

A to Z

A
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DICTIONARY

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Abbess The female superior of a monastic community of nuns (for example, Benedictines), elected by the community and having general religious authority over the community.

Abbot The male superior of a monastic community of monks (for example, Cistercians), elected by the community and having general authority and ordinary jurisdiction over the community.

Abortion As understood here, the deliberate, intentional destruction of the human fetus at any stage after conception or the expulsion of it from the womb before it is capable of surviving outside the womb. It involves serious moral, legal, social, and canonical questions.

Morally, both from the viewpoint of natural law ethics and from divine revelation, abortion is a fundamental evil. The right to life is the most basic of all human rights; the right to life of

the innocent is inviolable. In the teaching of Vatican II, “all offenses against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful suicide; all violations of the integrity of the human person such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures; all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions where people are treated as mere tools for profit... all these...debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [*Gaudium et Spes*], 27).

The right to life of the unborn has traditionally been fully protected by law in civilized societies. In 1973, however, the Supreme Court of the United States rendered a decision legalizing abortion and,

therefore, denying legal protection to the most helpless of innocent human beings. Socially, this decision has brought about the formation of many pro-life groups, which have as their purpose to inform and to educate American citizens on the basic issues at stake, to bring about a reversal of the Supreme Court's decision and so to insure legal protection for the unborn, and to address the specific needs of women with problems related to pregnancy so they will have a realistic alternative to abortion.

According to canon law, a Catholic who procures an abortion incurs automatic excommunication (Canon 1398); accomplices (that is, those without whose assistance the abortion would not have been committed) also incur excommunication. See EXCOMMUNICATION.

Abraham Abraham is a great patriarch of the Hebrew Scriptures. His vocation, as recounted in Genesis 11:25—25:11, begins with God's call to leave his homeland for a land God would show him, make of him a "great nation," and would "bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you," adding that, "all the families of the earth will find blessing in you" (Genesis 12:2–3). That "great nation" is first and foremost the Jewish people who look to Abra-

ham as their father in faith. By extension, Abraham is recognized and revered by Christians and Muslims as an extraordinary witness to faith. The CCC presents Abraham as the model of prayer, saying: "God has always called people to prayer. But it is above all beginning with our father Abraham that prayer is revealed in the Old Testament.... Abraham's heart is entirely submissive to the Word and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart... is essential to prayer.... Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds..." (CCC 2569–2570).

Absolution (Sacramental) In the sacrament of penance, the absolution is the form (words) spoken by an authorized priest for the forgiveness of sins. Through the sign of absolution, God pardons the sinner who, in confession, manifests his change of heart to the church's minister, thus completing the sacrament of penance. See PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION, SACRAMENT OF.

Abstinence As understood in Catholic teaching, abstinence is a penitential practice of doing without (abstaining from) meat or another food or drink. The conference of Catholic bishops is empowered to "determine more precisely the

observance of fast and abstinence as well as substitute other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety, in whole or in part, for abstinence and fast” (Canon 1253). The American Catholic bishops have determined that abstinence from meat is specifically required only on the Fridays of Lent (as well as on Ash Wednesday), but that some penance should be performed on each Friday of the year.

Acts of the Apostles A New Testament book written by the evangelist Luke about AD 70 to 75 to complement his Gospel. It describes the faith and way of life of the early Christians and the origin and spread of the Christian communities in New Testament times. Luke’s Gospel culminates in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life. Acts, which ends with Saint Paul in Rome, demonstrates that Christianity was no longer confined to the Jewish tradition but destined to expand throughout the entire world. Luke presents the Christians as both an ideal community (2:42–47) as well as one challenged by conflict and the need to discern where the Spirit was leading it (10–11, 15).

Adam The Book of Genesis describes Adam as the father of the human race, the first man created by God (Genesis 1 and 2). He was expelled from the Garden of Eden because he disobeyed God’s command not to eat of a certain tree. The Christian doctrine of original sin is traced back to Adam: Through him the entire human race fell away from God’s plan. In the New Testament, Jesus is described as the “new” or “second” Adam, bringing salvation to humanity (Romans 5 and 8).

Adoration According to the CCC, adoration is essential to the virtue of religion. “To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Savior....To adore God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the ‘nothingness of the creature’ who would not exist but for God” (CCC 2096–2097). Adoration in the strict sense is due to God alone. See EUCHARISTIC ADORATION.

Adultery A voluntary act of sexual intercourse between a married person and another who is not that person’s wife or husband. It is forbidden by the sixth commandment (“you shall not commit adultery”) and condemned as immoral in the New Testament (see Matthew 5:27 and Mark 10:19). In Matthew 5:27,

Jesus describes lustful desires that regard another as an object for gratification rather than an image of God as forbidden by the same commandment.

Advance Directive Advance directives describe the type of care one wants when incapacitated or nearing death. They may include a durable power of attorney for health decisions and/or a living will. When making end-of-life decisions, moral theology insists on the basic values of respect for human dignity, the value of human life, and acceptance of human finitude. It is not morally necessary to use means to preserve life that are not likely to reverse the person's condition or significantly forestall death if the burden of the treatment outweighs the benefit.

Advent The season that opens the liturgical year of the Church. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends before the first evening prayer of Christmas on Christmas Eve. The liturgical readings and prayers place emphasis on the coming (advent, arrival) of Jesus Christ. The first part of Advent highlights his second coming at the end of time, and the second part, December 17–24, his coming into human history at the time of his birth in Bethlehem. This liturgical

season features joy, hope, repentance, expectation, and preparation for the coming of Christ.

Advent Wreath A wreath of laurel, spruce, holly, or similar foliage with four candles that are lit successively in the weeks of Advent to symbolize the coming of Christ, the Light of the World. The lighting of the candles is usually accompanied by an appropriate hymn, a reading from Scripture, and/or prayers. Of German origin, the Advent wreath is now popular in U.S. churches, schools, and homes.

Alb See VESTMENTS.

Alleluia A word of Hebrew origin meaning “praise the Lord,” it is used frequently in the liturgy, especially during the Easter season and at the “Alleluia verse” that precedes the reading of the Gospel at the eucharistic liturgy, except during Lent.

All Saints A liturgical solemnity celebrated on November 1. This feast commemorates all the blessed in heaven, but is especially designed to honor the blessed who have not been canonized and who have no special feast day. All Saints is a holy day of obligation on which Catholics in the United States are bound to participate in the Mass unless it falls on a Saturday or

Monday. See HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION.

All Souls A feast commemorating all the faithful departed, observed each year on November 2 (or, if November 2 is a Sunday, on November 3). Special prayers for the dead are offered on this day, a tradition that has come down from the earliest days of the Church. A plenary indulgence for the souls in purgatory may be obtained on this day. See INDULGENCE; PURGATORY.

Alphonsus Liguori, Saint Born near Naples in 1696, he was trained in law and practiced at the bar for eight years. Ordained a diocesan priest in 1726, he had great pastoral concern for the unevangelized poor in the country places outside the city. He founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists) in 1732, especially to preach the Gospel to these poor people. He wrote more than 100 books on the Christian life and is perhaps best known for his monumental four-volume work in moral theology for the guidance of confessors. His writings were instrumental in opposing the heresy of Jansenism. He was ordained a bishop in 1762 and served the diocese of Saint Agatha of the Goths until 1775. He died in 1787, was canonized in 1839,

declared a doctor of the Church in 1871, and named the patron of confessors and moralists in 1950. See JANSENISM.

Altar A table on which the eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated. As the catechism teaches: "The altar, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of the sacrifice and the table of the Lord. This is all the more so since the Christian altar is the symbol of Christ himself, present in the midst of the assembly of his faithful, both as the victim offered for our reconciliation and as food from heaven who is giving himself to us" (CCC 1383).

Amen A Hebrew word meaning "truly" or "so be it," it was used in the Jewish synagogue to declare personal agreement with a prayer offered in the name of the community. In apostolic times, it was taken over by the Christian community for scriptural and liturgical use. It is commonly used by Catholics at the end of prayers and as an affirmation of faith in receiving the Eucharist.