

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 18 - THE COMMANDMENTS (Part Four)

Now, in examining the last three Commandments, we turn our attention to the virtues of JUSTICE and TRUTH. The Seventh and Tenth Commandments - "THOU SHALT NOT STEAL" and "THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S GOODS" both have to do with justice. We are bound to respect our neighbour's property (7th) and we are also bound to respect one another's right to OWN property (10th). The malice in envy or jealousy lies in GRUDGING another the right to own property or to have more than oneself, and so to desire to steal or damage it.

Thus, it is clearly UNJUST for the very rich to live side by side with those who lack even the bare necessities of life without lifting a hand to help them. Their very refusal to help is a denial to the others of their right to own property at all through their failure to help them in their need. Everyone has the right to own property but NOT the right to refuse to share that property with those who are in need.

EMPLOYERS are bound to pay a fair wage and the EMPLOYEE is bound to do a fair day's work for that wage. It is sinful, therefore, to pay an inadequate wage or to make a huge profit without sharing it with the workers who have helped to make that profit. On the other hand it is sinful to waste one's employer's time or to help oneself to his property, however little, on the grounds that "he can well afford it".

To STEAL is obviously wrong but so is deliberate DAMAGE to another's property. The gravity of the offence is not just measured by the amount stolen or damaged but also by the degree of hardship inflicted on the victim. Thus to steal ten pounds from a poor pensioner is obviously more serious than to steal the same sum from a wealthy person.

In all these cases, since one has caused damage to one's neighbour, one is bound to make good the damage. This is called MAKING RESTITUTION. Sometimes it is not possible to make restitution to the person concerned. For instance, a PICKPOCKET could not possibly find the person whose pocket he had picked in a crowd. In this case, he would be bound to make restitution in some other way by, say, giving an equivalent sum to charity. Similarly, one who has stolen from the public by travelling on a bus or train without paying the fare, or has damaged public property would have to make restitution in the same sort of way.

From all I have said, it can be readily seen that you can never be a professional thief or vandal and a practising Catholic! - you would always be made to pay back all you have stolen or make good any damage you have done! As priests we are sometimes called upon to act as a go-between in cases of restitution in order to conceal the identity of the repentant culprit!

The tenth commandment covers all internal sins against the seventh commandment. Thus, as we've seen, envy or jealousy are sinful. Simply wishing you had what somebody else has is not jealousy. There is always ill-will present where jealousy is concerned and, if unchecked, it can destroy a person.

The story of King Saul in the First Book of Samuel is a classic example of the harm jealousy can do to a man. From being a humble, likeable man, Saul became insanely jealous of David's popularity after he had killed Goliath. So great did that jealousy become that he attempted to murder David which led in time to the division of his kingdom and his death.

You have heard me say before it is also the SILLIEST SIN since you don't even get any FUN out of it! So my neighbour has more than me? So what? Probably he is DISCONTENTED too! GREED is a bottomless pit - the more you have: the more you want.

Now, finally, the Eighth Commandment - "THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS." This commandment binds us to say all those things and only those things which are GOOD, TRUE and FREE TO TALK ABOUT. Does this mean I am bound to tell every nosey-parker something he or she has no right to know? Certainly not: indeed, it is sometimes necessary to say, politely but firmly, "that is none of your business!" There are certain social conventions such as: so and so "is not available for comment". Everyone knows what that remark means and it is perfectly acceptable behaviour. However, the lie of convenience or so-called "white" lie is wrong. Not seriously, perhaps, but nevertheless wrong. If you try hard you can get very good at evading questions - most politicians are experts!

We priests often have to watch our tongues! There are often things we know and cannot talk about, and it is so easy to let something slip out by mistake! The two principal sins against this commandment are CALUMNY (slander) and DETRACTION. Both of them involve saying something unpleasant about another person. In the case of CALUMNY, the thing said is also UNTRUE whereas detraction is saying something unpleasant but TRUE. So, for instance, I say, "of course, you know that Jimmy is a drunk, don't you?" and it is a malicious lie. In this case, I have committed the sin of calumny or slander. Whereas, if I said the same thing and it is TRUE; I still have no right to say it and I am guilty of DETRACTION.

Where something is public knowledge although, strictly speaking, I am not detracting from his good name since he has lost it already, I still should not indulge in such gossip. In the case of both calumny and detraction I am bound to make restitution. Just as I have to make good any theft or damage to another's property, so I have to do the same if I take away or damage his good name.

Let's use the example I gave earlier. If I was guilty of CALUMNY when I said Jimmy was a drunk, all I have to say, to make restitution, is: "When I said Jimmy was a drunk: that was a malicious lie, I'm sorry." But if I was guilty of DETRACTION, I cannot say I told a lie: I didn't. So I have to make restitution in some other way such as saying: "Well, Jimmy may be a drunk but he is a much more generous and charitable person than I am!"

So, true or not, I mustn't say unpleasant things about people. Now, what about SECRETS? There are various degrees of secrecy and thus various degrees of gravity. First, the 'Committed Secret'. Doctors and lawyers, for instance, by their very profession, have access to confidential information concerning their patients or clients. The secrets are COMMITTED to them on the understanding that they will not betray that confidence. They would clearly be seriously in the wrong if they betrayed that confidence. Secondly, the 'Promised Secret'. This is where someone approaches you and says: "If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone else?" and YOU GIVE YOUR WORD, then it would obviously be wrong if you then break your word. Thirdly, and finally, there is the 'Simple Secret'. This is the case when, for instance, you happen by accident to overhear or read something confidential. You certainly should not talk about it, since it is confidential, but clearly the obligation to secrecy is less serious.

Let me give an example. Mary, a young married woman, is in the doctor's consulting room. He is giving her the result of a pregnancy test and says to her, "Mrs. Smith, I am happy to tell you, you are going to have a baby!" Neither he nor Mary notice that, in fact, the door of the consulting room is slightly ajar. Tom, sitting outside in the waiting room overhears the remark and makes a note of it. On leaving the surgery and heading for home to give the good news to her husband, Mary meets a friend and says, "don't tell anyone till I have seen my family, but I want you to know the good news, I'm going to have a baby!" and her friend promises to not tell anyone. Now, if Tom tells anyone the secret he has overheard, it is wrong, but NOT seriously so. But if the friend who promised to keep the secret blurts it out, it is MORE serious, and if the doctor tells anyone, it is a SERIOUS breach of professional confidence.

Under the same heading, comes reading other people's letters which may have been left laying open. They are entitled to their privacy and you have intruded on it. All that I have been saying about this commandment has to do with the tongue, so we must remember always to think before we speak. In this connection you might find it helpful to read the third chapter of the Epistle of St. James in the New Testament - he has some thought-provoking words to say about the use of the tongue!