

Why Do We “Practice” the Faith?

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We all know the term. “John is a practicing Catholic.” “Susan practices the faith.” But what do we mean by “practice”? And what does it teach us about our faith?

“Practice” as an action has two senses. The first is to “perform” or “carry out” in a habitual way, as, for example, a doctor practices medicine or a generous person practices charity. **The second is to “train” or “prepare,”** as, for example, athletes practice for a game or musicians practice for a concert.

Typically, we use **“practice the faith” in the first sense. We carry out the essential features of Catholicism: attend Mass, pray, keep the Commandments, perform acts of charity, go to Confession, fast, and donate money to support the Church. These “practices” illustrate the ongoing nature of Catholic life: we are never at rest, even when sitting for hours in quiet meditation. “Being Catholic” is not merely a state of being; it requires action – it requires practice.**

Understanding Catholicism as an action, in addition to a set of beliefs, reminds us that our religion is not only something that comes *to* us. **It is also something that is *in* us, that we make part of ourselves when we perform the requisite actions.** Practice is a synonym for habit. For Catholics, “habit” calls to mind “virtue,” which is a good habit. We develop virtues such as prudence or courage by performing acts of prudence or courage to such a degree that we internalize them.

To practice Catholicism is to practice virtue, for, as St. Thomas Aquinas explains, since “it belongs to religion to pay due honor to someone, namely, to God, it is evident that religion is a virtue.”

What is the purpose of “practicing the faith?” A doctor practices medicine to heal; a generous person practices charity to aid the needy. The practice of these actions, then, are not ends in themselves but means to an end.

The end of practicing the faith is union with God, our Father who gave us life, and who wills that, every day, we come into deeper union with Him. Union with God does not begin at death – death is the perfection of this union. Rather, **it begins at Baptism and develops over the course of our lives, rarely in a linear progression but more often in fits and starts in proportion to our response to God’s grace and our acquiescence to sin.**

Union with God is eternal life, which, as Joseph Ratzinger teaches, “is not simply what comes afterward.” It is, rather, “a new quality of existence, in which everything flows into the ‘now’ of love.”

To help us achieve this new existence, our faith practices are of two types. One prepares us for union with God. In this, the two meanings of practice – to perform and to train for a contest – overlap. Our Lenten practices of fasting and almsgiving, as well as following the Commandments and performing acts of charity, train our wills and cultivate our souls so that we can love God more deeply.

In popular parlance, these **practices make us “better people” by helping us die to ourselves so we can be filled with God’s grace rather than our own egos.**

The second type of practices creates union with God through prayer and receiving the sacraments. Every time we make the Sign of the Cross, every time we pray, every time we participate in Mass or receive absolution from

our sins, we commune with Him. And, of course, every time we receive our Lord in the holy Eucharist, we come into the deepest union with God possible this side of eternity. In Ratzinger’s words, “Eternal life is there, in the midst of time, whenever we come face to face with God.”

As glorious as this union with God is, separated as we are from Him by the veil of eternity, our practice of the faith can feel like practicing for other contests. **Practice is difficult. It can be tedious. It can be boring. There are days, even many days, when we do not want to bother.**

Just as athletes and musicians need **coaches** and conductors to motivate them so they can refocus on their goals, so we Catholics have our coaches – **our pastors, our friends and family, and, above all, the saints** – to urge us out of our **spiritual malaise and back onto the road that leads to God.**

Understanding the practice of the faith in this way – as a virtue, as performing actions that lead to union with God – can renew us in our daily work of “being Catholic.” It may also help Americans regain a more favorable view of religion. A recent [Pew Research Center](#) ^[1] study found that “Nones,” the religiously unaffiliated, are now 28 percent of the U.S. population, larger than any other religious group. Forty-three percent of Nones believe “religion” does more harm than good in society; they blame it ^[2] for fostering intolerance, superstition, and division.

Certainly, when it comes to Catholicism, we make no apologies for the truths that God has revealed to His Church. What we can do is show those skeptical of religion how those truths direct our lives into concrete practices that are good for all minds, hearts, and souls, and, by extension, for society as well. Because, that famous maxim of the secular world is equally true for the supernatural world: practice makes perfect.

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[1] Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>

[2] they blame it: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/are-nones-hostile-toward-religion/>

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