

Certificate of Catholic Practice – Guidance for Clergy

Definition of Practising Catholic for the Purpose of the Certificate of Catholic Practice

General Principles

The Certificate of Catholic Practice is based on the following principles.

- There is to be a single, objective, test for Catholic Practice: whether the child comes from a practising Catholic family.
- It is for a priest to make the judgment whether a child comes from a practising Catholic family.
- The priest should have enough information to allow him to build up a complete picture of the family and its circumstances in order to exercise that judgment.
- The definition of ‘practising Catholic’ set out in this guidance is for the purposes of Certificate of Catholic Practice only and for no other purpose.
- The test for Catholic practice:
 - (a) does not impose a higher requirement than the Church itself imposes;
 - (b) is capable of being applied consistently by many different priests; and
 - (c) is susceptible to proof by reasonable evidence based on observation.
- A child from a practising Catholic family is entitled to a Certificate of Catholic Practice.

The test is based upon Mass attendance, as this is capable of being observed objectively, with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Therefore, **for the purposes of the Certificate of Catholic Practice, a person is a practising Catholic if they observe the Church’s precept of attending Mass on Sundays and holidays of obligation** (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 2041 - 2042).

The precise nature of this obligation is set out in the Church’s canon law. For members of the Latin Church, the relevant canons are canons 1246 – 1248 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. For members of Eastern Catholic churches the equivalent canon is canon 881 of the 1990 *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*. In applying these canons, it is important for priests to remember the following:

- children under seven are not bound by these canons¹;
- for numerous reasons, occasional non-attendance may not constitute a breach of the obligation: canon law provides for a range of particular circumstances which excuse or mitigate the obligation².

Priests cannot be expected to be able to recall whether or not each parishioner has attended Mass on every single Sunday or holiday of obligation, nor can they always be expected to know whether or not, on a particular occasion, a person is lawfully excused from doing so. On the other hand, it is also clear that fortnightly or monthly attendance does not constitute the practice required by the canons.

¹ CJC, c.11; CCEO, c.1490. It is therefore not permissible to attempt to measure the practice of a child below the age of seven, rather than that of the parents.

² The law itself mitigates its effects on those under 16 (18 in the Eastern Catholic churches): CJC, c.1323; CCEO, c.1413. Necessity or grave inconvenience can mitigate the effects of the canon: CJC, c.1323; CCEO, c.1414. These canons admit of substantial observance, that is to say that occasional non-observance does not constitute a violation: CJC, c.17-19; CCEO, c.1499-1501. See also Coriden, J.A., *An Introduction to Canon Law*, p.33, and Canon Law Digest VI, 684-5. In the Latin church, parish priests and equivalent, as well as ordinaries, have the power to dispense from the obligations of canons 1246-1248. As well as their own subjects, parish priests or equivalent may also dispense visitors and those with no fixed abode: CJC cc.1245, 91, 87.

For those reasons, priests are advised that, if, by their own observation or other evidence, they can ascertain that a person has an established pattern of attending Mass most Sundays, **and** the practice claimed by that person is not less than is required by the Church, that person should be regarded as a practising Catholic for the purposes of the Certificate of Catholic Practice.

Length of Practice

Priests cannot judge whether a person's pattern of attendance at Mass corresponds to that required by the Church unless it has continued for a substantial period of time. This should always be presumed if the required pattern of attendance has continued for five years or more (or the whole time required by the Church, where this is shorter). On the other hand, priests should enquire very carefully into the circumstances where the pattern of practice has not continued over several years.

Practising Catholic Family

For the purposes of the Certificate of Catholic Practice, a family is normally to be regarded as a practising Catholic family where at least one parent is a practising Catholic and is doing his or her best to hand on the faith to his or her children. This fits with the mission of Catholic schools to assist parents in that task. It is therefore reasonable for that parent to expect the Church to assist him or her in doing so. Sometimes, unusually, a different pattern of practice may be judged by the priest to be equivalent. Examples might be where a grandparent or other relative supplements for the lack of practice of the parents, or where an older child practises despite the lack of practice of the parents. These children, too, deserve the support of the Church in their efforts.

WHICH PRIEST SHOULD COMPLETE THE FORM?

The Certificate of Catholic Practice should be given by **the appropriate priest**, who is either:

- The child's own Parish Priest (i.e. the Parish Priest of the Parish in which the child's family **live**); or
- the Parish Priest of the Parish where the child's family fulfils its obligation (if different).

If the family fulfils its obligation at a church which does not have a Parish Priest, then the priest who is the equivalent of a Parish Priest is the appropriate priest (e.g. Administrator, Ethnic Chaplain etc.). If the family fulfils its obligation at more than one church, the appropriate priest is one of the above, who must take into account evidence from the other priest(s) concerned.

Particular Issues

New Parish Priests. New parish priests may need to liaise with their predecessor, where this is possible. Any assistant priests should be consulted, and in some cases it may be necessary to involve other senior members of the parish community.

Claimed Practice not Substantiated. Some priests find it particularly difficult when families insist that they practice, but this is not substantiated by the priest's own observation. In such cases it must be made clear that the onus is on the family to satisfy the priest's own mind that this is the case. The family may call upon evidence from other sources (e.g. priest of another parish which they visit regularly), but you should not issue the Certificate of Catholic Practice unless you are satisfied about the evidence presented to you.