

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 15 - THE COMMANDMENTS (Part One)

Now, we turn our attention to the Commandments. You will remember right at the beginning that I mentioned three great gifts that God had given us at Baptism. - FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY. We saw how Faith helped us to believe all that God had revealed - those truths summarised in the Creed. Then we saw how Hope enabled us to trust God to keep the promises He has made and to use the helps He has provided us with – namely, the Sacraments.

Now we shall see how Charity helps us as we consider the Commandments and our response to them. I have often said how the meaning of words has changed or become debased over the years. None more so than Charity - or love - which St. Paul describes as the greatest of all God's gifts.

Charity, or love, means loving God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves for God's sake. Remember that, like Faith and Hope, it is a GIFT offered to us by God which requires ACCEPTANCE on our part.

One of the commonest misconceptions is to think of love as some form of intense or passionate liking. It may INCLUDE it, but it is not to be identified with it. LIKING lies in the FEELINGS which are so liable to get out of our full control. It is an instinctive thing - thus there are people and things we just can't help liking... But, because it is instinctive, automatic, there is NO VIRTUE in it - neither is there anything wrong in it - it is morally neutral.

Now, LOVING is something quite different - it desires the good of the other and thus desires to do all that will be for the other's good. It is an act of the will and it is supremely UNSELFISH since it subordinates its own will to the will of the other. It is important to remember that the one loved may not want what is for their good! Thus, Mum truly loves her children and often she does things which she knows are for their good. THEY may not think so! But she knows they are - so she does them. She is LOVING them though they may not be LIKING that love of hers!

With God, of course, there can be no such conflict of interest. We can unconditionally do all He wants us to do since He cannot will us to do anything wrong. With others, however, there is always that danger. So we always do what is for their good but not necessarily to their liking. Now, if we also LIKE the person, then that makes it all the easier for us, but we don't HAVE to like them in order to love them. We can do all that is for their good even though we DON'T like them.

Now this gift of Charity, or love, given us by God, enables us to do what He wants always - in other words it enables us to keep His Commandments – to correspond to His Divine Will. Moreover, it is a proof of our love when we DO keep His Commandments. As He said Himself - "If you love me you will keep my Commandments." Having prefaced this chapter on the Commandments with an explanation of love, they can now be seen for what they are - not IRRITATING PROHIBITIONS but laws given to us for our good by God who loves us, and proofs of our love for Him when we keep them. We saw when we were examining JUDGEMENT that God's laws reflect His nature and, since He is goodness itself then all His laws will be good, and to break them doesn't just offend God but also damages us in so doing. So, in keeping His Commandments we not only prove our love for God but also do good to ourselves.

The Commandments can be found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus - Chapter 20, verses 2 to 17; and also in the Book of Deuteronomy - Chapter 5, verses 6 to 21.

There are Ten Commandments, and they are as follows:

1. I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage.
Thou shalt not have strange gods before me: thou shalt not make to thyself any graven thing, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them nor serve them.
2. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.*
3. *Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day.*
4. *Honour thy father and thy mother.*
5. *Thou shalt not kill.*
6. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
7. *Thou shalt not steal.*
8. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*
9. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife.*
10. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods.*

Notice that most of them are framed in a NEGATIVE way: this is to assist the memory - it is easier to remember what NOT to do! We should, however, always try to look upon them in a POSITIVE way. God is asking us to prove our love for Him and to do good to ourselves - and others - by doing something positive.

Now we shall examine the FIRST, SECOND and THIRD Commandments - all of which deal directly with our relationship with God.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“I AM THE LORD THY GOD... THOU SHALT NOT HAVE STRANGE GODS BEFORE ME: THOU SHALT NOT MAKE TO THYSELF ANY GRAVEN THING... THOU SHALT NOT ADORE THEM NOR SERVE THEM.”

That binds me positively to worship the One True God by acts of Faith, Hope, Charity and Religion. I worship God by FAITH positively by believing all that He has revealed to me through His Church. That pre-supposes I have taken the trouble to find out what HAS been revealed. So sins against Faith are disbelief - INFIDELITY; willful DOUBT; DENIAL of any doctrine; FALSE belief or HERESY; rejecting all belief - APOSTASY; and simply not bothering to find out (assuming I have the means and opportunity to do so) - which is called CULPABLE IGNORANCE.

I worship God by HOPE - positively - by trusting Him to keep His promise of everlasting life with Him in heaven, and by using all the helps He gives me: Grace and the Sacraments. So sins against Hope are giving up all hope - DESPAIR, or its less serious form, DISCOURAGEMENT - “losing heart” as we say. Then there is the opposite extreme - giving up all effort and thinking I’ll ‘get by’ simply because I’m a Catholic – that is the sin of PRESUMPTION.

I worship God by CHARITY by loving Him above all things, and my neighbour as myself for His sake. The sins against Charity are threefold: leading my neighbour into sin (SEDUCTION); causing him to sin by my behaviour (SCANDAL); and assisting him to sin (CO-OPERATION).

I worship God by RELIGION by giving due REVERENCE to Him - and all that is His. So I sin against Religion by worshipping a false God - IDOLATRY. By 'worship' here we mean making anything - like wealth or power for example - the OBJECT of our whole lives. It is forbidden to WORSHIP an idol (a graven image) but to have a statue of someone we revere such as Our Lady or one of the Saints is NOT 'worshipping' any more than photographs of one's family are idols.

Other sins against Religion are: giving FALSE reverence - to the devil for instance, practising spiritualism, possessing charms (SUPERSTITION); treating holy people and things with IRREVERENCE (SACRILEGE) (for example: hitting a priest, stabling horses in a church, lying in confession, or receiving Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin). Charging money for spiritual things - called SIMONY after Simon Magus who offered the apostles money in exchange for the power to work miracles. So if we sold rosaries which had been blessed by the Pope for more money than unblessed ones we would be committing Simony!

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

“THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN.”

That binds me positively to use God's name reverently and only on such occasions as are lawful, such as in prayer or when we take a lawful oath in a court of law or bind ourselves by a vow.

So we break the second Commandment when we talk irreverently or contemptuously about God or Our Lady – this is called BLASPHEMY. When we tell a lie when on oath - PERJURY. When we break a vow - such as when a priest leaves the priesthood or a nun leaves the religious life. So-called “cursing and swearing” (PROFANITY) - is just bad language and comes under the sin of UNJUST ANGER which is a sin against the Fifth Commandment which you will read about in the next chapter.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

“REMEMBER THAT THOU KEEP HOLY THE SABBATH DAY.”

That binds me positively to worship God in HIS way on HIS day which, of course, is Sunday because of the Resurrection. It also binds me to avoid unnecessary work as I am supposed to RE-CREATE on that day - in other words to rest and build up my reserves of energy, both spiritual and physical.

So I sin against this Commandment when I fail to worship Him in HIS way on HIS day. We saw in the chapter on the Eucharist (chapter 12) that His way is the Mass and that is why the Church has made it one of her commandments as we shall see later on.

So now we have covered the first three Commandments - the ones that govern our relationship with God (the 'vertical' relationship). In the next three chapters we shall cover the remaining seven which govern our relationship with our neighbour (the 'horizontal' relationship).