

**CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE**

by Fr. John Ramsay

**CHAPTER 17 – THE COMMANDMENTS (Part Three)**

With the Sixth Commandment, “THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.” and the Ninth Commandment, “THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR’S WIFE”, we come to two Commandments which, by their very nature, require very special treatment since they deal with the most mysterious and profound part of man. They are sometimes called the DIFFICULT commandments - difficult to KEEP and difficult to TALK ABOUT. If ever there were two commandments that need to be seen as POSITIVE, these are they! Yet, sadly, most people think of them in a purely NEGATIVE way. After all that, I am now embarking on the mysterious subject of SEX. Oh! what different reactions that word produces! Especially when it is seriously and *religiously* spoken about. “RELIGIOUSLY”?! How can anyone talk about sex religiously? It’s quite simple, really - the subject is HOLY so it deserves to be treated religiously or carefully.

How do we do this? Well, let’s go back to the first chapter: God created ALL things and God is goodness itself, so this thing, SEX, was created by Him and is therefore good. It is also the means of transmitting life and therefore it is IMPORTANT. And since God intended it to be intensely enjoyable, it is also simply super! When talking to engaged couples, I always say that the correct Christian response to this magnificent gift of God’s is “Whoopie! I can hardly wait!” Seriously, though, that is the CORRECT attitude. It comes from God so it is GOOD. He made it enjoyable so it IS enjoyable. He also made it the means of transmitting life so that purpose must never be PREVENTED but, as we saw in the chapter on marriage, it DOES need to be CONTROLLED. Now - since it is the means of procreation, it follows that ONLY THOSE who can provide any child that might be born with all that it has a right to (i.e. love, food, shelter, education) have a right to use that gift – namely, man and wife as we saw in that same chapter. And that, of course, is exactly where the Sixth and Ninth Commandments come in because they LIMIT the use of that gift, and even the pleasurable desire for it, to husband and wife in marriage.

I think this is the right moment to repeat what I said about sin in the chapter on Judgement (Chapter 6). God is utterly good - Goodness Itself. His laws reflect His nature and so they are good in themselves and good for us to keep and if we don’t keep them we are DAMAGED. But, quite apart from the SPIRITUAL damage they do us, they also do SOCIAL damage. The greatest SUPPORT to marriage is CHASTITY - the right use of the gift in marriage alone - and the great THREAT to marriage are SINS AGAINST CHASTITY - using the gift outside marriage.

It is because it is so hard to keep these two Commandments that God has given a special gift to those who choose to follow Him in the priesthood or religious life - the gift of CELIBACY. Just as the act of FAITH enables us to BELIEVE without doubting all that God has revealed, so CELIBACY enables us to surrender cheerfully all use of the gift of sex. Celibacy is far too often looked upon as an IMPOSITION thrust upon a priest or nun, instead of a gift offered and willingly accepted. It is beyond man’s capacity to remain celibate WITHOUT this help so that is why God offers the gift. That is not to say that it is easy: it is a struggle at times: we are weak creatures after all. You need to pray for priests, especially those poor souls who found the struggle too much for them and left.

Now to return to the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. God has given us a fabulous gift. He has also given us laws governing its use. KEEP THOSE LAWS and the gift will be what God meant it to be - a source of joy. BREAK THOSE LAWS and only harm can come to us.

So, the Sixth Commandment binds us positively to be chaste - using that gift ONLY inside marriage - and forbidding all use of it OUTSIDE marriage. Thus it is forbidden between two unmarried persons (FORNICATION); with another person who is NOT one’s married partner (ADULTERY); between two persons of the same sex (SODOMY); or by oneself (MASTURBATION). In view of the fact that the FIRST CONDITION for a Mortal sin - serious matter - is present (because it deals with the transmission of life) these sins are always potentially mortal and should be confessed. However, because this type of sin is difficult to TALK ABOUT it is also difficult to CONFESS. Hence, the disastrous consequence that it is often concealed in confession and thus the sin is unforgiven and a further grievous sin of sacrilege is committed.

I think, therefore, that this is the moment to correct some false notions on the matter of confessing sins. Many people feel ASHAMED of confessing even when the sins they have to confess are not serious. This is a colossal error. Now I am going to quote Our Lord Himself, “I tell you solemnly, there is JOY among the angels of God when a sinner repents” and again, “there is MORE joy over a repentant sinner than ninety-nine just men that require no repentance.” Moreover, He told the story of the Prodigal Son to illustrate God’s EAGERNESS to forgive the sinner. That story, as I told you before, ended with the words: “AND THEY BEGAN TO CELEBRATE.” There can be no argument here. God says that repentance is a CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION in heaven, that in fact they DO CELEBRATE in heaven when a sinner repents. That being so, surely it does not make any sense to be ashamed of something that causes CELEBRATION in heaven.

So, what has gone wrong? We are confusing SIN with REPENTANCE of that sin. We should be ashamed of the sins all right and, because we are ashamed, we resolve to confess them - in other words, to repent of them. But when we confess them, we should be PLEASED because we are doing something good and giving pleasure to God! So why ARE we ashamed? Is it the presence of the priest? Maybe, but remember he KNOWS you are doing something good and causing celebration in heaven so even if you FORGET it, he doesn’t! He also knows the struggle you have with your pride - he has the same struggle himself. I can say that I have never known a priest who looks down on his penitents. I think I speak for most priests when I say that we often feel like crawling out of the confessional! So many of our penitents are far better than US! So, forget that false shame! You have something to be PLEASED about! You are about to do something that makes God OVERJOYED! That is why I sometimes say to my penitents: “WALK TALL! HOLD YOUR HEAD HIGH! LOOK THE WHOLE WORLD IN THE EYE! YOU ARE REPENTANT, FORGIVEN, PURE - AND DEARLY LOVED BY GOD!”.

And so, briefly, to the Ninth Commandment. This forbids the DESIRE for the pleasure aroused by sins against the sixth Commandment. It includes the deliberate stimulation of sexual THOUGHTS which can result from reading books or watching television programmes and videos.

But now let us end this section POSITIVELY. God has given us this beautiful gift of SEX. We should therefore THANK Him for it - even those of us who may not USE the gift. It is the most perfect expression of that TOTAL GIFT of oneself - which is what love is - and it is thus the perfect means of creating new life. Those who are privileged to use it should thank God for it, ENJOY it, and do all they can to educate their children to see it for the beautiful thing it is. Finally, ALL of us should talk of it always and only with what it deserves - REVERENCE.