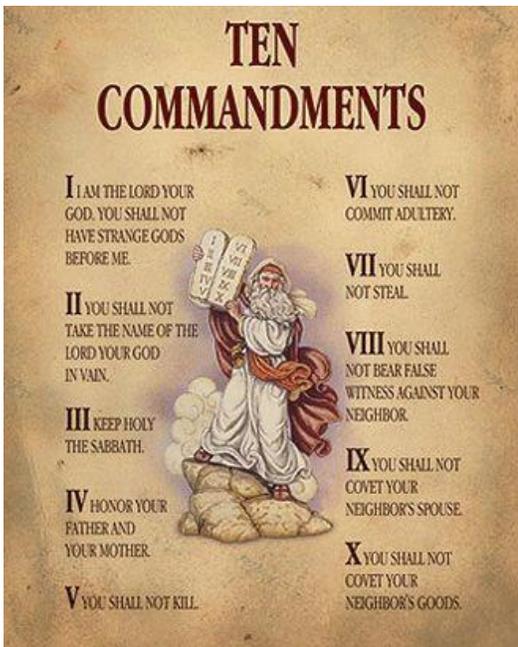


# The Ten Commandments

## Commandments 1-5



## THE ROLE OF THE COMMANDMENTS

God helps us in many different ways to live a moral life. He gives us grace, which awakens in us the desire to say no to temptation and sin and to choose only that which is good. He gives us the Theological and Cardinal Virtues and the grace to practice human virtues so that we can grow stronger in them. God gives us help and grace through the Church and through our reception of the Sacraments. He also teaches us how we should live. One way he does this is by giving us laws to guide our actions. The Ten Commandments are laws that God has revealed to us. Heeding the guidance God gives us in the Commandments will help us know how to serve God and how we should live with each other. It also helps us to be open to the grace of the Holy Spirit and what

God can accomplish in us and through us by that grace.

## THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

The first three Commandments treat our relationship to God. The last seven concern our relationship with each other. The First Commandment calls us to have faith in the true God, to hope in him, and to love him fully with mind, heart, and will. We respond to God, who has created and redeemed us and extends his providential care to us every minute of each day. The First Commandment fosters the virtue of religion that moves us to adore God alone because he alone is holy and worthy of our praise.

**Adoring God, praying to him, offering him the worship that belongs to him, fulfilling the promises and vows made to him are acts of the virtue of religion which fall under obedience to the first commandment. (CCC, no. 2135)**

All the Commandments call us to practice certain virtues and forbid a number of immoral behaviors. The positive invitation of the First Commandment calls us to practice the Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and charity by believing in the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, placing all our hope in them, and loving them with our whole heart and mind.

## Faith

God has given us the virtue of faith, which is a personal response to the Lord's Revelation of his holiness, love, beauty, and transcendence. We experience hints of his majesty in creation, traces of his love in the human love we receive, and impulses of his concern for us in our inner life, especially in the movements of conscience. Our faith is also communal, coming to us from our families and parish community. Above all, our faith in God is a gift of grace and is constantly nourished by the Holy Spirit from the moment of our Baptism, through our prayer life, our participation in the Eucharist and the Sacraments, and our Christian witness.

While it is the duty of all to worship and serve God, regrettably, there are some who do not believe in him and others who seriously doubt his existence. Some hesitate to believe because they cannot overcome their objections to faith, or are puzzled by the mystery of God. Some of the baptized later lapse into heresy. “Heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same” (CCC, no. 2089).

Apostasy is a total repudiation of the faith (cf. CCC, no. 2089). Schism is the refusal to submit to the pope’s authority as head of the Church. Christ calls us to have a prayerful, reconciling attitude toward people with difficulties in their faith, to help them toward assent to the truth of faith.

## Hope

God has given us the virtue of hope. Hope fills us with the confidence that God accompanies us on our journey through life and guides us to eternal life with him. If we refuse this gift of hope, we stray into presumption or its opposite, despair. In the sin of presumption, we think we will be saved without any personal commitment to the moral life. In the sin of despair, we lose hope in God’s mercy and believe we cannot be saved.

## Love

Finally, God has given us the virtue of love, the very love that he has for us. Our Lord asks us to accept this love and respond to him with it. Jesus made the love of God the first of the two greatest Commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37). We sin against this call to love by indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, spiritual sloth, and hatred of God (cf. CCC, no. 2094).

## ISSUES RELATED TO THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

### Idolatry

The First Commandment prohibits idolatry, the worship of false gods. In ancient times, people worshiped created things such as the sun, moon, stars, trees, bulls, eagles, and serpents. In some cases, emperors and kings were considered divine, and worship of them was expected. Israel was forbidden to make images of God: Do not “degrade yourselves by fashioning an idol to represent any figure” (Dt 4:16). This injunction against “graven images” was based on the conviction that God is greater and more mysterious than any artistic representation of him. It also restrained Israel from carving idols like the pagans and lapsing into idolatry. But the people of Israel could make images that symbolically pointed toward salvation by the Messiah, such as the bronze serpent, the Ark of the Covenant, and the cherubim (cf. CCC, no. 2130).

Christians, however, have been permitted to fashion religious art. The veneration of icons—religious images of Christ, Mary, the angels, and the saints—was upheld by the seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicea (AD 787), in opposition to the iconoclasts—those who rejected the use of religious images such as statues, paintings, and mosaics. The fact that, in the Incarnation, Christ took on human nature provided the foundation for the Church’s tradition that artistic images such as icons can portray mysteries of salvation. Whoever venerates a holy image venerates the person portrayed. This veneration of Mary and the saints—and images of them—differs from the adoration that belongs to God alone.

Today idolatry has emerged in new forms, whenever something created is given absolute value. Examples of where this happens include power, money, materialism, and sports. Also, those who resort

to astrology, palm reading, and interpretation of omens by mediums, clairvoyants, and others who claim to control time and history weaken their faith in God, lapse into superstition, and sometimes fall into sin. Those who get involved with cults or the occult (e.g., magic, witchcraft, Satanism) open themselves to evil influence, undermine their faith in the true God, and commit sin.

Some contemporary individuals turn to a New Age spirituality. This spirituality does not have a doctrinal basis but reflects many religious strands from the non-Christian East, various occult practices like astrology, and some insights from psychology. Practitioners tend to abandon doctrinal teaching on the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Church, and the sacraments. They also ignore the moral teaching of God and the Church.

## Atheism

In the context of our culture, atheism often wears the face of secularism in its extreme form. Atheists or radical secularists deny God's existence. Some are strict materialists, believing that ultimately there is nothing spiritual whatsoever. Some are secular humanists, who claim that humans should control history and the world with no reference to God. Christians must always examine their own behavior because lack of consistency with the Gospel in their lives can encourage others in atheism.

**Believers . . . have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the true nature of God and of religion. (GS, no. 19)**

## Agnosticism

This is another way to evade the call of the First Commandment. The term agnostic means "I don't know." It comes in different forms. Some agnostics admit God's existence but claim nothing can be known about him. Others say it is impossible to know whether there is a God. Some agnostics are searching for God; others do not try. Many are practical atheists, who may not consciously deny God's existence, but live as if he does not exist.

## The Second Commandment

### THE NAME OF GOD IS HOLY

*The second commandment [requires] respect for the Lord's name. Like the first commandment, it belongs to the virtue of religion and more particularly it governs our use of speech in sacred matters. —CCC, no. 2142*

At the burning bush, Moses asked God for his name. God replied, "I am who am. . . . This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). The Hebrews treated this name for God with such respect that they did not speak it. It was honored in silence. Only the high priest, once a year at the feast of atonement, pronounced this name at the incense offering in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Out of reverence for the revealed holy name, the people substituted the name Adonai, which means "Lord." Modern Jews adapt this custom by writing "G-d" instead of the customary spelling.

The Second Commandment calls us to the virtue of reverence for God, which trains us to know and to preserve the difference between the Creator and the creature. Respect for God's name keeps us from

reducing him to a mere fact, or even a thing that we can control or manipulate. At the same time, a gracious God desires to be intimate with us, even becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ and dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, Jesus applies to himself the expression "I Am" (cf. Jn 8:58), thus identifying himself with God. He distinguishes himself from his Father and from the Holy Spirit, whom he will send to the world after his Resurrection. This was one way Jesus opened us to understanding God as Trinity.

A name in some way conveys the reality of a person—the origin, the history, the very being of the person. That is why people are protective about their names and expect them to be treated with honor. The name of God obviously deserves the highest honor and respect. The Lord gives us a Commandment that asks us to reverence his name and not to use it in a disrespectful or manipulative way. When Jesus taught the Our Father, his first petition was "Hallowed be thy name." We also praise God's holy name in every Mass at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer when we recite or sing the Holy, Holy, Holy.

We also draw strength from recalling our Baptism, which initiated us into the Church "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." To be baptized in the name of the Trinity means to be immersed into the very life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. God's name sanctifies us. In Baptism, we also commonly receive the name of a saint, a disciple of Christ who has led an exemplary life, to remind us of our call to holiness. Patron saints—that is, the saint or saints whose name we have been given—serve as examples of the way to holiness by their witness to faith, hope, and love. They also intercede with God for our benefit. God calls us by name. Our name is sacred. We need to honor God's name and the names of others to make our world a center of dignity and respect.

## THE WRONG USE OF GOD'S NAME

The Second Commandment forbids the wrong use or misuse of God's name. There are a number of ways in which this happens. Blasphemy uses the name of God and of Jesus Christ as well as those of the Blessed Mother and the saints in an offensive manner. The Catechism teaches that blasphemy consists "in uttering against God—inwardly or outwardly—words of hatred, reproach, or defiance" (CCC, no. 2148). This is gravely sinful. Habitual disrespect for God, displayed in cursing and even in the use of vulgar language, can create an attitude that erodes our relationship with the Lord.

At the same time, we recognize diminished culpability when the name of God is used because of an outburst of undisciplined speech due to passion or unexpected incitement to anger. We need to cultivate a persistent reverence for sacred names; if we do not, we can end up giving bad example and also fall into the sin of blasphemy. It should also be noted that in Scripture, the sometimes passionate language of the Prophets, in which they lament the troubles of their times and utter loud complaints to God, is not blasphemy or the taking of God's name in vain. It is actually prayer addressed to God.

We are forbidden to use God's name to witness a perjury or false oath, thereby using him to approve our lie.

God's name has been invoked to justify unjust wars and terrorism, slaughter enemies, and impose unwarranted power over others. Many have used the God of love to promote hatred, the God of trust to facilitate betrayal, and the God of mercy to validate acts of cruelty. Critics of religion cite the suffering and cruelty caused by the excesses by some of those who participated in the Crusades, the wars of religion during the Reformation, and the Salem witch trials as examples of using God's name to justify such acts. The sins of Christians do indeed undermine the credibility of faith. The name of God must never be used to support immoral acts.

## The Third Commandment

### THIS IS THE DAY THE LORD HAS MADE

*Jesus rose from the dead "on the first day of the week." . . . For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord's Day. —CCC, no. 2174*

### THE SABBATH DAY

The Catechism starts its reflection on the Third Commandment with the scriptural meaning of the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8-11 states that the Sabbath was the seventh day on which the Lord rested after the work of the previous six days. Deuteronomy 5:12 adds that the Sabbath is a day of our renewing the covenant with God. The Sabbath is connected to creation and covenant.

God's "rest" on the seventh day was his contemplative gaze enjoying the good of creation, especially its crown in man and woman. It was not a matter of divine inactivity, but rather the deeper "work" of contemplation and the restful act of loving us (cf. CCC, nos. 2184-2185). This is true also of ourselves. If we never stop working, when would we ever have time to contemplate and worship God and nourish a love relationship with him or with anyone else? Every human person, having been created by God, owes him worship and thanksgiving for what the Lord has done and continues to do.

The scriptural history of the Sabbath demonstrates that it was a day of worship of God and relaxation with one's family: "Then [on the Sabbath] you shall delight in the Lord / and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth" (Is 58:14). At their liturgies, the people of ancient Israel remembered the great works God performed on their behalf. They looked back on their history and family roots in the light of God's plans for them. They sang praises to God for his love and mercy. They recalled, "Everything belongs to God!" The Christian Sunday carries forward Sabbath themes of contemplative rest and worship.

The Third Commandment calls us to keep holy the Sabbath day. For Christians, the observance of the Sabbath is transferred to Sunday, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. God, through the Church, obliges us to make Sunday holy by participation in the Eucharist and by our being prayerfully reflective as far as possible. Sunday observance fulfills the interior law inscribed in the human heart to render to God visible and public worship as a sign of radical dependence upon God and as gratitude for all the blessings we have received.

Every seven days, the Church celebrates the Easter mystery. This tradition goes back to the time of the Apostles. It takes its origin from the actual day of Christ's Resurrection. Sunday extends the celebration of Easter throughout the year. It is meant to be illumined by the glory of the Risen Christ. It makes present the new creation brought about by Christ.

Sunday also recalls the creation of the world. The Genesis account of creation, expressed in poetic style, is a hymn of awe and adoration of God in the presence of the immensity of creation.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council explained how we should celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday, or its vigil on Saturday evening:

**The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also together with**

**him, they should learn to offer themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all. (SC, no. 48)**

Our presence at Eucharist must be more than a passive experience of the work of the priest and the music from the choir. We should join actively in the worship, where everyone present pours out adoration of and love for God. The more we meditate upon what we are doing, the more we will worship in spirit and truth and benefit from the grace that flows from the Eucharist. We will grow in our love and worship of God as well as in respect and love for one another.

### **WHY GO TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY?**

*The intimate bond between Sunday and resurrection of the Lord is strongly emphasized by all the churches of East and West. In the tradition of the Eastern churches in particular, every Sunday is the anastaseos hemera, the day of resurrection, and this is why it stands at the heart of all worship. —Pope John Paul II, Day of the Lord (Dies Domini; DD), no. 19*

While it is the first day of the week, Sunday is also called the “eighth day”—a day signifying eternity. Sunday fulfills and completes the Sabbath because it anticipates our eternal rest in God. The Sabbath remembered the first creation. Sunday recalls the new creation in Christ and the Spirit.

The heart of Sunday is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The practice of celebrating the Eucharist on Sunday dates from the earliest times. For example, St. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) wrote as follows: “We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead” (I Apol. 67: cf. PG 6, 429 and 432; cf. CCC, no. 2174). By their Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, the Catholic faithful fulfill both the Third Commandment to “keep holy the Lord’s day” and the words of Jesus to his disciples at the Last Supper: “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19).

The Third Commandment has been concretized for Catholics by one of the Precepts of the Church. **Because the faithful are obliged to attend Mass unless there is a grave impediment, pastors have the corresponding duty to offer everyone the real possibility of fulfilling the precept. . . . Yet more than a precept, the observance should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life. It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly. (DD, nos. 49, 81)**

For a Catholic, the Sunday Eucharist must be the most important religious exercise of the week. In it, we offer our lives in sacrifice with Jesus to the Father, thereby participating directly in the great mysteries of our faith.

The Catholic parish, shepherded by the priest under the authority of the diocesan bishop, is the ordinary setting for Sunday worship and is central to the preparation for and celebration of all the Sacraments.

While Sunday is the time for worship, it is also an occasion for rest and relaxation. We should make time to be with one another in meals, conversation and activities that deepen family life. “Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day. Traditional activities (sports, restaurants, etc.), and social necessities (public services, etc.), require

some people to work on Sundays, but everyone should still take care to set aside sufficient time for leisure” (CCC, no. 2187; cf. no. 2186). The Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door. Those who participate at Mass carry their joy, faith, and concern for others from the Mass into the rest of the day, and indeed into the week that follows.

## The Fourth Commandment

### THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

*Marriage and family are ordered to the good of the spouses, to the procreation and education of children. . . . Children owe their parents respect, gratitude, just obedience, and assistance. —CCC, nos. 2249, 2251*

The Fourth Commandment deals with all aspects of family life— parental and filial duties and responsibilities, that is, those of love from child to parent. This includes the duties of children toward their parents, the duties of brothers and sisters toward each other, and the responsibilities of adult children toward their older parents. This Commandment also addresses the duties of government and the duties of citizens (cf. CCC, nos. 2234-2246), including the responsibility of the state and society to foster family values and to strengthen the family in every possible way.

### THE DOMESTIC CHURCH— THE CHURCH OF THE HOME

The Catholic family as a domestic church is the fundamental community or cell of the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church. Christ has called all family members to union with God through Baptism and the other Sacraments and to share in the mission of the whole Church. Family members carry out the Church’s mission by fostering mutual love in the home and, through that love, by building up the community of the Church and society.

**The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called “the domestic church,” a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity. (CCC, no. 1666)**

The Christian family forms an environment within which faith is professed and witnessed. When family members pray together, engage in lifelong learning, forgive one another, serve each other, welcome others, affirm and celebrate life, and bring justice and mercy to the community, they help each other live the faith and grow in faith. Some families may not understand themselves as a domestic church. Perhaps they consider their family too broken to be used for the Lord’s purposes. They need to remember that a family is holy not because it is perfect, but because God’s grace is at work in it.

What is a family? “A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family” (CCC, no. 2202). A family as defined in the Catechism may be found in a considerable portion of the households in our nation. Other familial arrangements have developed, such as single-parent families, blended families, and families in which adult children care for their parents as well as their own children. All families are beset with many challenges. They deserve compassion and the hope that they can be faithful to Christ’s way of love.

The Christian family is called to be a community of faith, hope, and love in an environment of prayer. Aided by a number of other virtues, such as prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, the family that

practices them begins to actualize its spiritual calling as a domestic church. When a family becomes a school of virtue and a community of love, it is an image of the loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is then an icon of the Trinity. CHILDREN'S LOVE FOR THEIR PARENTS Respect for parents derives from a grateful heart toward those who gave us the gift of life and nourished, loved, and supported us throughout all our stages of growth. Filial love is shown by genuine obedience from children to their parents while living in their parents' home and by responsible concern of grown children toward their elderly parents. With your whole heart honor your father; / your mother's birth pangs forget not. / Remember, of these parents you were born; / what can you give them for all they gave you? (Sir 7:27-28) God offers each member of the family the grace for creating family solidarity so that it may grow as a domestic church. Parents utilize the energies of their love, their education, and their experience for their children. In this way, they make a positive and essential contribution toward building a truly human and Christian family. Children respond in love and should work to reduce rivalries, angers, hurts, and hostilities among brothers and sisters. Adult children of elderly parents are asked to care for them with a generous heart: "Listen to your father who begot you, / and despise not your mother when she is old" (Prv 23:22). The family remains a major source of support for the elderly. The elderly who have no adult children should be helped by the considerate care of others. While adult children may sometimes experience a strain between raising their own children and caring for their parents, they must do what they can to help their parents. Still, not only do adult children help their parents, but many of the elderly parents also help their adult children by their continuing love, their example, and the benefit of their lifetime experience. While it is right for society to help care for the elderly, the family remains the rightful source of support.

## **PARENTS' LOVE FOR THEIR CHILDREN**

Parents exercise their love for their children by caring for their physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral needs. Concern for these needs takes much time and commitment on the part of both mother and father. Giving proper example to children is the most powerful form of childrearing. Helping children to grow in virtue contributes to their character formation. Inspirational stories, good parental example, and repetition of acts of virtue are basic ways of forming the young.

Parents should teach their children to pray by praying with them from their earliest years. Parents, as the first and primary educators, must also ensure their children's Catholic religious education and regular participation in Mass and other aspects of parish life. Sharing with them the lives of the saints, bringing them to church, helping them to participate in the Mass, and encouraging them to go to Confession are necessary ways to help children grow in faith. Catholic schools and parish religious education programs can help parents fulfill their responsibility to educate their children in the Catholic faith. Parents are encouraged to use Catholic schools and parish programs whenever possible.

Parental example in all these areas is essential, for the young need to see a living faith in those they love. Emphasis on fundamental elements of the faith—such as fostering a relationship with Christ and devotion to Mary, the angels, and saints, along with love and concern for everyone they meet—gradually forms the religious life of the young in a productive and creative way.

When children become adults, they assume the responsibility of how they will live and work. Parents should not exert undue pressure on their children when the children are faced with these decisions (cf. CCC, no. 2230). However, since parents often know their children well, they can direct their children to make decisions in harmony with their gifts and education. Since the family is the domestic church, it is fitting that parents always encourage their children to make life decisions with serious consideration about the best ways to live out their faith. Parents, by their own faith and commitment to

the Church, create an environment in their homes that is conducive to helping children begin to think about a religious vocation. They should not hesitate to invite a son or daughter to consider becoming a priest or a vowed religious. In particular, parents should always encourage and support a child who is discerning such a call.

## THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY

*Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society. —CCC, no. 2207*

The family and society need to work together to defend the good of each human being. The state should encourage responsible initiatives for families and should provide them with all the economic, educational, political, and cultural assistance they need to exercise their responsibilities.

Civic authorities should defend and protect the family as created by God and based on the permanent and exclusive union of a man and woman in marriage. The first obligation of civil authorities is to establish laws that reflect and protect proper moral order. If the governing authority attempts to impose a law contrary to the moral order, then the citizens have a moral obligation to seek to try to change the law. If that fails, they should refuse to obey such a law.

The Church, too, has the mission and obligation to critique and challenge any civil laws, societal organizations, or political structures that infringe upon or deny the fundamental rights of human persons and communities. Jesus spoke of the difference between serving God and the state when he said, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Mt 22:21). Catholics have the duty to vote, to participate in the political arena, and to help shape society in light of Catholic teaching.

## THE CHARTER OF FAMILY RIGHTS

In his apostolic exhortation *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* (*Familiaris Consortio*), Pope John Paul II cites a list of rights of the family. Among those rights, we note the following:

- the right to exist and progress as a family, that is to say, the right of every human being, even if he or she is poor, to found a family and to have adequate means to support it;
- the right to exercise its responsibility regarding the transmission of life and to educate children;
- the right to the intimacy of conjugal and family life;
- the right to the stability of the bond and institution of marriage;
- the right to believe in and profess one’s faith and to propagate it;
- the right, especially of the poor and the sick, to obtain physical, social, political, and economic security;
- the right to housing suitable for living family life in a proper way;
- the right to form associations with other families and institutions, in order to fulfill the family’s role suitably and expeditiously;
- the right to protect minors by adequate institutions and legislation from harmful drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc;
- the right of the elderly to a worthy life and a worthy death;
- the right to emigrate as a family in search of a better life;

- the right to bring up children in accordance with the family’s own traditions and religious and cultural values, with the necessary instruments, means and institutions. (FC, no. 46)

## The Fifth Commandment

### RESPECT HUMAN LIFE

**Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being. —CCC, no. 2258; citing *The Gift of Life (Donum Vitae)*, no. 5**

God’s creative action is present to every human life and is thus the source of its sacred value. Each human life remains in a relationship with God, who is the final goal of every man and woman.

The Fifth Commandment calls us to foster the physical, spiritual, emotional, and social well-being of self and others. For that reason, it forbids murder, abortion, euthanasia, and any life-threatening acts. We are called to create the culture of life and work against the culture of death. This presents us with three challenges.

1. We need to counter the relativism that imperils human life, by recognizing that human freedom needs to be consistent with God’s intentions and the laws that govern moral life.

2. We must witness God’s providential presence to all creation and particularly to each human being. “Where God is denied, and people live as though he did not exist, or his commandments are not taken into account, the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human life also end up being rejected or compromised” (Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life [Evangelium Vitae; EV]*, no. 96).

3. We need to confront the weakening of conscience in modern society. Too many people fail to distinguish between good and evil when dealing with the value of human life. Moral confusion leads many to support choices and policies that desecrate life. Choices that were once considered criminal and immoral have become socially acceptable. Many consciences that were once formed by the Ten Commandments, Christ’s moral teachings, and the Holy Spirit’s grace-filled guidance are now swayed by the moral confusion of the spirit of the times. We should deal with the weakening of conscience by helping people to understand the Church’s teaching on conscience as the capacity to make judgments in agreement with God’s law, to protect human dignity and reject anything that degrades it.

### LIFE ISSUES THAT CONFRONT US

#### Murder

**The deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule, and to the holiness of the Creator. —CCC, no. 2261**

God forbids murder. “The innocent and the just you shall not put to death” (Ex 23:7). The intentional murder of any person is strictly forbidden by this commandment (cf. CCC, nos. 2268-2269). Such actions are gravely sinful.

Self-defense against an unjust aggressor is morally permitted. There is also a moral duty for the defense of others by those who are responsible for their lives. Self-defense or the defense of others has the goal of protecting the person or persons threatened. Once the threat is eliminated, no further action is required. In such situations, the deliberate killing of the aggressor can be permitted only when no other solution is possible (cf. CCC, no. 2265). Any response to aggression must be proportionate to the nature of the threat or the act of aggression.

## Abortion

Legalized abortion is having a destructive effect on our society; few other actions legalized by our public policy as profoundly undermine our values as a people or upset the moral compass by which we live. The Church has always condemned abortion. In the Didache (The Teaching of the Apostles), 2, 2, written toward the end of the first century and revered as an honored guide for Christian life, we read, “You shall not kill the embryo by abortion.” This teaching has never changed and it will not change.

**From its conception, the child has the right to life. Direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, is a “criminal” practice (GS, no. 27 §3), gravely contrary to the moral law. The Church imposes the canonical penalty of excommunication for this crime against human life. Because it should be treated as a person from conception, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed like every other human being. (CCC, nos. 2322-2323)**

Modern technology has enabled us to appreciate how quickly the growing child in the womb takes on human features. This has made many more people aware of the fact that human life begins at conception, the moment that the egg is fertilized. Many common forms of artificial birth control cause abortions by not allowing the newly conceived human child to implant in the mother’s womb.

The pro-life commitment of the Church is reflected in her compassion for those who so often regret having had an abortion, her understanding for those who are facing difficult decisions, and her assistance for all who choose life. People who have been involved with an abortion are encouraged to get in touch with the Project Rachel ministry and other ministries that enable them to seek the mercy of God in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and to obtain the necessary counseling. Pro-life ministries work with expectant mothers who are considering abortion by encouraging them to choose life for their children. They also provide alternatives to abortion through prenatal care, assistance in raising children, and adoption placement services.

## In Vitro Fertilization

While in vitro fertilization is more appropriately treated in relation to the integrity of the link between fertility and love, it deserves brief mention here. This is because very often in the process, eggs that have been fertilized and are beginning to grow as a human person are discarded or destroyed. This action is the taking of human life and is gravely sinful.

## Stem-Cell Research and Cloning

Every human body contains stem cells, undifferentiated cells that have the potential to mature into a wide variety of body cells. They develop early in the human embryo after fertilization or conception. They are also found in the placenta, the umbilical cord, as well as in the adult brain, bone marrow, blood,

skeletal muscle, and skin. Scientists theorize that these stem cells may be used for therapeutic purposes for curing diseases such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.

Some scientists, however, maintain that the best source for stem cells is the human embryo. The moral problem is that in order to retrieve the stem cells, the growing child must be killed. But every embryo from the moment of conception has the entire genetic makeup of a unique human life. The growing child must be recognized and treated as completely and fully human. He or she needs only time to grow and develop. To destroy an embryo is to take a human life, an act contrary to God's law and Church teaching.

Some argue that the good obtained by healing serious diseases justifies the destruction of some human embryos. But this reduces a human being to a mere object for use. It assumes there are no moral absolutes that must be held in all circumstances. It violates the moral principle that the end does not justify the means. Embryonic stem-cell research is an immoral means to a good end. It is morally unacceptable.

Similarly, cloning, whether for reproductive or therapeutic uses, is immoral on many levels, not the least of which is because it too involves the destruction of human embryos.

**No objective, even though noble in itself, such as a foreseeable advantage to science, to other human beings, or to society, can in any way justify experimentation on living human embryos or fetuses, whether viable or not, either inside or outside the mother's body. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation [Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987])**

On the other hand, stem cells can be obtained from adults with their informed consent. The federal government has spent millions of dollars on this research. Stem cells from placenta, bone marrow, and the umbilical cord are being used to treat leukemia. This is a promising field of research and does not involve the moral implications of embryonic stem-cell research.

### Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide

Intentional euthanasia, sometimes called mercy killing, is murder. Regardless of the motives or means, euthanasia consists of putting to death those who are sick, are disabled, or are dying. It is morally unacceptable. The emergence of physician-assisted suicide, popularized by the right-to-die movement, seeks to legalize what is an immoral act. Its advocates plan to achieve this on a state-by-state basis.

Suicide is gravely sinful whether committed alone or aided by a doctor. Serious psychological disturbances, anxiety, fear of suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. The question is often asked whether persons who have committed suicide receive eternal salvation. Although suicide is always objectively sinful, one "should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives" (CCC, no. 2283). The pastoral care of family and friends of those who have taken their own lives is an important focus for the Church's healing and compassionate ministry.

Catholic moral tradition has always taught that we can discontinue medical procedures that are burdensome, extraordinary, and disproportionate to the outcome. However, respect for every human being demands the ordinary treatment of the dying by the provision of food, water, warmth, and hygiene. Ordinary treatment is always a moral requirement.

There is also extraordinary treatment. The Church recognizes that some medical treatment may not provide benefits commensurate with the risks of certain medical procedures. Extraordinary medical

treatment may not be morally required and can even cease in certain cases, depending on the benefits to the sick person and the burdens it will or may impose. For example, in instances when a person has been declared brain-dead, the patient can be disconnected from mechanical devices that sustain breathing and the heart since there is little hope of the person's recovery.

## The Death Penalty

Following the lead of Pope John Paul II's *The Gospel of Life*, the Catechism teaches that governmental authority has the right and duty to assure the safety of society, and to punish criminals by means of suitable penalties. This includes imposition of the death penalty if there is no other way to protect society (cf. CCC, no. 2267). But this principle has a very restrictive application:

**If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm—without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself—the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity “are very rare, if not practically non-existent.” (CCC, no. 2267, citing EV, no. 56)**

When dwelling on legal and moral arguments concerning the death penalty, we should do so not with vengeance and anger in our hearts, but with the compassion and mercy of our Lord in mind. It is also important to remember that penalties imposed on criminals always need to allow for the possibility of the criminal to show regret for the evil committed and to change his or her life for the better.

The imposition of the death penalty does not always allow for one or both of the purposes of criminal punishment to be achieved. “Our nation's increasing reliance on the death penalty cannot be justified. We do not teach that killing is wrong by killing those who kill others. Pope John Paul II has said the penalty of death is ‘both cruel and unnecessary’ (Homily in St. Louis, January 27, 1999). The antidote to violence is not more violence” (USCCB, *Faithful Citizenship* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003], 19).

## War

Blessed John XXIII wrote that peace is a gift from God:

**So magnificent is this aim [for peace] that human resources alone, even though inspired by the most praiseworthy good will, cannot hope to achieve it. God himself must come to man's aid with his heavenly assistance, if human society is to bear the closest possible resemblance to the Kingdom of God. (Peace on Earth [Pacem in Terris], no. 168)**

The best way to avoid war is to safeguard peace by letting go of the anger and hatred that breed war and by eliminating the poverty, injustice, and deprivation of human rights that lead to war. Disarmament needs to be encouraged. “The arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts on the poor is more than can be endured” (CCC, no. 2329, citing GS, no. 81 §3).

While every possible means must be taken to avoid war, there are times when a use of force by competent authority may be justified to correct a manifest injustice, especially to defend against a threat to one's homeland. The tradition of the Church going back to St. Augustine (AD 354-430) has developed

the conditions for war to be moral. These are known as the just-war conditions. They are listed as follows in the Catechism:

The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous standards of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time:

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- there must be serious prospects of success;
- the use of arms must not produce evils graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

These are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the “just war” doctrine. The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good. (CCC, no. 2309)

War may never be undertaken from a spirit of vengeance, but rather from motives of self-defense and of establishing justice and right order. The government has the right and duty to enlist citizens in defense of the nation. Special provision should be made for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. These men and women should serve their country in some other way.

The Church and human reason assert the permanent validity of the moral law during armed conflict. Civilians, wounded soldiers, and prisoners should be treated humanely. Exterminating people by ethnic cleansing is an intrinsic and grave moral evil.

In 1983, the bishops of the United States formally rejected nuclear war:

**Under no circumstances may nuclear weapons or other instruments of mass slaughter be used for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly civilian targets. . . . We do not perceive any situation in which the deliberate initiation of nuclear warfare, on however restricted a scale, can be morally justified. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, nos. 147 and 150)**

## Terrorism

Terrorist attacks throughout the world have killed thousands of people. We are aware, along with all people of good will, of the unmitigated evil of such acts. These deeds have raised our awareness of similar acts of terror around the world.

There can be no religious or moral justification for such acts. Such claims by terrorists can be countered by the teachings of the world’s religions and by the constructive actions of religious believers. At the same time, we are called to mitigate problems such as violations of human rights and poverty, which cause widespread frustration and anger. While never excusing acts of terrorism, we still need to address issues associated with poverty and injustice that are exploited by terrorists.

## Scandal

In its focus on the preservation of life, the Fifth Commandment also is concerned with the care we show for each other’s moral life. A person whose words or actions lead others to believe that evil or sinful behavior is acceptable and not morally wrong is guilty of the sin of scandal.

Scandal can also be caused by laws or institutions that legitimize sinful actions. An example from the history of the United States can be seen in laws that allowed slavery. A modern example is seen in those laws that allow abortion.

### The Right of the Dying to Live

There are cases where state and federal courts have ruled against the idea of a constitutional right to die. In doing so, they have been gradually assembling a defense against this so-called right-to-die movement. Following is a brief summary of some of these arguments:

- Many physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, by which they commit themselves to do no harm. The relationship between a physician and a patient should be marked by compassion. Physicians should not be the killers of their patients. It would perversely affect their self understanding and would reduce their desire to look for cures for disease, if killing instead of curing were to become the option.
- We should not allow the elderly and infirm to be pressured to consent to their own deaths by assisted suicide or euthanasia.
- We should protect the poor and minorities from exploitation. Pain is a significant factor in the desire for physician-assisted suicide. The poor and the minorities often do not have the resources for the alleviation of pain.
- We should protect all people with disabilities from societal indifference, antipathy, and any bias against them.
- We should never present suicide as a socially acceptable solution to life's difficulties.

The Pontifical Academy for Life on March 8, 1999, issued a statement that included the following comments about euthanasia and the alleviation of the pain of the dying:

**With absolute conviction we vigorously reject any kind of euthanasia, understood as recourse to those actions or omissions which are intended to cause a person's death in order to prevent suffering and pain. At the same time, we want to express our human and Christian closeness to all the sick, especially to those who know they are approaching the end of their earthly life and are preparing to meet God, our beatitude. We ask that these brothers and sisters of ours be spared the "therapeutic neglect" which consists in denying them the treatment and care that alleviate suffering. Nor should this treatment and care be lacking for financial reasons.**

Greater efforts are being made today to provide patients whose medical conditions cause great pain with medications or treatments that relieve their suffering. People are being encouraged to use advanced directives to make sure that medical treatment and end-of-life care is both humane and in conformity to the moral teachings of Christ and the Church. The personal presence, prayer, and love of relatives and friends, supporting their loved one through the final stages of life's journey, are also essential parts of the process of Christian dying. The Church, through her ministers, also accompanies the dying person through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, Viaticum, and Prayers for the Dying.