

# FIRST AND SECOND COMMANDMENTS

## PUTTING GOD FIRST

(C 2084-2167, USC Ch. 26)

The *Catechism* states: “*In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with Jesus’ example, the tradition of the Church has always acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue*” (C 2078).

In this lesson we will:

- Introduce the Ten Commandments
- Examine what the first and second commandments call us to and forbid

### The Ten Commandments – Introduction (C 2052-2082)

The Ten Commandments were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. We can read about the Sinai event in Ex 19:3-20:1-17. Moses leads the former slaves out of Egypt to Mount Sinai where they enter into a covenant relationship with God. He will be Israel’s God and they will be his people. When Moses tells the leaders of his conversation with God, they respond in one voice: “All that God has said, we will do” (Ex 19:8). Then God gives Israel the Decalogue (“Ten Words”) which become known as the Ten Commandments.

Moral theologian Fr. Timothy O’Connell writes that “the genius of the Ten Commandments...is the tight, clear way they sketch hard-won wisdom of life. We are not forced to spend a lifetime finding this wisdom; it is given to us on a platter. Woven together, the Ten Commandments are a great, inspired poem, drawing lines around a way of living that can make us whole and keep us holy, a way of living that in the end is the only way we can be happy.”

Sports fields are marked by areas that are inbounds and out-of-bounds, and players must abide by them. These markers are precisely that: markers delineating boundaries. They do not tell athletes how to excel at their sports.

The Ten Commandments serve a similar purpose. They name expectations or, to use a stronger word, the demands of a relationship. They clearly state what is out-of-bounds in our relationship with God and neighbor. But like other boundaries in life, they do not necessarily tell us how to excel or be virtuous in these relationships.

**Jesus and the Ten Commandments** (C 5052-5054). In his dialogue with the rich young man, Jesus stresses the importance of the Ten Commandments when he

says, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:16-19). Later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments and places them in the context of love. In response to an inquiry about which commandment is the greatest, Jesus says: “*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Mt 22:37-39).

The first three commandments focus on our call to love God with our whole being and the other seven focus on our relationship with others. Both commandments are inseparable. One cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor, and love of neighbor is one central way for us to love God.

The list of the Ten Commandments is found in two places in the Old Testament: Ex 20:2-17 and Dt 5:6-21. When naming each of the Ten Commandments in this article, we will use the familiar catechetical formula that most of us grew up with.

**Pause:** It has been well said that the Ten Commandments are commandments, not ten suggestions. Why do so many people treat the Ten Commandments as outdated or at most suggestions for moral living?

### The first commandment (C 2084-2141, USC p. 341)

*“I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me”* (Ex 20:2-3).

In our treatment of each commandment, we will look at what the commandment calls us to do, what it forbids and condemns.

The first commandment calls us to acknowledge the existence of God and worship him. The first commandment calls us to make God and his values the number one priority in our lives. More concretely, the first commandment calls us to express our belief and worship of God through our practice of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

**Faith.** “The first commandment is more than a reference to an abstract idea of God. It is an announcement of the presence of the most holy God, both in outward creation and within the human soul. His existence does call for a faith response” (USC p. 346). Faith is the

supernatural gift that enables us to believe in God's existence, to accept his divine truths, and to trust in his word. True faith works hand in hand with reason. Faith enables us to accept divine truth even when we cannot fully understand it. Reason helps us to explore the truths of our faith and come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of them. Theology is often described as "faith seeking understanding." As we grow in faith, we will be moved to share it with others. Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32-33).

It should be noted that *involuntary doubt* is not a sin against faith. Many holy people have been plagued with doubts concerning God's existence and other truths of our faith. When young people start to explore Christian beliefs, they may go through a period of doubt. When people are going through a period of spiritual or theological doubt and pray for divine help and do not seem to receive it, it can be very difficult and painful. At such times, it is very important for us to seek out a spiritual or theological mentor who can lead us through a time of doubt and to a deeper understanding of our faith.

Some people do not come to believe this because they cannot overcome objections to faith in God, the Church or a particular belief, or because they do not know how to handle the mystery which is at the heart of Christian belief.

The *Catechism* also speaks about other forms of incredulity:

*Heresy* is the denial or refusal by a baptized Catholic to believe in a truth that is held by the Church.

*Apostasy* is the repudiation or abandonment of the Christian faith by a baptized Catholic.

*Schismatics* are Catholics who break away from the Church and refuse to accept the authority of the Pope.

**Hope.** The virtue of hope enables us to believe that God accompanies us on our journey through life and will lead us to eternal life with him. Two sins against hope are *despair* and *presumption*. Despair causes us to stop believing in God's love and mercy. Presumption is the sin that leads us to believe that we will be saved without any commitment to living a moral life.

**Love.** The *Catechism* states: "The first commandment enjoins us to love God above everything and to love all creatures for him and because of him" (C 2093). We manifest our love for God by our sincere worship of him, by seeking his will in all things, by allowing his

word to be a lamp that guides our steps by loving what he loves, by loving our neighbor and by appreciating and protecting his creation.

One sins against God's love in various ways such as indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, spiritual laziness and hatred of God.

**Pause:** Have you ever doubted God's existence or his love for you?

**Sins against the first commandment** (C 2110-2132, USC 343)

**Idolatry.** The *Catechism* states: "Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons, power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money" (2113).

It has been well said that we become like what we worship. In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: "If we are absolute about God the Absolute, we are free from absolutizing anything else. Reality offers only one absolute good: God. Everything is good if it leads to God or comes from God as his will, and evil if it leads away from God or his will. Obeying "the first and greatest commandment" gives us a meaning, point, goal, and direction in life and a liberating simplicity. It is like a single lighthouse in a confusing storm" (p. 28).

As we consider the question of false gods, it will be good to be aware of incomplete images of God that we may have that will not be helpful to a loving relationship with God, e.g., Lawgiver and Judge. Although these titles capture some truth about who God is, they will ultimately lead us to a poor relationship with God if they become our *primary* image of God—which should, of course, be that God is love (1Jn 4:8).

**Superstition** is the belief or practice that attributes supernatural or magical powers to certain objects or ritual actions. Sometimes it involves believing that objects have secret powers or it may involve using religious devotions in a superstitious way, e.g., "chain prayers" or certain prayers said for a particular number of days to obtain a favor from God. Refusing to fly on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month is based on superstition and manifests a lack of trust in God to protect us. Another superstitious belief is the placing of medals or other religious objects in the car to prevent accidents. These objects can remind us of God and our need to pray often to him for safety. But we also need to practice good driving habits.

**Divination** is the act or practice of attempting to learn what is hidden in the future by invoking Satan, conjuring up the dead, reading horoscopes, consulting mediums, reading palms, playing with the Ouija board, etc. Such practices do not show respect for our loving God who asks us to place our trust in him.

**Magic or sorcery** is the attempt to deal with the occult and to gain control over hidden powers to help oneself or another, or worse still, to curse them. The Church condemns these practices as contrary to the humble submission to God required of true religion.

**Irreligion.** The *Catechism* names three forms of irreligion:

- **Tempting God** by challenging him by word or deed to manifest his goodness, e.g., Satan asking Jesus to throw himself down from the Temple, thereby forcing God to act (Lk 4:9);
- **Sacrilege** involves treating the sacraments or other sacred actions, persons or things in a profane way.
- **Simony** is the buying or selling of spiritual things. God's graces are free gifts and cannot be purchased or sold. Although it is permissible for ministers to accept a donation for certain services, it is very wrong for someone to try to buy or sell spiritual powers or con unsuspecting people with promises of God's favor. No sacrament or spiritual good should be denied due to lack of money.

**Pause:** What are the false idols that can easily become more important than God in our lives? What can be done to give such idols their rightful place?

**Atheism** is the denial of God's existence and it is the ultimate violation of the first commandment. Atheism can have many forms or faces: *Materialists* live their lives as if the only thing that matters is material realities. *Secular humanists* live as if humans are the center of the universe and are the supreme good; that they are not dependent on God. *Atheistic political systems*, like communism, believe that "religion is the opium of the people" (Marx), and look to the state as the ultimate good.

**Agnosticism.** Another way to evade the call of the first commandment to believe in and worship God is agnosticism, which means "I don't know." Agnostics admit that there is or may be a god, but we can know nothing about him. Some agnostics are genuine seekers of God; others are too lazy to even seek him. Still others are

*practical atheists* who believe that God exists, but act as if he doesn't.

Vatican Council II states that believers are sometimes partially to blame for the rise of atheism. "*Believers can 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 religion*" (Gaudium et Spes 19).

### **The veneration of sacred images** (C 2129-2132)

The first commandment states: "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything" (Ex 20:4). Most Christian churches have taken this verse of the first commandment very literally. Hence, one will not find in their churches statues, vigil lights or Stations of the Cross. Do Catholics disobey the first commandment when they venerate religious images? The ancient Israelites, like their pagan neighbors, had a tendency to create and worship false idols like the golden calf. Because of this, God forbade them to make any idolatrous images. Yet God did permit Israel to make images like the bronze serpent, the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim.

When the Word became flesh, God took on a visible form. Since then, the Church has seen that it is most fitting for Christians to venerate (not worship) icons and religious images of Jesus, Mary and the saints. These sacred images remind us of and point us to the persons they represent.

The Church is quick to point out that God *alone* is to be worshipped and adored. Mary, the saints and statues are *venerated*, i.e., shown honor and respect.

**Pause:** Do you have a favorite icon or holy image? Why is it special to you?

### **The second commandment** (C 2147-2167, USC Ch. 26)

"*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*" (Ex 20:7).

The *Catechism* states: "The second commandment requires respect for God's name... more particularly it governs our use of speech in sacred matters" (C 2142).

In the Old Testament, when Moses encounters God in the burning bush, he asks God his name. God replies, "I am who am... This is what you shall tell the Israelites. I AM sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). "The name I AM (YHWH) asserts God's uniqueness, infinite and

indefinable mystery and ever-present reality. God cannot be defined. He does not limit himself to being *this* or *that*, he is just ‘I AM.’ God has no dead past (‘was’) or unborn future (‘will be’), just living present (‘am’)” (*Catholic Christianity*, p. 210).

By revealing the divine name YHWH to them, God enters into a personal relationship with the people of Israel. In knowing God’s name, they can call upon him in time of need. Prophets and all others who speak in God’s name are called to speak truly (Dt 18:15-22).

### **What the second commandment calls us to do**

The second commandment calls us to show reverence and respect for God, his holy name, and for people, places and things. The second commandment also has *social* implications for all who are sons and daughters of God. In its deeper and more positive sense, it is a call to the Israelite community to live their identity as a people who bear God’s name. The resident alien is to be welcomed and treated as one of their own. They are to be honest in their business dealings with others. They are to tithe so that no one among them lives in need. They are to care for the widow, the orphan, and the dispossessed (Dt 10:14-22). These are some of the ways they are to honor God’s name.

The second commandment also calls us to know and preserve the difference between 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, our gracious God desires to be intimate with us, even becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ and dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit” (USC p. 353).

At our baptism, we were initiated 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 that we are immersed into the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Pause:** Have you ever considered the social implications of the second commandment? How do you feel about this aspect of the commandment?

### **Sins against the second commandment**

The second commandment forbids the wrong use or misuse of God’s name. Sometimes today we hear people say, “Is there anything sacred anymore?” The comment shows that God has planted in our hearts a sense of the sacred which we want to preserve and celebrate. To speak “in vain” means that what we say

has no positive result or value. Using the name of God improperly is a subtle sign that we are losing our sense of awe and reverence due to God.

**Wrong uses of God’s name.** To call upon the name of God to support us in activities that are contrary to the nature of God, e.g., to ask God to support us in a lie as in the case of perjury, to ask God to strike down our enemies in cruelty, or to condemn someone to hell for all eternity.

**Cursing and vulgar language.** By definition *cursing* is calling down evil on another person. If the curse involves wishing serious harm on another, it is a grave sin. *Vulgar or crude language* can erode our respect for God and religion. It should be avoided. It is immature more than sinful (see James 3:7-10) for his words to us concerning what we often call “sins of the tongue”).

**Blasphemy.** The *Catechism* teaches that blasphemy consists “in uttering against God—inwardly or outwardly—words of hatred, reproach, or defiance” (C 2148). This is gravely sinful. It is also blasphemous to use God’s name to justify criminal practices, the enslavement of people, torture, and murder. Tragically, people, including Christians, have used God’s name to justify wars and the killing of enemies.

**Oaths/perjury.** For morally correct and serious reasons, e.g., a legal trial, one may take an oath for the purpose of serving justice. *Perjury* is lying under oath.

**Pause:** Why is there a rise in vulgar, obscene and blasphemous language in our time? What can Christians do to counteract this trend?

### **Meditation**

*Jesus taught that he would be present to those who come together in his name. “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:30). St. Peter staked his entire ministry on the utter uniqueness of Jesus, the only Savior, by employing the power of his name: “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12, USC p. 357).*

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