

Faith Tidbits..

*a little food for thought
and some knowledge
about your
Catholic faith*

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This monthly series will answer questions you always wondered about or questions you never even thought to ask... all about our Catholic Faith.

If you have a question you want answered, call Diane Hardick at 633-3672.

What is Canon Law and why is it important?

Canon Law is the internal legal system that governs the day-to-day workings of the Catholic Church. The word "canon" comes from the old Greek word "*kanon*", which means "reed." In the ancient world, a reed symbolized the authority to rule. Thus the word "canon" means "to rule" or "the rule of law." The Church, like other large institutions, needs a legal system and list of rules and laws to exist and function well. And although the Church does not need a Code of Can Law, but it has chosen to use such a structure to deal with its day-to-day affairs.

What is a "canonist"?

Within the church's legal system there is a need for professionals trained and educated to function within the system. They are known as canon lawyers or canonists. Most canonist hold a J.C.L. degree. Others continue their study and obtain doctorates in canon law (J.C.D.), while other hold degrees in both canon law and civil law (J.U.D.). Canon lawyers may be clergy, religious or laity. Some canon lawyers work in a diocesan chancery offices to assist the bishop. Others assist in the Marriage Tribunal, and still others teach in Catholic colleges or seminaries. Most canon lawyers, through, find employment in the Church's court system, which functions much like our secular courts.

Does the Code of Can Law contain all of the laws of the Catholic Church?

The Code of Canon Law cannot contain all the laws of the Church because there are different types of law in the Church. First, there is *divine law* revealed to us through the Scriptures. Secondly, there is *ecclesiastical law* or laws made by the Pope and bishops of the Church. These laws fall into different categories—liturgical law (how we worship), sacramental law (how we celebrate the sacraments), ecumenical law (how we work with other Christians), and so on. Canon Law covers seven general areas: I. General Norms (lays down the ground rules for the Church's legal system); II. The People of God (who makes up the Church); III. The Teaching Function (how to proclaim the Gospel through teaching), IV. The Sanctifying Function of the Church (deals with our sanctification by Christ in the sacraments, V. Temporal Goods (how to deal with worldly goods), VI. Penal Law (the Church's response to errant behaviors, and VII. Procedural Law (which explains legal processes in the Church).

What does Canon Law mean when it says "once a Catholic, always a Catholic"?

One becomes a Catholic by baptism in the Catholic Church or by public profession of faith in the Catholic Church. Baptized infants or professed Catholics remain Catholic for the rest of their lives. If a baptized Catholic denounces God or joins another religion, he or she remains a Catholic although he or she is not in full communion with the Church.

For more interesting questions about Canon Law, see "Surprised by Canon Law" by Peter Vere and Michael Frueman, St. Anthony Messenger.