behavior strikes one as simply incredible. Yet is it really so different from that of the dishonest politician who would not dream of eating meat on Friday? Legalism, in our modern day, can easily lead to such inconsistency, just as it did in the days of the Pharisees.

It was not very difficult for the Pharisees to fall into legalism. Of necessity they were greatly concerned with the Mosaic Law, and the law reached into every department of their lives. It was easy for their insistence on an exact observance of the law to degenerate into preoccupation

with external observance. It was easy for them to fall into the error of thinking that a rigid external observance of the law was enough to satisfy God and accomplish their sanctification.

Catholics Beware

Catholics are faced with a similar danger, not so great a one as confronted the Pharisees, but a real danger nevertheless. As children, Catholics are taught their prayers, taught the very words to say. It is easy to fall into the habit of assuming that these very words of a prayer, muttered swiftly and without thought, can somehow constitute a good prayer. One can easily forget the old definition of prayer — “the raising of the mind and heart to God” — and fall into the habit of acting as if the prayer formula, the words of the prayer, worked automatically, *ex opere operato*, as the sacraments do.

The very sacraments, too, can be the occasion of this same kind of thing. There is always the danger that one will come to use the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist in a thoughtless way, out of routine, with little or no preparation, with little or no attempt to arouse in oneself the dispositions of heart and soul which are necessary for a really proper and fruitful reception of these sacraments. Catholics know that the sacraments work *ex*

opere operato — that is, they always have their effect when they are validly administered and no obstacle is placed to the grace they give. This very fact can make people lazy and careless. They can come to rely too much on the objectivity of the sacraments and begin to treat them as if they were some sort of supernatural automatic machines.

No Part of Life Escapes

This formalism in the area of prayer and the sacraments can show up as legalism regarding the Laws of the Church and the Commandments. Catholics are trained from early childhood to take an important view of their obligation of assisting at Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. They are trained, too, to be very strict in the matter of Friday abstinence. Well and good. But some may have come to equate these two laws of the Church with the Catholic life itself. They may have reasoned, subconsciously, that since Catholics are the only ones who do these things, these things themselves are the badge of a Catholic. They may even have come to regard them as the only things which make Catholics different from other people.

This was the attitude of one old man who came back to the sacraments after having been away for many years. He

began his confession by saying, "Put me down for everything, Father." And, sure enough, each question put by the priest was met with a sigh and a "Yes, many times." Each question, that is, except, "Have you ever eaten meat on Friday?" At this question the old man was shocked. "I may have been very bad," was his reply, "but I didn't give up my religion!"

It was the attitude, too, of one man who was taking an examination for membership in the Knights of Columbus. When he was asked, "What are the two greatest commandments of the law?" he did not give the expected answer: "Love God and love your neighbor." "Go to Mass on Sunday and don't eat meat on Friday," was his prompt reply.

Three-Monkey Philosophy

When it comes to the Ten Commandments, once again Catholics can easily find their legalism showing. They have learned so many "thou shalt not's" that they can fall into the error of assuming that holiness consists simply in not doing things. They can adopt the philosophy of the three monkeys, "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil," and equate it with the Christian life. This is the attitude which is betrayed often enough by penitents who come to confession and say, "It has been six months since my last confes-

sion, and I haven't committed any sins in that time."

No one wants a negative preoccupation with sin, but this attitude is also wrong. It reveals the fact that the penitent thinks that all God expects is that we refrain from breaking the Commandments. The person who thinks this way would have a difficult time trying to understand why Our Lord cursed the barren fig tree and caused it to wither away.

The Unhappy Legalist

This legalistic attitude generates a false attitude toward the Faith itself. Membership in the Church can come to mean merely being under the necessity of obeying all kinds of repressive laws. It is all a matter of commandments, precepts and formulas. The mind must accept without question a series of propositions. Faith is regarded as intellectual obedience, nothing more. The will must "toe the mark" and see to it that all the rules are kept, even those which seem to be very arbitrary. God is looked upon not as a loving Father, but as a stern judge who is forever testing our loyalty and obedience. The Christian life is thought to be a burdensome thing, no fun really, but a necessary discipline. Unless you knuckle under and keep all the rules you won't get to heaven.

This attitude is a gross misrepresenta-

tion of the Catholic life. Actually, it is the Calvinistic idea of Christianity, not the Catholic idea. True, there are some who rather enjoy living according to this philosophy. There are stern souls who enjoy the feeling of righteousness which they get from a grim and joyless performance of duty. There are people who enjoy repressing themselves, just as there are people who enjoy a plunge into icy waters and a game of volleyball on the snow-covered beach in January.

But these people are a decided minority. Many of the people who have this distorted idea of the Christian life are not very happy about being Catholics. They wouldn't dream of changing. They can't imagine being anything else. But they do not experience the joy which membership in the Church should bring them. When these people hear or read about how happy the saints were, even in the midst of their afflictions, they either have their deep doubts or simply conclude that saints are after all very odd people, quite different from everyone else.

The Comfortable Legalist

But there are others with a legalistic idea of the Church who are not so afflicted. They see the Church as an institution which imposes obligations upon them, but they find the burden light. They see the

Christian life as the "good life" full of all the comforts and pleasures and worldly preoccupations, no different than the kind of life lived by people who have no religion except that it entails keeping the Commandments, going to Mass on Sunday and abstaining from meat on Friday.

Keeping the Commandments, as these people see it, can of course be rather difficult at times. Still it is not really a great burden to live within these limits. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" presents problems, especially up to a certain age, but the other Commandments are not very hard to keep. "Thou shalt not steal" means, for these people, simply that they may not take other people's money. They are blissfully unaware of any connection between this Commandment and social justice or interracial justice or certain business practices, such as padded expense accounts, which "everybody does." For these people, "Love thy neighbor" means "Let him keep to himself and I'll keep to myself, and I won't do anything to hurt him."

The aim of this type of Catholic is to live comfortably in this world, keep out of mortal sin, and thereby assure his salvation. Religion for him is a very simple thing. It is a matter of saying prayers and going to church. It doesn't affect the way you act in your business and social life. You merely fulfill your obligations and go

on living just as other people do. You have "the best of two worlds."

The Sincere Legalist

Then there are other Catholics who are affected by legalism, but who do not fit into either of the groups described above. These are Catholics who genuinely love the Church and are wholehearted in their loyalty to her. They are not, like those in the first group, unhappy about the restrictions which the laws of God and of the Church impose upon them. They are not, like those in the second group, content to regard the Church simply as a club which has its special bylaws. They are people who sense that the Church has a life which is far deeper than the one they see on the surface. They have learned their catechism, and they "know what the Church teaches." But they are dissatisfied with what they know. They sense that the truths of the Faith have a more profound meaning which they have never discovered. They feel that there is much more to the Mass and the sacraments than they have learned in their catechism. They are haunted by the thought that the Christian life is a deeper and fuller life than they had always assumed it to be.

These people are dissatisfied with the conception of Catholic life which is content with a routine reception of the sacra-

ments and with merely keeping out of mortal sin. They are not content, as is the superficial Catholic, to keep the laws as a nod to the Church and proceed to seek their happiness outside of their religion. They sense that real happiness is to be found within their religion, but they know that this happiness is not to be found in merely keeping the Commandments.

These Catholics who are dissatisfied with a legalistic idea of the Church are really searching for the immense treasure which lies deep within her. To discover this treasure it is necessary to rid oneself of the sterile legalism which blinds one to the true nature of the Christian life.

Lifegiver, Not Lawgiver

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come to promulgate laws; He came to call men to a new life, a joyful new life, a life of intimacy with God. He came to draw men together into the family of God. His message might be summed up in this way: "God is your Father. He loves you and wishes to give you eternal life. Love God and love one another as your Father loves you." When Jesus gave the Apostles the commission to spread His kingdom throughout the world, He sent them to preach the "good news" of salvation to all men. It was a joyful message which the Apostles went forth to preach. Far

from announcing a new set of rules and restrictions, the Apostles proclaimed a new life of freedom, the freedom of the children of God.

To the Christians at Ephesus, people who had formerly belonged to the class of "heathen Gentiles," to these strangers to the family of God, slaves to their vices and to the pagan practices to which their ignorance and their superstition led them, St. Paul wrote: "Bear in mind that you were at that time without Christ, excluded as aliens from the community of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise; having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you, who were once afar off, have been brought near through the Blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, He it is Who has made both one, and has broken down the intervening wall of the enclosure, the enmity, in His flesh. The law of the Commandments expressed in decrees He has made void, that of the two He might create in Himself one new man and make peace and reconcile both in one body to God by the Cross, having slain the enmity in Himself. And coming, He announced the good tidings of peace to you who were afar off, and of peace to those who were near; because through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. Therefore, you are now no longer strangers

and foreigners, but you are citizens with the saints and members of God's household . . . " (Eph. 2:12-20).

We Are Born Again

The Christian life is not simply the adopting of new beliefs and principles, it is a completely new life. One does not "join" the Church, really; one is born into it. This was the truth which Jesus tried to convey to Nicodemus, the man who came to Him by night, seeking information about Christ's kingdom. Standing in the shadows beside the temple, in the still night air, Nicodemus could hardly believe his ears. "Amen, amen I say to thee," Jesus said, "unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

This concept of being born for a second time was completely bewildering to Nicodemus. "How can a man be born when he is old?" he asked Jesus. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again?"

Our Lord explained: Baptism was to be this new birth by which a man would receive the new life which Christ came to bring. "Amen, amen, I say to thee," Jesus said, "unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not wonder

that I said to thee, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it will, and thou hearest its sound but dost not know where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:3-8).

Life's Greatest Drama

Baptism is a rebirth. This fact was made dramatically evident by the very rite of Baptism in ancient times. In those days the baptismal font was not an urn or a small receptacle; it was a pool. Three steps led into this pool, which contained the waters of Baptism, and three steps led out at the other side. The one to be baptized removed all his clothes before entering the pool. This action symbolized the putting off of his old pagan ways and habits. Then he entered the pool and walked to the center, where a deacon was waiting to baptize him. (In the case of women, deaconesses were used.)

The one to be baptized was totally immersed in the water. This total immersion had a deep significance. It symbolized the death and rebirth of the new Christian. He was dying to his old self. He was laying down his life symbolically in imitation of Christ, Who in very fact laid down His life by dying on the Cross. Then, as he rose from waters of Baptism, the new Christian was rising to a

new life as Christ rose on the first Easter morning. As a symbol of this new life which he had just received, the newly baptized person was clothed in a pure white garment as he emerged from the pool. Thus was it brought home to the new Christian that he had died to sin, had buried his sins, as it were, in the waters of Baptism and had been born again of water and the Spirit. He was truly born again, "born," as St. John tells us, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1, 13).

A Transformation Unforeseen

The baptismal font is not a pool nowadays. The meaning of Baptism as a rebirth is not so dramatically portrayed as it once was. Yet the reality is the same. The newly baptized person looks exactly as he did before. There is no change in him as far as the human eye can see. But in the eyes of God there has been a tremendous change.

This person before had been the handiwork of God — a marvelous thing, to be sure, but merely a part of God's natural creation. He was greater than the other things which God had made — the other things of nature, the earth, the plants and the animals, because he could know and he could love. But he could know God

only as his Creator and his Master. He could love God only in the things God has made.

Now he is a new creature, now he lives with the very life of God. Now he is no longer merely the handiwork of God; he is God's own son. Looking at him, God sees not merely a man, a creature of body and spirit. He sees His own son, Jesus Christ. He sees one who is alive with the life of Christ. He sees one who can know Him now not merely as his Creator and Master, but as his Father. God sees one who can respond to His love and love Him in return.

The Lady and the Guppy

There is a true story of an old lady who had a pet fish, one of those tiny, utterly drab little fish called a guppy. One day the old lady took a long hard look at the guppy and became upset. There seemed to be something wrong with the fish. It wasn't taking its food. It was listless. Only a very determined guppy-lover, such as the old lady was, could have noticed it — but the guppy was sick.

The old lady tenderly picked up the fish bowl and carried the ailing guppy to a veterinarian. The veterinarian had had odd cases before, but this one easily took the prize. "Lady," he said, "you can buy those things for a penny in any pet store.

Why don't you just throw this fish away and go and get another one?" The old lady looked at the veterinarian with tears in her eyes. "Don't you understand?" she said, "this isn't just *any* guppy. This is *my* guppy."

We're All Like Guppies

This story may seem farfetched, but it does bring out one point — people value things and even love them, when those things belong to them in a special way. Baptism makes a creature belong to God in a very special way, to a far greater extent than he belonged to God merely as His creature. He now belongs to God as a child belongs to his father.

Watch the faces of parents at a high-school graduation. They sit in polite boredom as one capped and gowned figure after another steps forward to receive a diploma. But suddenly they sit up. They are all attention. Their eyes light up. A smile breaks out on their faces. This particular capped and gowned figure that has just stepped forward is not just any capped and gowned figure. This is their own child. Such is the case with God, our Father. God loves everything which He has made. But the baptized Christian is a child of God and therefore the object of God's special, paternal love.

The story of the guppy may strike some

as touching. More likely, it will strike most as silly. It is silly for anyone, even a lonely old lady, to love a guppy. The guppy is worthless and totally unworthy of being the object of love. But a human being, although far from worthless, is in himself unworthy of being the object of God's paternal love. Baptism actually brings about in a human being a change so profound that it renders him worthy of God's fatherly love. In the rebirth of Baptism God gives His creature a new life. This new life is nothing less than a sharing in the nature of God. It makes the baptized person holy in his very being. It causes him to become a living temple of God, one in whom the Blessed Trinity dwells lovingly.

It is said of the father of Origen, one of the figures in the early Church of Africa, that he knelt beside the crib of his newly baptized infant in adoration of the Blessed Trinity dwelling within the sleeping child. This may seem to be rather strange and unusual behavior, but it does give evidence of a realization of a great fact — the profound holiness of the baptized Christian as one who literally bears God within himself.

The Christian, cleansed by the redeeming Blood of Jesus Christ, reflects the holiness of God Himself. He belongs to the all-holy God. He is God's property

and possession. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, expresses this important truth: "Do you not know that your members are the temple of the Holy Spirit, Who is in you, Whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought at a great price. Glorify God and bear Him in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

St. Paul never tired of expressing this fact — the holiness of the baptized Christian. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing on high in Christ. Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish in His sight in love. He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ as His sons, according to the purpose of His will, unto the praise of the glory of His grace, with which He has favored us in His beloved Son" (Eph. 1:3-6).

"Like Father, Like Son"

As soon as the deep, interior holiness of the baptized Christian is established, there is at once a necessary corollary. It is well expressed in a phrase which is often used in scholastic philosophy. The phrase is *agere sequitur esse*; it means that the actions of any given being are in ac-

cordance with the nature of that being. In other words, birds act like birds; dogs act like dogs; human beings act like human beings. The application to the Christian is obvious. He has received a new life from God; he must now act according to that life. He has been made holy in his very being; now his actions must be holy. He has been made a son of God; now he must live and act as a son of God.

The very first Christians in the community at Jerusalem were well aware that they were called upon to lead a new life now that they had been baptized. They had been believers before; they had been Jews; they had been God's people; they had always kept the Law and the Commandments. But they were conscious now of a great difference. That difference was Jesus Christ.

Hitherto they had tried to serve God by keeping His Law. It had been a law, not a person, which bound them to God. But now God had come among them. God had come to them as a man, with a human heart and a human soul. It was now a person who united them to God — Jesus Christ, the God-man.

Christ had fulfilled the Old Law and had given them a new law. He had told them that they were to love one another. But Jesus had not left it vague and up

in the air. He had told them that they were to love one another as *He had loved them*. They knew very well how He had loved them; He had laid down His life for them. Jesus had set no limits to the holiness which should distinguish His followers. "You are to be perfect," He said, "even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

These words would have been meaningless before Christ came. How could one go about imitating the invisible God? But now the words had great meaning. Here was God, present among men in the God-man. Jesus had shown how the Son of God acts. He had spent His every minute loving and ministering to others. People had seen His mercy, His kindness, His love of the poor and the oppressed. They had seen His whole-souled devotion to His Father and His complete dedication to doing His Father's will.

The Gauge Is Love

"A new commandment I give you," Jesus had said, "that you love one another; that as I have loved you, you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). A Christian was to ask himself not, "What does the law say?" but "What would Christ do?" Love, not legal observance of

rules, was to be the earmark of a follower of Christ.

The modern Christian, just as the earliest Christian, lives by the same standard. His model is nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself. Men will know that he is a disciple of Jesus Christ not by the regularity with which he goes to Church, not by his fidelity to laws of fast and abstinence, not by his generous contributions to the Church, but by the love he shows for others.

A Tradition to Uphold

Among the nobility in a bygone age the words "*noblesse oblige*" were very meaningful. These words expressed the idea that there was a special code of conduct to which noblemen were expected to adhere. Their very nobility obliged them to act in a way which was different and superior to that which was expected of the common people. A peasant might quite properly take to his heels when confronted with a fellow peasant who was brandishing a knife. A nobleman was expected to stand his ground. His nobility obliged him to show bravery and courage. A peasant might show fear of another peasant. For a nobleman to show fear of a peasant was regarded as unthinkable.

Even in the absence of an aristocracy of blood, the idea of *noblesse oblige* still

prevails to some extent. Those in public life and professional people are expected to show more nobility than people in ordinary walks of life. Their lives are to be free from any taint of scandal. They are supposed to be a credit to their office or their profession.

But it is in the case of the baptized Christian that *noblesse oblige* is most meaningful. The new life which the Christian receives in Baptism gives him a nobility incomparably greater than that which is founded on social status. If a higher standard of conduct is expected of the children of kings and presidents, how much more is to be expected of those who are children of God Himself? The actions of a child always reflect on the parent. If Johnny jumps on the furniture and pulls the cat's tail while visiting a neighbor, everyone wonders "What kind of people are Johnny's mother and father?" If Johnny is well-behaved and says "please" and "thank you," everyone concludes at once that his parents are well-mannered people.

Christians on Parade

With the children of God it is the same. The actions of Christians actually have an influence on other people in their attitude toward God. The Christian is constantly on parade before the world. The world is

watching and, no doubt about it, expecting to see a way of life which is different from that of the world. It is a well-known fact, too, that people form their opinion of the Church, in most cases, by observing Catholics rather than by reading books.

Our Lord Himself tells all Christians of the importance of their good example: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a lamp and put it under the measure, but upon the lampstand, so as to give light to all in the house. Even so let your light shine before men, in order that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16).

Through Mud-Colored Glasses

The legalist lets no light shine before men. Seeing him, people get a false and unappealing picture of the faith. The Catholic who sees nothing but burdens, rules and restrictions gives the impression that the Christian life is a negative and gloomy business. Those who base their judgment of the Church on him are apt to think, "Catholics are people who have to get up and go to Church every Sunday. They may not eat meat on Friday or practice birth control. They must submit their minds to the Church, form all their opinions according to what they are told

and do everything the Church tells them to do.”

The Catholic who sees the Christian life as merely the worldly life with a few added rules which make all the difference between salvation and damnation gives the impression that it is not worth bothering about. Those who base their judgments on him are apt to think, “Catholics are just like everybody else except that they go to Church on Sunday and don’t eat meat on Friday.”

But what a different picture of the faith is given by one who truly appreciates it himself and lives it. It is not without reason that St. Francis of Assisi is so universally admired and loved. Even unbelievers feel that attraction of St. Francis. They cannot help being captured by his joy, his simplicity, his love. But what it is that is so attractive about this saint is the true Christian spirit which he displays. It is the spirit of the Gospel, shining forth in St. Francis, which everyone finds so appealing. This same spirit is to be found in all those who truly understand the faith and live the Christian life.

To Be Christian Is to Love

“All the world loves a lover,” it is said. After all, that is what it all comes down to. The legalist is not a lover. He is not in love with God; he merely keeps

rules. He is like a wife who does not love her husband, but keeps house for him and cooks his meals because it is her duty. She is not happy and she doesn't make those around her happy.

But a true Christian is, above all, a lover. He keeps the rules, of course, but he sees these rules as important for only one reason — they are ways of showing love. The modern Pharisee is a “professional Christian.” He knows all the rules and he is an expert at keeping them. The true Christian is an “amateur” — in the root meaning of that word — one who is a Christian because he loves, and who sees the Christian life for what it is — a life of love.

This pamphlet published in response to the requests of those people who read it first in . . .



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Censor Deputatus

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the point of Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican?
2. How is the spirit of the Pharisees against which Christ preached still with us today in many ways? How does it affect Catholics?
3. What is legalism? Give some examples.
4. What false attitude toward the faith does legalism generate?
5. What does St. Paul mean in the passage in Ephesians 2:12-20 where he says that "the law of the Commandments expressed in decrees He [Christ] has made void . . ."?
6. Explain the statement that "happiness is not to be found in merely keeping the Commandments."
7. Why is the "good news" of salvation so often thought of only in terms of rules and regulations?
8. Explain how the Christian life is a completely new life. What is the meaning of Baptism?
9. How should a Christian respond to this new life?
10. How does the life of a Christian affect the attitudes of others toward Christianity?



Selected Reading

Offbeat Spirituality, Pamela Carswell, Sheed and Ward.

What Is Christian Life? P. A. Liege, O.P., Hawthorn.

The Theology of Grace, Jean Daujat, Hawthorn.

The Life of Grace, Gregory Stevens, Prentice-Hall.

