



# The Ten Commandments



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# The Ten Commandments

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## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The Meaning of “Commandment” . . . . . | 5  |
| The First Commandment . . . . .        | 7  |
| The Second Commandment . . . . .       | 10 |
| The Third Commandment . . . . .        | 14 |
| The Fourth Commandment . . . . .       | 16 |
| The Fifth Commandment . . . . .        | 19 |
| The Sixth Commandment . . . . .        | 23 |
| The Seventh Commandment . . . . .      | 26 |
| The Eighth Commandment . . . . .       | 29 |
| The Ninth Commandment . . . . .        | 33 |
| The Tenth Commandment . . . . .        | 36 |
| Conclusion . . . . .                   | 40 |
| About the Author . . . . .             | 44 |



## The Meaning of “Commandment”

During a retreat I made several years ago, the retreat master, a recognized professor of sacred Scripture, told us that he could no longer bring himself to think of the Ten Commandments as “commandments” since that term seems to imply that they make demands on us. Rather, he felt they were better considered as ten “suggestions.”

Similarly, in the university class that I teach, one of the students commented that he felt the Ten Commandments were too arbitrary to be blindly followed by any free-thinking and intelligent person.

With due respect to both the Scripture professor and my student, the Ten Commandments are neither merely suggestions nor the arbitrary impositions of a capricious deity. While I can understand the sense in which, for rhetorical purposes, a retreat master might speak of “ten suggestions,” the Decalogue, as the commandments are known, is far too deeply entwined with who we are as human beings created by God and too intimately mingled with who God is to be dismissed simply as either “suggestions” or “irrational whims.”

The fundamental moral commandments or laws given by God to Israel through Moses are listed in two places in the Old Testament: in Exodus 20:2-17 and in Deuteronomy 5:6-29.

The first thing that must be said is that even without God’s revelation of how we are to live and behave, the same moral imperative would exist in our lives. The Ten Commandments grow out of our human nature; that is, they are expressions of who we are as human beings and how we should relate to each other. In other words, they list our rights and responsibilities to God and to each other. For example, the first three speak of our basic relationship to God. If we have been

created freely and lovingly by a God who cares for us, then we owe recognition, respect and honor to the person and name of our creator. This is neither a suggestion that one should ignore nor an arbitrary imposition that one should reject. It is the simple recognition that we, as human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, owe him our very existence and everything we are and have. This awareness should prompt us to show our gratitude. There is nothing arbitrary or demeaning about being obligated to return God's love for the gift of life and all the goodness given to us by God.

The remaining seven commandments address our relationship with each other as children of a loving God and, therefore, as sisters and brothers. These commandments speak of the need to build a human society where human beings can live together in justice and peace. No person is an island in God's plan. God created a helpmate for man because it is not good to be alone. But there can be no truly human society if we feel free to kill each other thoughtlessly, to destroy each other's families, or to undermine through deceit the truth and trust that are the very foundation of all human communication.

Our desire to live in peace with our neighbor, to be faithful to our family, and to trust those with whom we deal is not a whimsical, arbitrary wish, but a deeply rooted desire that grows out of our very nature as human beings. It is natural to recognize the value of life, the integrity of one's own family and the value of truth.

The answer to the question, "Why do we have the Ten Commandments?", is not to imply that God wishes to interrupt our otherwise peaceful, happy, just and fruitful lives with arbitrary commandments in order to make life difficult. God knows, as expressions of his wisdom, that the commandments can help us in the midst of our own weakness and the failings of those around us to achieve our full human potential in a world not fully supportive of human life, freedom and responsibility. God made it easy for us by simply forbidding: "You shall not kill." Those who do not accept the revelation and teaching of God expressed in this simple form will eventually arrive at the same conclusion after years or even a lifetime of intensive philosophical, sociological and psychological studies. But

very few people devote their entire lives to such study, and so God made it very clear and very simple: “Thou shall not kill.”

What does God teach us in the commandments? First, we learn of the absolute necessity of loving God first in our lives. After listing the Ten Commandments, the author of the Book of Deuteronomy teaches: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore, you shall love the Lord, our God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus calls this “the greatest and first commandment” (Matthew 22:38). In the same place we also learn that serving God requires respect in deeds, thoughts and words for one’s neighbor. We are to honor our parents through whom we have life. We must reverence human life in ourselves and in others. We are to respect all sexual relations, for it is within marriage alone that life is to be transmitted. We are called to respect property, which is to be used in the service of persons. And we must always tell the truth about others.

The Decalogue reveals that certain acts and even, as the last two commandments express, the inner disposition to such behavior, are incompatible with love of God and respect for neighbor. Such actions are always wrong. What the Ten Commandments make clear in concise, clear and unequivocal language is that one who claims to be a friend of God must act accordingly.

## The First Commandment

*“I, the Lord, am your God...  
You shall not have other gods besides me.”  
(Exodus 20:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:6-7)*

The First Commandment obliges us to acknowledge God’s existence and proper place in our lives. If God exists, remains only one, and has created everything good, then we who are God’s human creations should recognize his majesty, glory and transcendence and the obligation we have to worship and love he who brings us into existence and sustains the life given to us. We are not to put in God’s place other



created realities as the object of our ultimate loyalty, devotion and allegiance.

In the Book of Exodus, we read how God claimed his own people and gave to Moses the law that would keep the people close to God. The Lord told Moses:

Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven. Do not make anything to rank with me; neither gods of silver nor gods of gold shall you make for yourselves (Exodus 20:22-23).

The temptation to turn to more immediately visible and available sources of comfort and support can be as powerful to us as it was to the Hebrew people. We are told in Exodus:

...the people became aware of Moses' delay in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, let us make a god who will be our leader...' So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron, who accepted their offering, and fashioning this gold with a graving tool, made a molten calf. Then they cried out, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt' (Exodus 32:1-4).

Even today some people continue to accept substitutes for God. Sometimes it takes the form of a practical atheism that chooses to concentrate on the goods of this earth and the joys and satisfactions of wealth and power in place of having to deal with the living God.

Some people reject faith in God because they consider it humiliating for anyone to admit the existence of one who would be far superior to them. Others deny the reality of a good God because of the evil that exists in the world.

Others have, in effect, abandoned any hope of knowing God because their philosophical prejudices have convinced them that only the material realities that science can explore can truly be known, or because they simply deny all possibility of absolute truth. Many place their hearts elsewhere and never really consider the existence of God. Still others are pushed toward unbelief by the pressures of governments that are committed by policy to atheism and to the depersonalization of their citizens. This condition can also be the result of a rapidly

developing technological society. In the same vein, some people bend to the peer pressure of those who ridicule belief in God. Where it is not politically correct to accept the reality of God actually entering our world and our lives, a cynicism that verges on atheism develops and becomes popular.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, GS)*, “Undeniably, those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences. Hence they are not free of blame” (19). On the other hand, atheism can be a reaction to the failure of the words, attitude and behavior of some believers to give proper witness to God:

To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion (*GS* 19).

The First Commandment obliges us to recognize only the one true God and to worship him alone. We worship him by faith, hope and love. These virtues can be expressed in many ways, especially by participation in Christ’s one perfect sacrifice, renewed in the eucharistic liturgy. We worship God also by expressing our needs in prayer, thereby acknowledging God’s power and providence. By trying to keep all of God’s commandments, therefore, we acknowledge his divine authority.

As the 16th century *Roman Catechism* states and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reaffirms:

Whoever says ‘God’ speaks of a constant, unchanging being, always the same, ever faithful and perfectly just. It follows that we must necessarily accept God’s words and have complete faith and trust in God. God is almighty, gentle and infinitely inclined to the good. Who could not place all hope in such a person? Who could not love God when contemplating the treasures of goodness and tenderness God has poured out for us? Hence the formula God employs in Scripture at the

beginning and end of his commandments: ‘I am the Lord’ (*Roman Catechism*, III).

There are many ways that we can violate this first and fundamental commandment. The simplest sin against the First Commandment is the rejection of God. Ultimately, this is a sin of pride that finds its roots in humanity’s first struggle to accept God’s dominion over us. We are often tempted to put ourselves in God’s place.

Sins of superstition and sacrilege are also directly opposed to true worship of God. In superstition one seriously attributes to created persons or things powers to shape events or to foresee the future that are proper to God alone. Sacrilege is a mistreatment of what is sacred, of persons or things consecrated to divine worship. An especially serious sin is the sacrilegious reception of sacraments, approaching those sacraments that signify and require love of God in one’s heart, such as in the Eucharist, confirmation, orders or matrimony, when one has committed grave sin and has not repented.

The First Commandment teaches us that God is not only our beginning but also our final and lasting goal, for God moves and stirs the deepest longings and aspirations in each of us. When we live according to the commandments, we return our love to God in a way that manifests the sincerity in our hearts. As our Lord said: “If you love me...obey the commands I give you” (John 14:15).

## The Second Commandment

*“You shall not take the name of the Lord,  
your God, in vain.”*

*(Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11)*

Without any sensitivity or respect, the name of the Lord is often spoken as an epithet, a curse or just a thoughtless expletive on television, in the movies and in so much of what is called the “entertainment industry” today. It is as if we assume that the name of the Lord has no significance. Yet we are commanded to reverence the

name of the Lord our God precisely because it is God's own name and a reflection of his being.

Perhaps nothing so well indicates how far we as a people, individually and as a culture, have lost our awareness of God's presence in our life as the ease with which we take the name of the Lord in vain. We regularly hear our Savior's most holy name proclaimed with contempt, ridicule or disdain. Whenever the pizza is too hot, our Lord's name is often invoked. Some comedians have made abuse of the name of Jesus Christ an art form. The entertainment industry seems incapable of human articulation without resorting to the name of the second person of the Blessed Trinity. But the fault is not all theirs. From the corporate leaders of the multibillion dollar entertainment industry comes the response: "We only mirror what is happening in society." Perhaps our society has either forgotten or has chosen to ignore the Second Commandment: "You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain."

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read that the Second Commandment demands respect for the name of the Lord. It is because among all the words of revelation, one stands alone: the revelation of God's holy name. As the Book of Psalms reminds us, we are to "attribute to the Lord, the glory of his name; worship the Lord in his holy array" (Psalm 29:2).

God's name is holy because it speaks to us of who God is. When Moses encountered God in the burning bush he asked, "What is your name?" God replied, "I am who am." Then God added, "This is what you shall tell the people: I AM sent me to you...this is my name forever, this is my title for all generations" (cf. Exodus 3:11-15).

God entrusts his name to those who believe. In so doing, God reveals his personal mystery to us. The gift of a name is part of a relationship of trust and intimacy. It is not to be used in ridicule or irresponsibly. The Lord is holy, and the name by which God identifies himself and the name God shares with us so that we can lay claim to know him is also holy. We are called first to respect it and then not to abuse it.

There are times when we dare to call upon God's holy name. In prayer, in worship, especially in the liturgy, we should not hesitate to

pronounce God's holy name in praise. So too in our daily speech the holy name of the Lord should be used only to bless, praise and glorify him. The Holy Name Society in so many of our parishes exists to strive by word, deed and example to fulfill the petition of the Lord's Prayer "hallowed be thy name," and to avoid disrespect to the name of God, of Jesus, and to holy things, and to abstain from improper language such as blasphemy, cursing, perjury and obscene and indecent expressions. This admonition reminds us of the respect we owe to God's name and the holy name of Jesus. As Saint Paul reminds us: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bend" (Philippians 2:10).

In the days of the Old Covenant the name of God was considered to be so holy that it was not even spoken. To invoke the name of God was to make God present in a special way in our lives. To do this in a casual or careless manner was to show disrespect to God. In much the same way that we cherish the names of our parents and other loved ones and recoil at having people ridicule or insult them by making light or fun of their names, God expects us to react in the same way when his holy name is used irreverently.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us further that the Second Commandment forbids the abuse of God's name, and includes every unsuitable use of the names of God, Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and all God's saints (cf. 2148).

God's name is dishonored in grave ways through false oaths, or perjury, that is, when one lies after calling upon the name of God as a pledge to speak the truth. It is an abuse of God's name if one is false to one's vows, that is, if one does not fulfill promises made to God and sealed in his name. Another wrongful use of God's name is by cursing, or calling on God who is savior of all to do harm to others; and especially by blasphemy, that is, by any words or behavior intended to insult or express contempt for almighty God. Blasphemy is directly opposed to the Second Commandment. It consists in uttering against God, inwardly or outwardly, words of hatred, reproach, or threat, speaking evil of God, lacking respect toward him and abusing his name.

Scripture frequently expresses God's transcendence by proclaiming that he is perfectly holy. God is "the holy one" (Isaiah 5:24). God's

holiness is far more than freedom from moral evil, for he cannot sin. References to God's holiness are to his absolute perfection. Because God is infinitely greater than all he has created, we who are God's creatures are not worthy even to gaze on him or to speak his name.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the Second Commandment:

You have heard the commandment imposed on your forefathers, 'Do not take a false oath, rather make good to the Lord on all your pledges.' What I tell you is: Do not swear at all. Do not swear by heaven, for it God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is his footstool, nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King; do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. Say, 'yes' when you mean 'yes' and 'no' when you mean 'no.' Anything beyond that is from the evil one (Matthew 5:33-37).

The holiness of God's name, therefore, prohibits our use of it for trivial matters. When an oath is required by lawful civil authority, for example, it must be taken with great seriousness.

The holiness of God attracts the human heart because of the goodness that is a part of it, a goodness of such intensity that it imbues and transforms the sinful heart with awe and reverential fear. The splendor and holiness of God must be taken seriously. God, whom all the universe proclaims as sovereign, has a right to lay claim to our respect and that fear that is the beginning of wisdom:

You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn away, lest you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him and your reward will not be lost. You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.... Has anyone persevered in his fear and been forsaken? (Sirach 2:7-10).

The Psalmist states: "O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalms 8:1). The simple recognition that God is God and we are his creatures should lead us to show respect and reverence for his name. Our attitude should be that of Mary when she said: "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior.... God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name" (Luke 1:46-49).

## The Third Commandment

“Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.”  
(Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

There was a time when it was generally accepted that the Christian Sabbath was a unique and special day. It was to be a period of rest and prayer. It was a day when the family spent time together and when the routine of everyday activities was broken so that our relationship with each other as a family and our relationship with God as his family might be strengthened and renewed. Today we should consider how far we have strayed from a proper observance of the Lord’s Day.

In imitation of God’s own plan that called for a time of rest after the mighty work of creation, the Hebrew people were called to keep holy the Sabbath Day, or the seventh day. This is not an arbitrary interference in the marketing plans of business and industry but rather the common-sense recognition that in the midst of our daily labors we need to set aside time to reflect on who we are and to renew our relationship to God through acts of praise, adoration and worship.

The celebration of the Sabbath for the Christian world is Sunday. The Church celebrates the resurrection of Jesus with great joy. Not only Easter, but every Sunday of the year is a celebration of the Lord’s resurrection. As we are told in the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium, SC)*:

By an apostolic tradition which took its origins from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord’s Day or the Day of the Lord (SC 106).

On this day the faithful followers of Jesus should come together so that by hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist we might call to mind the passion, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ and thank God who “gave us new birth; a birth unto hope which draws its life from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

Thus Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is a unique Christian feast day. For all Christians it should be a time of spiritual celebration, a day of joy and

a period of freedom from work. Since the ultimate celebration of God's people is the great prayer of thanksgiving called the Eucharist, we are called as a faith family every Sunday to celebrate publicly our belief in the resurrection of the Lord and to offer worship to God in and through Christ in the Church's great eucharistic prayer. The Sunday obligation for Catholics, therefore, is not an arbitrary whim of the Church, but an effort to remind us of our obligation in response to the law of the Lord to worship God with fitting praise and adoration.

The precepts of the Church in the *Code of Canon Law* specifies that on Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are obliged to participate in Mass (c. 1247). This obligation is satisfied by attending Mass celebrated in a "Catholic rite anywhere, either on the day itself or on the evening of the previous day" (c. 1248).

The Sunday Eucharist is the basis of all Christian practice. Thus, the faithful are obliged to participate at Mass on days of obligation, unless excused for serious reason or dispensed by their pastor or parish priest. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that those who deliberately fail in this obligation sin gravely (cf. 2181).

The center of all Christian life is Christ himself. By his Incarnation and his work of redemption, we are healed and called to share in a new life, a life that binds us together as children of God and sharers in the life of the Trinity. It is for this very reason that the Eucharist is the center and crown of Christian life. For in the Eucharist, Christ gives himself to us and we possess his life within us. The Eucharist is not merely a symbol and ceremony; it is a sacrament in which the saving work of Jesus and the gifts of God are made available to us.

The existence of the local or the universal Church would not be possible without the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council teaches in its *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis, PO)*: "No Christian community, however, can be built up unless it has its basis and center in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist" (PO 6). Hence, we are called together as a family, a Christian community, on the Lord's Day, to renew our personal spiritual life and that of the Church in the public act of worship that is the celebration of the Mass.

The other sacraments, as well as every ministry of the Church in its apostolic work, are linked with the Holy Eucharist and are directed



toward it. For the Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and Living Bread. In his very flesh Christ offers new life to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are thereby invited to offer ourselves, our labors and all that we have to God through union with Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. Sunday becomes a moment of spiritual and personal renewal for us individually but also as a community as we gather to celebrate the Eucharist in union with the whole Church throughout the world.

We are told in the Book of Genesis that God rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done (Genesis 2:2). Like God, we too should follow a sequence of work and rest. On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are to abstain from any work or effort that inhibits the worship due to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, works of mercy and relaxation of mind and body. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the family's needs or important social service that should be given are legitimate excuses from the obligation of the Lord's Day rest, but these responsibilities and duties must not be allowed to become so habitual that our religious practice, family life and even our health eventually suffer (cf. 2185).

Finally, we are reminded that while engaging in leisure activities, Christians should not forget their sisters and brothers who have the same needs and rights and yet cannot enjoy rest and renewal because of poverty. Sunday is traditionally consecrated to good works and service of the sick, infirmed and elderly. By such action on behalf of those in need we actively strive to sanctify the Lord's Day and to make it a time of true blessing for ourselves and others.

## The Fourth Commandment

*"Honor your father and your mother."  
(Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16)*

The Fourth Commandment turns our attention to those precepts of the Decalogue that principally address our relationship with each other.

Thanks to the blessings of modern medical science and human technology, we are living longer. With each passing decade the life expectancy of women and men, particularly in the United States, continues to be extended. Antibiotics, availability of new medicines, new surgical techniques and even organ transplants that are combined with a way of life which is far less demanding on the human body, have joined to provide for each of us a far greater life expectancy than our grandparents and theirs could have ever anticipated. Where once it was national news when a person reached the age of 100, now many of us knows someone in our community who has celebrated a centennial birthday. This blessing, however, is not without its share of challenges.

Multiplying rapidly throughout our communities are nursing homes, skilled-care facilities, and the growing need to deal with an aging population. The elderly were once a respected, but very small portion of the general population, but now they are becoming a large part of our society. And where once the senior members of the family lived at home and were cared for by their children or together with their children's children, we are faced today with a phenomenon described by some sociologists as the "warehousing" of our elderly. There is no question that with the passing of years and the weakening of the human body and mind, older adults need a larger portion of our resources, time and attention.

The Fourth Commandment teaches us that we have obligations to our parents not only because they are the source of our human life but also because they nurtured and cared for us, helping us to grow in wisdom, knowledge and age until we were capable of living on our own. The Decalogue reminds us that our parents deserve our respect. There is nothing arbitrary about the injunction "Honor your father and mother." This is not the order of a capricious God. It is the simple confirmation of something we all know: We should love and cherish our parents. Whether we are teenagers seeking independence or adults struggling to find a balance between our needs and the needs of those whom we love, our parents remain an integral and essential part of our lives.

Saint Paul reminds us: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is what is expected of you. 'Honor your father and mother' is

the first commandment to carry a promise with it ‘that it may go well with you...’” (Ephesians 6:1-3). Similarly, the commandment to honor one’s parents is included in the reply that Jesus gave to the man who asked what he must do to attain eternal life (cf. Mark 10:17-19).

Children must do more than simply obey parental directions. Children have a duty to honor their parents and to be concerned about them throughout their lives. As living members of the family, children contribute in their own way to the holiness of their parents when they respond to their kindness with gratitude, love and trust. Children should stand by their parents when hardships and loneliness overtake them.

Families should also share their spiritual riches generously with other families. The Christian family, therefore, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant between Christ and the Church, will manifest the Savior’s loving presence in the world and the true nature of the Church. The family can accomplish this important task through mutual love, generosity, faithfulness, and the way in which all the members of the family work together. “If anyone does not provide for his own relatives, and especially for members of his immediate family,” says Saint Paul in his Letter to Timothy, “he has denied the faith; he is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). The honor that we are obliged to show our parents should mature even as we ourselves grow older. The obedience of children should be motivated not by fear but by love, gratitude and humility (cf. Sirach 7:28). Such attitudes can deepen with the passage of years and motivate us to respond to our elders as they grow old.

The same commandment reminds us of the importance of the family as the first cell of the human community. The social aspect of human life is illustrated first of all in the family. The marital companionship between a woman and a man is “the primary form of interpersonal communion” (GS 12).

Families today have urgent needs. As Pope John Paul II noted in his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC):

“The modern Christian family is often tempted to be discouraged and is distressed at the growth of its difficulties; it is an eminent form of love to give it back its reasons for confidence in itself, in the riches

that it possesses by nature and grace, and in the mission that God has entrusted to it” (FC 86).

Families that are victims of economic change or long-standing social injustices must often struggle for their very existence in intolerable living conditions in crowded urban centers. Those that belong to racial minorities or to immigrant groups often find it especially difficult to claim their legitimate social rights. Even when problems are so great that social, political and economic changes are urgently needed, those measures are not taken unless concerned persons press for effective social action. Christians should cooperate with others of good will to ensure that governmental policies address these needs, including in a special way the needs of the elderly, our “parents.”

The Fourth Commandment also highlights the obligations we all have to strengthen the family ties that grow out of our bonding with our parents. The gift of life, our growth into our own adulthood, and the ever-present spiritual, emotional and moral support of our parents, are threads woven into the fabric of our life to such a degree that should they be weakened, our own lives unravel.

This commandment is not an arbitrary whim of a capricious God. “Honor your father and your mother” is an injunction that speaks to the very core of human society. As a people, community and nation we can only be as strong, healthy and vital as our families. And our families can only be as vibrant and life-giving as the level of care and respect that we offer to each other beginning with the honor we give to our parents.

## The Fifth Commandment

*“You shall not kill.”*

*(Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)*

The basic instinct of every living creature is to preserve its life. The natural desire of every living being is to live. This truth finds expression in the common understanding found among all human beings that the life of one individual is not to be taken by another.

God's revelation that life is fundamentally a divine gift highlights the atavistic, human experience that we are not free to take the life of another.

As the account of the creation of the world reaches a climax in the first chapter of Genesis, God is portrayed as creating man and woman as the crown and glory of all that he has made. "Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...let them have dominion...'" (Genesis 1:26). From the first poetic pages of Genesis that reveal so many essential truths about human existence, to the Gospels in which we learn from Christ more than anyone else the mystery of who we are, Scripture helps us to appreciate the meaning of the human person. Since each person is created in the image of God, what we learn about God helps us to better understand who we are and how we should act. What we learn of humanity, schooled and aided by faith, teaches us something about God.

The Church has always proclaimed the dignity of each person. Because we are images of our maker and are called through Christ to share in the life of the Trinity, each of us has a transcendent worth. In many ways, the Second Vatican Council addressed the special need of our age when it stressed once again in new terms how human life must be honored and protected, fostered and respected. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* teaches:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful self-destruction...all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator (*GS* 27).

Flowing from this basic option for life comes the recognition that human rights and duties given by God are inviolable. Each person should have "everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter..." (*GS* 26).

God, the lord of life, has conferred on human beings the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life, a ministry that must be fulfilled in a manner which is worthy of us. From the moment of its conception,

therefore, human life must be guarded with the greatest concern and care. Abortion and infanticide must be regarded as “unspeakable crimes” (GS 51).

Our belief in the sanctity of human life is rooted in the Scriptures, the word of God. The Book of Genesis teaches us that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:27). “You shall not kill,” said the Lord in giving the commandments to Moses (Exodus 20:13). “Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live,” Moses warned the chosen people (Deuteronomy 30:19). And, of course, the whole life, teaching and ministry of Jesus confirmed the dignity of human life and of each individual person. Jesus said, “I have come so that they might have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). This teaching of the Scriptures, along with the clear and consistent teaching of the Church throughout the ages, serves as the unshakable foundation of our commitment to human life. It is the living reflection today of the resounding command of God to his people: “You shall not kill.” The primordial transgression against God, the giver of life, therefore, is the act of destroying the lives of others.

There are many ways in which we can fail in our responsibilities to respect and pursue the value of life. In the case of war, for example, the Church affirms that “every act of war which tends indiscriminately the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself...” (GS 80).

Those who are unjustly attacked have a right to resist. Those responsible for defending justice in a community have a right to defend the helpless when they are assailed. Under certain conditions they might even be called upon to defend themselves or others in ways that will result in the death of the assailant. In the past, when there was no other way of containing and preventing the unjust violence of the criminal, the Church has supported the execution of criminals according to law enacted by properly constituted authority. But today, with all the means available to society to control even the most violent criminal, the imposition of the death penalty remains increasingly unnecessary. It seems to compromise the Church’s primary proclamation of the dignity and value of all human life (cf. U.S. Bishops’ Statement on Capital Punishment, Nov. 1980).

Of all the commandments, the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not kill,” seems the most self-evident. And yet today our society is riddled with emotional pleas which argue that human life is simply a commodity that can be altered or destroyed at will.

In the United States we are aware that what began with the simple and frightening principle “if human life is inconvenient to you, you may take it,” is now being applied far beyond the area of abortion. In its social teaching and public policy our country has created a mindset and an attitude that is being enthusiastically passed on to our young people: “Life, if it is inconvenient to you, may be destroyed by you.” While this generation may have chosen to draw the line at the birth of the child, the next generation is already indicating that it will extend it further to other persons.

Since so many of our politicians agree with the belief that a child in the womb may be killed up until the moment the child is born, there is no reason to deny that public pressure may influence them in the not too distant future to extend anti-life legislation to people considered in the minds of the majority to be unproductive, unwanted, unplanned, or simply, as in the case of 95 percent of all abortions, inconvenient.

In the constant, human struggle to recognize and to accept God’s plan for human life, we have battled the darker side of human nature trying to articulate for ourselves and our society laws that reflect the value of human life. But there have never been such strong opposing forces of death as we face in our own land today. Human life, we are told, is essentially a commodity. It belongs to those who have power to maintain it according to a principle of personal convenience. A new darkness, expressed in the increasing violence we find all over this land, is quickly descending on us as a people. The Lord sets before us the commands: “You shall not kill,” and “Choose life!” These commands, so basic, simple, clear and self-evident, must more than ever be reaffirmed and proclaimed by each of us for all to understand, accept and live.

## The Sixth Commandment

*“You shall not commit adultery.”*  
(Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18)

The Sixth Commandment speaks of the relationship of a man and woman who choose to be husband and wife and the founders of a family. On this relationship is based not only their love but the future of their lives together and the family that they hope to nurture. A unique and essential element in their relationship is their human sexuality.

The Church has always considered sex a precious and sacred reality. The Genesis account of human origins, together with much subsequent revelation, proclaims the divine origin and sacredness of human sexuality and its purposes, the divine institution of marriage and the dignity and nobility of women, who have been degraded in so many societies.

The Old Testament describes the creation of man and woman and speaks of the divine origin of our sexuality. The accounts stress the purposes of human love and sexuality. Genesis emphasizes the way that sexuality should serve enduring and committed love. When the woman was created, the man said: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). The sacred writer adds: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (Genesis 2:24).

Love is the norm of all Christian moral living. And love is more than sex. Jesus knew that love is the greatest of all gifts. Sexuality is itself a powerful gift of God, but it needs to be guided by a wise and strong love. Jesus’ teaching about love and sexuality is not simply a set of narrow rules. Its purpose is not to make us nervous, to quench love with cautiousness or stifle spontaneity, but to help us to be open and free. He teaches us to channel the powerful drives of sexuality into authentic and honest love. When a man and a woman come to love each other enough to leave father, mother and all familiar things, coming together is not to be for a passing moment. This kind of love is meant to endure a lifetime. Personal love, touched with the energy



of sexuality, speaks by God's design of faithful and lasting commitment, of promises that must be kept.

Genesis also underlines the creative aspect of sexuality. "God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Sexual activity not only serves enduring love, but through such love also calls new persons into being. New life is born out of acts of human love, to become the joy of parents and the focus of their lives. All sexual activity should be an expression of faithful love and should be open to new life. Life must be formed, nurtured, and educated, and that takes place within the family where the husband and wife work together.

This vision of family and children demands a lifelong commitment of love to each other. Some forms of behavior fall outside this vision and violate God's law. Premarital and extramarital sex cloud this vision and undermine it. Such activity fails to be committed, responsible and truly loving. The Sixth Commandment condemns such action precisely because it attacks and makes sordid that which God created as beautiful and good.

Because sex is a precious gift, the Church condemns its abuse and degradation. Faithful to Scripture, the Church insists that love of God is incompatible with fornication, sexual promiscuity, licentiousness and other sexual perversions. Christ warns that fidelity to God can be broken also by our desires (cf. Matthew 5:28).

The Church has constantly taught that specific kinds of sexual activities which obviously involve a departure from either or both procreation or the marital love between a husband and wife are forbidden by God. This is so not only because such acts are forbidden by name in Scripture. They are wrong because they amount to an attack on basic human values persistently upheld by Scripture, and are opposed to principles that we can discern even without revelation. Such acts as fornication and adultery, homosexual acts and other like sexual vices, have throughout the centuries been condemned by the ordinary teaching of the Church and by formal judgments of the magisterium.

The Sixth Commandment calls us to respect sex for the serious reality that it is. Casual sex has led to personal and social tragedy. The sexual revolution promised a paradise on earth, but it created instead a wilderness of broken homes, child abuse, epidemics of sexual diseases and an immense increase of pregnancies among the very young. Under its banner many children were born not into secure and loving homes, but into broken families and into circumstances that promised little hope. The cruelty of massive abortion for personal convenience is the deadly fruit of the modern sexual revolution. Mass media and the entertainment industry, instead of serving well the best of ideals, came to advocate petty selfishness, lust and control over others.

This flawed revolution has wounded many human hopes and brought about so much pain. What has been forgotten is the simple fact that not only is sexuality a gift from God, it is also meant to support love that will last a lifetime. Its purpose is to strengthen families, making them strong and able to nurture and protect that space where generous, unselfish love can be learned. Sexuality is intended to be treated with reverent care, so that it could free us from loneliness and protect the dignity and worth of every person.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in the context of the Sixth Commandment speaks also of the vocation to chastity, which is defined as the successful integration of sexuality within the person (cf. 2348-59). The virtue of chastity and its servant virtue modesty address the integrity of life and love and require mature self control and a growing into true human freedom. It is within the context of the Sixth Commandment that the catechism reminds us of offenses against chastity including lust, pornography, prostitution and rape. Ultimately, the call of God echoed in the Sixth Commandment is to marital fidelity and the admonition against anything such as adultery or divorce that would undermine the covenant freely contracted by spouses. The Sixth Commandment reaffirms the centrality of faithful love and imposes on husband and wife the obligation to keep their marriage exclusive and indissoluble.

## The Seventh Commandment

*“You shall not steal.”*

*(Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19)*

In the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the joy of faith, Jesus' followers learned to live as he taught and then to teach what he commanded. Today the Church must continue to proclaim God's revelation and Christ's teaching about love, marriage and the family. We do this to keep faith with the Lord and at the same time to announce the profound wisdom of this simple moral prohibition that expresses the most basic marital value: fidelity, trust and the integrity of the commitment of a man and woman to each other, to their children and to their future together.

Inside the doorway of a store that specialized in toys for young people was a very large, brightly colored sign that proclaimed to the shoppers: “Shoplifters will be cut up and eaten!” While the message was exaggerated, apparently the need for it was not. The manager of the store explained that many young people who frequent the store assume that they are free to steal as long as they can get away with it. He then went on to tell me how one outraged parent threatened to sue the store because his child was apprehended while leaving the store with a small video game. The rationale that motivated these threats was that the item stolen did not cost much. “The game isn't worth \$25,” stated the parent. With this “flawless logic” the indignant parent defended his “innocent child.”

On another level, we have probably all heard that cheating on your income tax is acceptable. “After all, you are stealing from yourself,” the saying goes. The first time I bought a new car I learned a lesson about honesty and justice. The car had less than one hundred miles on it when it developed serious problems. When my complaint reached the manufacturer, I was blithely told, “You bought the car, didn't you; if it doesn't work properly, that's your problem.” I wondered out loud whether the manufacturer would have felt the same way if the check with which I paid for the car had been equally defective.

A whole industry has developed in the United States around the issue of false labeling and misleading advertising that has become a standard part of the American way of shopping. Ads seem to be geared to make us spend our hard-earned dollars for the illusion that we are getting something more than for what we are paying.

The Seventh Commandment is rooted in the concern for justice. It forbids taking or keeping our neighbor's goods unjustly or damaging them in any way. This commandment demands justice in caring for created goods and the fruits of human labor. The follower of Christ must live in such a way that his or her earthly goods serve the love of God and neighbor.

Without justice, sustained and stable relations between individuals and within society cannot exist. Justice is a virtue that disposes a person "to render to everyone his due." The form of justice that governs relationships between individuals is called *commutative justice*. Each person is required to respect the rights of his neighbors. The Seventh Commandment speaks of the basic duties we have in justice toward our neighbor, that is, each person is forbidden to steal from another. If one person violates the rights of another, a duty to make restitution arises. Thus, one who has taken the property of another must return it or its equivalent, as far as possible; one who has injured a neighbor in other ways must find suitable means to atone for the offense.

The form of justice that deals with the fair division of the goods and burdens of life in society is usually referred to as *social justice*. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly points out, quoting the Second Vatican Council document *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, the Church makes moral judgments about economic and social matters, when demanded by the fundamental rights of the person or the salvation of souls (cf. 2420). This moral mission is distinct from that of civil government and its authorities. The Church cares for the temporal aspects of the common good because they have a role to play in God's plan. Hence, the Church makes every effort to foster a correct understanding of the use of earthly goods and our relationship with all other human beings in our socioeconomic relations.

The Church's social teaching is rooted in Scripture and has developed over the centuries, but some of its most articulate teaching has been formulated in the past 100 years since the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. The Church's social teaching proposes principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action. While all of the practical judgments are not directly revealed, they are a part of the Church's authoritative moral teaching.

At the basis of the commandment "You shall not steal" is the understanding that the material goods of the earth are intended to benefit everyone, but that specific goods which belong to an individual are to be respected as the property of that person. Hence, the Church teaches that private property is a right and that the state must regulate the exercise of that right for the sake of the common good.

The Seventh Commandment forbids theft, that is, appropriating the goods of others against the reasonable will of their owners. It also demands that promises be kept and that contracts be fulfilled. On the positive side, the same commandment urges us to serve those in need and to care for and love the poor.

Two great human values are at issue when we address the Seventh Commandment. The first is the right of people to keep what is theirs. The ancient adage "To each his own" is protected by the divine injunction "You shall not steal." The second value is the simple recognition that the goods of the earth are meant for everyone's use and so there should be appropriate social structures to provide for the equitable distribution of the goods of the earth in a manner that meets the basic human needs of each person.

Just as the other commandments carry social implications, so also does this one. Each person has a right to property since it is the means that provides for his or her well-being and that of his or her family. Without recognition of such ownership, chaos certainly ensues. The social structures that sustain communal life collapse without the recognition of private property. The economic, social, cultural and moral disarray in which the former Soviet Union and its satellites find themselves today is eloquent testimony to the rooting of the commandment "You shall not steal" in our very human nature.

The Seventh Commandment obligates us to respect God's creation. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, animals, plants and inanimate beings are intended for the common good, past, present and future (cf. 2415). Our use of the mineral, vegetable and animal resources of the world must respect its moral dimension. Our dominion over inanimate and living beings that comes from God their creator is not an absolute power. It must be tempered by concern for the quality of life of our neighbor, including generations yet to come, and calls for a religious respect for the integrity of God's creation.

The same commandment that demands respect for the property of others also challenges us to respect the dignity of human work because it shares in God's work of creation by exercising responsibility for the earth through human labor. Everyone has the right to use their talents in a correct way and thus to contribute to their own good and the common good. This right carries with it a concomitant obligation: We are all to contribute to the common good. Business leaders are responsible for the economic and ecological efforts of their companies. Laborers are entitled to a just wage and society must work to provide access to jobs and develop a social system that provides some form of social security.

The Seventh Commandment clearly calls us to the practice of justice and love in caring for all of God's creation and to a profound respect for the fruits of human initiative and human labor. It is a commandment that reminds us of our social, cultural and economic interdependence and challenges us to live out God's plan in such a way that the human family will live together in peace, justice and harmony.

## The Eighth Commandment

*"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."  
(Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20)*

As I began to reflect on this commandment, a vivid memory came to mind. The year was 1987 and the place was the San Fernando Mission in Southern California. The occasion was the meeting of Pope

John Paul II, with the bishops of the United States. It was a spiritually powerful moment as some 300 bishops from every part of the United States gathered with their chief shepherd, Peter in our midst. The media, however, had predetermined that this was not news. There was another story.

The predetermined “story” for the pope’s arrival in the United States was Catholic dissent. As the buses carrying the bishops entered the San Fernando Mission area, a handful of protesters (no more than 20) stood at the entrance. What seemed like two or perhaps even three times as many media people with cameras, lights, microphones and note pads gathered around them. What remains vivid in my mind was the sight of camera people lying on the ground so they could shoot an angle that would make the crowd appear to be larger. The fact that we gathered with the pope in a session of prayer and wonderful dialogue was totally ignored. The 11 o’clock news showed what appeared to be some people with placards. The anchor people and news reporters breathlessly proclaimed “the contestation that plagues the pope even when he visits with the bishops.”

For those of us who were at Denver for the visit of the pope for World Youth Day in 1993, the phenomenon repeated itself. You would think that there were actually two papal visits. One was a time of faith, joy, affirmation and prayer. The other was an occasion for some members of the media to promote their own agenda and rehash anything negative that could be said about the Church for the one hundredth time. One group was part of a pilgrimage of faith. The other was creating “a story.”

Not too long ago, I read some articles in a couple of Catholic publications that cater to different groups on the fringes of the Church. Since I was familiar with the material about which they were writing, I knew that the stories were filled with inaccuracies and made unsubstantiated and false charges against individuals and groups within the Church. As I prepared to write this article on the commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” those newspapers and the media events in Los Angeles came to mind.

Truth is one of the great casualties of the modern media era. We are told that the medium is the message. Once this is accepted, truth remains incidental. For example, I remember standing at a rally of the Communist Party in Rome in the 1970s and listening to the speaker announce that any means that carries the party to power are justifiable and any word spoken to advance the party is truth. What a far cry from the simple proclamation in the Decalogue, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

A just and properly functioning society is impossible without a level of trust and understanding rooted in the truth. Human interchange, whether it be personal, economic, cultural or moral, is not possible unless we agree that words must convey truth, at least the objective truth available to us all or the truth as one understands it. It is on this principle that our human efforts at community-building rests. We have a duty to seek the truth and to speak the truth. We must be honest with ourselves and with others.

God’s truth is fully revealed in Jesus Christ who came as the light of the world so that “everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness” (John 12:46). When he stood before Pontius Pilate, Jesus proclaimed that he “came into the world to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). As a follower of Christ we should never be ashamed to testify to the truth. We also recognize that people cannot live together if they do not trust one another and if they are not truthful. The virtue of truthfulness requires that we be honest with one another.

Proper communication is essential to life and all communication must be rooted in truth. Lying contradicts what one believes to be truthful and, therefore, remains a sin. It destroys human bonds built on trust. Saint Paul reminds us:

You must put on that new man created in God’s image, whose justice and holiness are born of truth. See to it, then, that you put an end to lying; let everyone speak the truth to his neighbor (Ephesians 4:24-25).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the seriousness of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who tells it, and the harm suffered by its victims. If a lie in itself is only a venial sin, it can become



mortal when it seriously violates the virtues of justice and love (cf. 2484).

Lying merits being condemned because it is a profanation of language whose very purpose is to communicate the known truth to others. It is a lack of justice and love to say things contrary to the truth with the deliberate intention of misleading a person. The culpability is even greater when the intention of deceiving involves serious and harmful consequences to the one deceived.

Someone once described a gossip as a person who will never tell a lie if a half-truth will do as much harm. In all situations Christians must not only be sincere and authentic in representing themselves, but also be trustworthy and honest in their representation of others. Hence the demand that we serve the truth when we speak of others. Once again, Saint Paul states:

Stop lying to one another. What you have done is put aside your old self with its past deeds and put on a new man, one who grows in knowledge as he is formed anew in the image of his Creator (Colossians 3:9-10).

Lying under oath is a particularly serious wrong. In swearing an oath, one calls on God, the source of all truth, to witness to the truth of one's testimony, assertions, or intentions. In accord with the injunction of Leviticus 19:12, the Church has faithfully taught that deliberate perjury is always a grave sin, whatever the reason or occasion.

Other offenses against truth include rash judgment, detraction, calumny, any of those acts that diminish or destroy a neighbor's reputation and honor. The other side of the coin is the challenge to respect the truth. We must hold the truth in high esteem and correct any way in which it is distorted.

Precisely because a search for truth is central to human dignity, and because an authentic grasp and personal acceptance of truth, especially the truth about God, are so precious, human persons have a right to religious truth. Anyone who accepts the responsibility to teach the faith accepts the obligation to teach the whole truth presented by the Church lest in some way Christ's very teaching be distorted and become less than the truth.

The 20th century, an era of mass and almost unending communications, is an age that needs to understand, accept and respect the divine injunction that when we deal with each other and speak to and about each other, we do so fully aware that “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

## The Ninth Commandment

*“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.”  
(Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21)*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges each of his followers to a life that is not reduced merely to external actions, but reflects what is deeply rooted in our hearts:

You have heard the commandment imposed on your forefathers ‘You shall not commit murder; every murderer shall be liable to judgment.’ What I say to you is: everyone who grows angry with his brother will be liable to judgment... (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus is speaking about the importance of the heart in living our lives. This is true, for example, of the commitment of husband and wife to each other. “You have heard the commandment ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ What I say to you is: Anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts” (Matthew 5:27-28).

In commenting on this text from the Sermon on the Mount, Pope John Paul II, early in his pontificate, taught:

It is significant that Christ, speaking of the object of this act, does not stress that it is ‘another man’s wife,’ or a woman who is not his own wife, but says generically a woman. Adultery committed ‘in the heart’ is not circumscribed in the limits of the interpersonal relationship which make it possible to determine adultery committed ‘in the body...adultery ‘in the heart’ is committed not only because man looks in this way at a woman who is not his wife, but precisely because he looks at

a woman in this way. Even if he looks in this way at the woman who is his wife, he would likewise commit adultery in his heart (“Lust and Dignity,” Oct. 1980).

Significantly, on an occasion when the Pharisees asked Jesus about the external adherence to the law, he pointed out:

What comes out of the mouth originates in the mind...from the mind stem evil designs, murder, adulterous conduct, fornication, stealing, false witness, blasphemy. These are the things that make a man impure. As for eating with unwashed hands, that makes no man impure (Matthew 15:17-20).

One of the truths Christ taught us, therefore, is that our heart is the seat of our personal morality. The struggle between good and evil, between right and wrong, involves purifying our heart and controlling our desires.

In the Sermon on the Mount, as in the conversation with the Pharisees on the indissolubility of marriage, Christ speaks from the depth of the divine mystery. At the same time, he enters into the very depths of the human mystery. For that reason Jesus makes mention of the heart of that “intimate place” in which there struggle in man good and evil, sin and justice, concupiscence and holiness. Within everyone there is the mystery of sin and redemption and the interior dimension of the struggle of good over evil. It is this interior battle between concupiscence and grace that can be referred to as the condition of our heart or our attitude.

In describing one’s attitude or condition of the heart, some people speak about a “new morality,” a phrase often used to describe a way of life with full freedom but with little responsibility. This philosophy compromises hopes and dreams by appealing to our weaknesses. It believes that commitments which traditionally have revealed the depth of true love are not necessary. In contrast with this “morality” is a condition of the heart or a true morality worthy of the name “new.” This is the morality to which Christ calls us, an interior attitude or disposition of the heart that is vibrant, strong and able to change everything. It is the way of life that Jesus taught which offers us joy. Morality, therefore, is more than just a set of actions, it is an attitude and condition of the heart.

Christian morality offers a fully human response to life. In Jesus we discover that questioning itself is part of the wonderful movement of God's grace within us. Religion is neither extraneous nor a burden to our development and growth. In it we can find answers to the most important questions with which we struggle as we grow and try to determine who we are, how we should live and what our responsibilities are in this life. God is not an "extra" in life but the answer to life.

In his beautiful encyclical *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor, VS)*, Pope John Paul II teaches us:

Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the cross (cf. Philippians 2:5-8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Ephesians 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of grace of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit in us (VS 21).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus further taught: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8)." Who are these pure of heart? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that they are those whose intellects and wills are on the same wavelength or frequency as the requirements of God's holiness, primarily in three areas: love or charity, chastity or sexual integrity, and the love of truth or the orthodoxy of the faith. It goes on to point out that there is a connection between purity of heart, that of body and of faith (cf. 2518). If we are right before God, all else will be well. "Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him" (John 14:23).

The pure of heart are promised that they will see God face to face and be like God. It is the sacrament of baptism that provides the grace of purification that enables the baptized person to attain this purity of heart that carries with it the power to live a chaste, modest and pure life.

The Ninth Commandment calls us to that purity of heart proclaimed by the sixth beatitude. Such purity involves us in a struggle

against being overwhelmed by the desires of the flesh or any other disordered human appetite. Hence the Church challenges us to accept chastity as a virtue and a gift and calls us to purity of mind, heart and action. The same Christian sensitivity calls us to modesty that protects the mystery of persons and their love and invites patience and moderation in a loving relationship. Decency is another name for modesty. It is basic human decency that frees us from the overwhelming preoccupation of our society and its culture with eroticism and its companion vice of voyeurism. Christian purity calls us also to purify the social climate and places obligations on the communications media to demonstrate a respect and restraint in the information that they disseminate.

The Ninth Commandment is a reminder that Christ's redemption and our conversion is working its way out slowly in our lives. Much of us still need to be redeemed and washed white in the blood of Christ's sacrifice. Not just our actions, but our intentions, our motives and our hearts need to be washed clean every day in the blood of Christ's loving sacrifice.

## The Tenth Commandment

*"You shall not covet anything  
that belongs to your neighbor."  
(Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21)*

The Tenth Commandment brings us face to face with the whole world of our desires, intentions and motivations. This realm is not easily identified by casual observation. The more common infractions of the Decalogue involve things we choose to do or fail to do rather than what we think or perhaps plan and plot. Like the Ninth Commandment, the Tenth Commandment is involved with the stirrings of the heart. Both commandments remind us that we are to shape our lives including our desires, thoughts, plans and aspirations so that we reflect the life of Christ within us.

Christ calls each of us to new life. Christians must live their lives as children of God and co-workers of Christ in making this world a better place. We are called to live freely and responsibly. With our natural talents and the gifts of grace, we are to live a life that is pleasing to God. Since God reads the innermost recesses of our hearts, the life we live and the honor and glory we give God by following his way must include not only the external observance of the law but also an internal disposition to follow Christ in all that we say, do and think.

As soon as we begin to think about what we should do, various questions usually arise. There are many forms of good that one might pursue in one's life and many ways of achieving them. We must also keep in mind that our own individual life is not the only life that might be enriched as a result of the choices we make. Our choices can enhance many lives. Am I my neighbor's keeper? Who is my neighbor? What forms of good should I seek? How much? For whom? With whom? Of all the choices I could make, which are the ones that I really ought to make? What criteria should I use in choosing? The answers to these many questions are revealed not only in external observance of the law that measures what others can see us do or hear us say, but also in the attitudes of our heart.

We are charged to conform to the mind of Christ. The second chapter of our Holy Father's encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth*, takes its name from Saint Paul's admonition in the Letter to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). Pope John Paul II teaches:

Genuine freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image in man.... Although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known (VS 34).

In that same letter regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching, we read:

Jesus brings God's commandments to fulfillment, particularly the commandment of love of neighbor, by interiorizing their demands and by bringing out their full meaning. Love of neighbor springs from a loving heart which, precisely because

it loves, is ready to live out the loftiest challenges. Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey toward

perfection, at the heart of which is love (cf. Colossians 3:14), (VS 15).

The value of Christ's life and teaching consists in their conformity to the will of God the Father. "My judgment is just, because I seek to do not my will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30). Christ's own prayer in the face of the terror of death was: "Father...not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ lived and died in the spirit of the prayer he taught us: "Our Father...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10). He makes this the very meaning of his sonship through which we become sons of God: "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me" (Matthew 12:50).

To conform to the mind of Christ is to conform to the will of the Father. If we ask what we must do to "perform the works of God," Jesus replies: "This is the work of God, have faith in the One whom he sent" (John 6:28-29). He further states: "None of those who cry out 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

As Saint Paul teaches, we can know "the mind of the Lord" in ways that those who are "unspiritual" cannot, because "we have the mind of Christ" (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14-16). This understanding enables Saint Paul to answer the question of what we ought to do. His answer is that we should conduct ourselves in a way pleasing to God. This expresses the mind of Christ, for Christ does only what pleases the Father (cf. John 8:29). When Jesus rejects Peter's advice to him as sheer temptation, his reason is "You are not judging by God's standards but by man's" (Matthew 16:23). Peter's advice was to avoid the cross, but Christ went to the cross "so that all of us, dead to sin, could live in accord with God's will" (1 Peter 2:24).

We can see more clearly with eyes of faith. Every part of Christian moral teaching depends on this principle. “You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor” rests on our ability to see all of life with eyes of faith and to live a life of faith that is rooted in the conversion of our heart.

The Tenth Commandment forbids us to covet the goods of others. Covetousness leads to the violence and injustice forbidden by the Fifth Commandment. Hence, to covet what belongs to others is wrong and among its effects include envy at the success of others and bitterness, anger or hatred at the sight of their prosperity. At the same time, the Tenth Commandment challenges us to develop a spirit of poverty that brings a sense of detachment and balance to our lives.

The Tenth Commandment forbids uncontrolled greed that grows out of an immoderate passion for riches and the power that wealth can bring. It urges us to form a spirit of detachment that imitates Christ to the extent that we would crucify “the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24), and live a life that enables us to enter the kingdom of heaven because we are “poor in spirit” (cf. Matthew 5:3).

In the search for righteousness and goodness, the only way to satisfy fully the demands of our own human nature is to see as God sees, to judge as God judges, to love as God loves. The challenge to arrive at this divine perspective and purpose is a struggle of the heart and mind that eventually involves one’s whole character. As Saint Paul reminds us:

“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

The commandments of God that direct our actions and thoughts reflect a far more powerful reality: the conversion of our very being, our will and mind to Christ. And while it was through his death and resurrection that Christ purchased our salvation, he reminds us that the commandments which govern all of our actions, external and internal, must still be obeyed. The meaning of the commandments is now rooted in the love of Christ, a love in which we share. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love...the command I give you is this, that you love one another” (John 15:9,17). Christ takes



the commandments and elevates them to the highest possible level: the level of love.

Some years ago there was a song that had as its refrain “You can’t go to jail for what you’re thinking.” Perhaps not, but one can easily go to hell for what one thinks in preferring evil to goodness. The Tenth Commandment challenges us to change our lives so completely that we manifest the presence of Christ in our hearts and minds, as well as in our lives and actions.

## Conclusion

### *The Commandments, Law and Conscience*

In the previous chapters we have explored the Ten Commandments and the application of those commandments to our daily lives, individually and as a community. The commandments are the word of God giving us sure and clear direction on how we are to live. Yet there is another voice of God that speaks to us not on the pages of the law but in the quiet recesses of our heart. That is the voice of conscience. What is the role of conscience as we attempt to live a moral life? In what sense does the revelation contained in the commandments express the law of God written in our hearts in creation?

To understand the relationship of the commandments, the moral law and our conscience, we need to reflect on the fact that God is the author and source of all three. God created us and gave us a human nature that corresponds to his plan. The more we understand ourselves and our relationship to God, the better we understand the obligations of God’s plan, which we call the natural moral law. At the same time, God gave us the commandments so that we could know clearly and directly God’s law. God also placed deep within us an awareness that there is a right and wrong way to act. This awareness is the voice of conscience.

First, let us look at the natural moral law placed within our hearts at creation. When the Church speaks of “those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself” (cf. *DH* 2-3), as

the Second Vatican Council explains in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae, DH)*, she speaks of a universal natural law and its all-embracing principles. The natural moral order is God's creative plan understood by human reason and assisted by the presence of his Holy Spirit.

The natural moral law is derived from our intellectual understanding of how things should be according to God's plan. It is for this reason that definitions of natural law in traditional philosophy, though they take various forms, always indicate two factors: the created reality according to God's plan and our intellectual ability to recognize that order. In this understanding of the natural moral order, our very life and our intellectual ability are the pillars of the natural law. We are not asked to apply some objective order that exists outside of us. We come to understand who we are and in that realization recognize what we ought to do. This is the great difference between human life and all other types of plant and animal life. We as human beings are capable of reflecting on who we are and to determine how we ought to act.

God in his graciousness crystallized the major points of the natural moral law and made them explicit in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant, and brought to full clarity in the new law by Christ.

The Gospel, which had been promised "in former times to the prophets" and which Christ himself "fulfilled and promulgated with his own lips" and which he commissioned his Apostles to preach to all, is "the source of all saving truth and all moral teaching" (*DV* 7). Christ, as Saint Paul says, "is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4), and "end" here means not its termination but its completion or perfection.

Hence, the law of God written in our hearts is knowable to human reason without the gift of revelation, but because of the light of faith it has been made all the more clear and explicit for us. The commandments are not external to us nor are we free to ignore them with the claim that we prefer to "follow our conscience."

Conscience, by definition, is one's practical judgment about the rightness or wrongness of one's acts. Judgments of conscience are the outcome of a person's effort to avoid being arbitrary and to seek to know and follow what is right. We are able to speak about a conscience

being true and upright, and this implies that implicitly or explicitly a person must conform his conscience to God's design and will. That is why Saint Paul not only observes the universality and naturalness of human conscience in all times and places, but also insists on the fact that conscience bears witness to the demands of God's law (cf. Romans 2:15).

Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris, PT)* reminds us that: "The Creator of the world has stamped man's inmost being with an order which his conscience reveals to him and strongly enjoins him to obey" (*PT* 5). The Church has constantly taught that a conscience is correct when its judgments are right and correspond to God's judgments. When one "enters into his heart" sincerely seeking the true direction and standard for love, then "God, who probes the heart, awaits him there" (*GS* 14). If one wants to know what is true and good, then, in the quiet reflections of conscience, "he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths" (*GS* 16).

Ultimately, we are obliged to follow our conscience, but we also obliged to see that our conscience is properly formed. Conscience does not come already formed with its own set of rights and wrongs. Conscience is an inner light that allows us to examine the situations we face and to make practical, moral judgments. But the principles on which we base those judgments is the knowledge that we have received and made our own in the formation of our lives.

For this reason, teaching and learning the commandments of God remain an integral part of the effort of the Church to follow in God's way. Every Catholic, particularly parents and grandparents, faces the challenge of imparting God's wisdom and God's way to the next generations. By sharing this knowledge and helping one to form one's heart and mind and to be receptive to the loving grace of God, consciences are prepared to respond with correct moral judgments that lead us to God.

How are the commandments, the natural moral law and conscience related? The natural moral law is God's law written in nature itself and on our hearts in the very act of creation. The commandments are God's divinely revealed and explicit obligations regarding the natural moral order together with our obligation to

recognize and worship God the creator. Conscience is the immediate practical moral judgment that we make about good or evil, the rightness or wrongness of a specific action we are about to take. If that judgment flows from the law written on our hearts and made explicit in the Decalogue, it will be the work of a correct, upright and true conscience and our action or thought will be truly good.

It is not always easy to live a good life. Moral judgments are not easily made without the grace of God. That is why in addition to our acquired knowledge and our sincere efforts to form a right conscience we need also to pray. We need to pray daily for God's grace, strength and loving guidance so that we will always have the courage not only to know but also to live the wisdom contained in God's word and God's plan: the Ten Commandments in our lives.

## A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R

Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl is the diocesan ordinary of the Archdiocese of Washington. He was born in Pittsburgh November 12, 1940. After gaining bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., he went to Rome to complete his seminary training at the Pontifical North American College, where he was ordained a priest December 17, 1966.

He earned his doctorate in theology at Rome's Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, more commonly known as the Angelicum. He taught theology there from 1975-79 and was one of the chief editors of *The Teaching of Christ*, a three-year project by a team of theologians to produce a comprehensive adult catechism.

In 1985, Pope John Paul II named him auxiliary bishop of Seattle. In 1988 he was named bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, where he served for 18 years. On May 16, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as the sixth Archbishop of Washington.