

## Good Steward Newsletter – September 2011

September 6, 2011 by [O'Meara Ferguson](#)



### What Does it Mean to Be Catholic?

Some estimates suggest that a majority of those who identify themselves as Catholic (54 to 77 percent) do not attend Sunday Mass each week. How is it possible to call yourself a Catholic but ignore the most fundamental expression of what it means to be a Catholic—the obligation to attend Sunday Mass?

For us Catholics, Sunday Mass is not optional. It is an essential requirement for all of us, and the Church teaches that unless we have a serious reason, there is simply no excuse for missing Mass on the Lord's Day. If through our own fault we miss Mass on Sunday, we are committing a serious sin. We should not receive holy Communion until we have gone to confession.

So Catholics who do not attend Mass regularly are not practicing their faith. But are they still Catholic? In other words, are they *bad* Catholics (serious sinners, who have violated their responsibility to practice the faith), or have they lost the right to call themselves Catholic?

Once a Christian has been baptized and has confessed his or her faith, he or she becomes a Catholic, a member of the community of believers, the Church. In other words, a Catholic is not a solitary individual. A Catholic is a member of the community of faith, a Christian who follows Jesus Christ in communion with all those (living and dead) who make up the one Body of Christ.

There is only one Church. In spite of the fact that the Body of Christ has been wounded by division, we Catholics believe that the Church remains one. In spite of the fact that her members are sinners, we believe that the Church remains holy. Although dispersed throughout the world, taking on the appearance of many different cultures (and diverse rites and rituals), the Church remains catholic or universal. Finally, the Church is apostolic—faithful to the teaching of the apostles dating back 2,000 years to the first Pentecost. Once we join the community of faith that is the Church, we become Catholic. It's part of our fundamental identity as persons.

So what does it mean to be Catholic? To be *authentically* Catholic means to be an active member of the Body of Christ, to be faithful to the teaching and practice of the Church, and to be engaged personally in a relationship with Jesus Christ that involves spiritual growth and responsible stewardship of all God's gifts.

In other words, to be fully Catholic we must be actively engaged in the life of the Church—especially by our participation in the Sunday Eucharist, our reception of the sacraments, our commitment to prayer and growth in holiness, our fellowship with other Christians and our involvement in the Church's outreach to others through ministries of evangelization and social justice.

To be active Catholics, we must be present at Mass each Sunday. And we must take seriously the Church's teaching on matters of faith and morals—living them as best we can in our daily lives, at home, at work, and in the public arena. That's the minimum.

So what about our family members and friends who no longer practice their faith? Have they lost the right to call themselves Catholics?

Those who deliberately, publicly or defiantly refuse to follow Church teaching separate themselves from the community of faith in a radical way. We pray for them and urge them to repent and to return to full communion with the Church. Fortunately, formal excommunication is rare. It is limited to very specific actions that are outlined in Canon Law (see #s 1364-1389). Those who drift away for whatever reasons (and are, therefore, called inactive or fallen away) also separate themselves from the Church, often unconsciously. But they remain Catholics. We pray for them, too, and we invite them to "come home" as soon as possible. We miss them and we care for them.

What does it mean to be Catholic? In the simplest possible terms it means belonging to the community of the baptized, the Church. What does it mean to be a *good* Catholic? It means being present, especially at the Sunday Eucharist. It means being engaged in the Catholic way of life through prayer and the sacraments, through efforts to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church, through a commitment to reach out to others by sharing our faith (evangelization) and serving those who are in need of our help through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

We are called to be good stewards of our Catholic identity—by nurturing our faith and by sharing it generously with others.