

CHAPTER FORTY
COMMANDMENTS 8-10
(Catechism nn. 2464-2557)

Truth

The Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Commandments (Catechism n. 2464-2513)

The Eighth Commandment

The eighth commandment reads: ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’ (Exodus 20:16 & Deuteronomy 5:20). This is quoted and refined by Jesus (Matthew 5:33-37), who insists on truth in every statement. We should not need an oath to guarantee that we are speaking the truth!

In a society that depended on the threat of capital punishment to maintain law and order, there is obviously a close connection between the eighth and the fifth commandment. It is wrong to unjustly murder another person; it is also wrong to lie about others in court, which as often as not could lead to their death.

Truth

Jesus once said: ‘the truth will set you free’ (John 8:32). He was speaking about the ultimate truth: the truth about who God really is and how God has chosen to relate to us – the truth that is the essence of the Good News revealed by Jesus. We may prove untrue, but ‘Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true’ (Romans 3:4). Faith is welcoming this ultimate truth that God is love that God is faithful to love, and that God is calling everyone to salvation – to the fullness of life in communion with God. Paul speaks of those who ‘refused to love the truth and so be saved’ (2Thessalonians 2:10). ‘Salvation’ comes from God ‘through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth’ (2Thessalonians 2:13).

Paul’s hymn to love includes the statement that ‘Love rejoices in the truth’ (1Corinthians 13:6). In the light of this, perhaps the best advice Paul ever gave was that we ‘do the truth in love’ (Ephesians 4:15). Sometimes we fail in love while insisting that we are defending the truth. You cannot have truth without love, for the ultimate truth is that God is love. Sometimes we think we are being loving, but we bend the truth. Love is not real when it is not truthful. Truth must always be the foundation. We are to do what is true, and we are to do it with all the love we can muster. The faith-community can help us in this, for, as Saint Paul reminded Timothy: ‘The church of the living God is the column and pedestal of the truth’ (1Timothy 3:15).

The word ‘truth’ is related to both ‘troth’ (as in betroth) and ‘trust’. The truth is something that we can rely on, entrust ourselves to, commit ourselves to in love. The Greek word is also instructive. ‘alêtheia’ is a composite word from ‘*lêthê* – the mythical river of forgetfulness in Hades – and the particle ‘a’ which negates what follows. Truth, in other words, is present when what is real is ‘not forgotten’, not obscured. Truth is present when what seems to be is what really is.

To say that a judgment is true is to claim that it is in accordance with the way things really are, not just with the way we would like things to be. The ultimate reality is God. Everything is an expression of God. So truth is always an aspect of God. The Beloved Disciple came to recognize Jesus as the human expression of the real God, that is to say, as the one who is full of truth: ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of the gift of truth’ (John 1:14).

He portrays Jesus as declaring: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), and promising: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth' (John 16:13).

We might ask ourselves the following questions: Do I always seek the truth? Even when it is embarrassing? Even when it means that I have to admit that I have been wrong? Even when it means financial loss, or loss of reputation? Am I willing to change my mind when evidence shows that I am wrong? Do I want the truth whatever the cost?

In relation to religion, John Henry Newman had to make huge sacrifices to be at home with the truth. In *'An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine'* he writes:

'Some claim that truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure; that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of faith and need no other guide. There is a truth; there is one truth; religious error is of itself of an immoral nature; those who maintain it, unless they do so involuntarily, are guilty in maintaining it; religious error is to be dreaded; the search for truth is not the gratification of curiosity; the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it; truth and falsehood are set before us for the trial of our hearts.'

Newman made much the same point in a speech given in Rome on the occasion of his being made a cardinal (1879). He said:

'Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with the recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy.'

In its *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965), the Second Vatican Council states:

'Truth can impose itself on the human mind only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power'(n. 1).

God respects our freedom, so we should respect the freedom of others. Using force or fear to get others to conform to the truth as we see it is to act contrary to the truth. The same document also states:

'We are impelled by our nature to seek the truth, to adhere to it once discovered, and to direct our whole lives in accordance with its demands'(n. 2).

This basic truth is at the heart of all genuine holiness. In the Prologue to the Ursuline rule, Angela Merici (died 1540) writes:

Sins against truth

‘Happy are those whom God fills with the light of truth and gives a keen longing for their heavenly home and who then try to keep alive within them the voice of truth and this longing.’

Therese of Lisieux (died 1897) is an outstanding example of one who was totally committed to truth. Among her last sayings from her deathbed are the following:

‘If I am not loved, that is just too bad! I tell the whole truth, and if anyone does not want to know the truth, let her not come looking for me.’ ‘O my God, I really want to listen to you; I beg you to answer me when I say humbly, What is truth? Make me see things as they really are. Let nothing cause me to be deceived.’ Her last words were: ‘It seems to me that I never sought anything but the truth ... I am not sorry for handing myself over to love ... Oh, I love Him! My God, I love you.’

With these words she sat up in ecstasy for the time it takes to recite the creed, then she lay back on her pillow and gave her spirit into the hands of her Beloved.

The poet, W.B. Yeats, went through a profound conversion experience in his forty-fifth year (1910). He gave expression to his conversion in the following poem:

‘Though leaves are many, the root is one.
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun.
Now I may wither into the truth.’

Sins against truth

The Catechism lists the following sins against the eighth commandment: giving false witness, perjury (n. 2476: giving false witness under oath), rash judgment, detraction and calumny (n. 2477), flattery and adulation (n. 2480), boasting (n. 2481), lying. It defines lying ‘to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error someone who has the right to know the truth’(n. 2483). This important qualification is repeated: ‘No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it’(n. 2489). We are also reminded that there is a duty to try to put right the harm that has been done through any of the above sins (n. 2487).

In relation to the Eighth Commandment the Catechism mentions the obligation to keep secrets: ‘Professional secrets – for example, those of political office holders, soldiers, physicians and lawyers – or confidential information given under the seal of secrecy must be kept, save in exceptional cases where keeping the secret is bound to cause very great harm to the one who confided it, to the one who received it, or to a third party, and where the very grave harm can be avoided only by divulging the truth. Even if not confided under the seal of secrecy, private information prejudicial to another is not to be divulged without a grave and proportionate reason’(n. 2491).

Note, too, the following observations:

‘Interference by the media in the private lives of persons engaged in political or public activity is to be condemned to the extent that it infringes upon their privacy and freedom’(n. 2492).

‘Nothing can justify recourse to disinformation for manipulating public opinion through the media’(n. 2498).

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

The ninth and tenth commandments focus on intention. They recognise that corruption of intention leads to the actions that are condemned in the earlier commandments, especially the sixth and seventh commandment. They read:

‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife. You shall not desire your neighbour’s house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that belongs to your neighbour’(Deuteronomy 5:21; see Exodus 20:16-17).

We recall the words of Jesus:

‘Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart’(Matthew 5:28).

‘Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’(Matthew 6:21).

This distortion of the heart is traditionally called ‘concupiscence’. We are like a fish spawned into a river that is partly polluted. Hereditary and environmental factors have influenced us from the first moments of our being conceived. In various ways, and to varying degrees, we find ourselves desiring what is not good for us. Our heart, our longings, are not all pure. They are not all in accordance with the truth. We touched on this subject in Chapter 33.

The human heart in Scripture

Let us pause here to reflect on what Scripture has to say about the human ‘heart’: symbol for the centre of consciousness, intention and decision. There is a close correspondence between ‘heart’ and ‘spirit’(our communion with God). We pray with the psalmist:

‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; put a new and right spirit within me’(Psalm 51:10).

The heart belongs to God who made it and knows it:

‘Yahweh moulds every heart’(Psalm 33:15).

‘Human beings look to appearances, but Yahweh sees the heart’(1 Samuel 16:7).

We must go to the heart, discern what our heart is saying to us, and follow it:

‘Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is. Your soul often forewarns you; it is better that seven watchmen perched on a watchtower. You must also beg the Most High to guide your steps in the truth’(Sirach 37:13);

‘More than all else, keep watch over your heart, for there are the wellsprings of life’(Proverbs 4:23);

‘May Yahweh grant you your heart’s desire’(Psalm 20:4).

The human heart

Yet the heart on its own can be unwise:

‘The person who trusts his own heart is a fool. The one whose ways are wise will be safe’(Proverbs 28:26);

‘Do not listen to what the prophets are saying: they are deluding you, retailing visions from their own hearts, and not what comes from the mouth of Yahweh’(Jeremiah 23:16);

‘Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander ...’(Matthew 5:19).

The heart can be insincere and hypocritical:

‘A glaze applied to an earthen pot: such are the smooth lips and wicked heart’(Proverbs 26:23);

‘Though they outwardly flattered him and used they tongues to lie to him, in their hearts they were not true to him, they were unfaithful to his covenant’(Psalm 78:36-37).

A hardened heart must be broken (‘contrite’), an adulterated heart must be purified:

‘Create in me a clean heart, O God’(Psalm 51:12);

‘You will not scorn this crushed and broken heart’(Psalm 51:16).

Though our heart is not entirely pure (not yet), we cannot hand over responsibility for our decisions to others. The only road to maturity is to dare to follow our heart – assuming, of course, that we have done our best to seek advice and to discern wisely. Our hope lies, not in distrusting our heart, but in fixing our heart on God who alone can purify us:

‘If you start searching once more for YHWH your God, and if you seek YHWH with all your heart, you will find him’(Deuteronomy 4:29);

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’(Matthew 5:8).

God is close to the heart that looks to him:

‘YHWH is near to the broken-hearted’(Psalm 34:18);

‘YHWH sent me to bind up hearts that are broken’(Isaiah 61:1);

‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!”(Galatians 4:6).

Virtues and vices

The Catechism speaks of purifying our intention, and defines this as:

‘Purity of intention consists in seeking to find and fulfill God’s will in everything’(n. 2520).

It speaks, too, of the virtue of modesty:

‘Modesty protects a person’s intimate centre. It is ordered to chastity. It guides how one looks at others and behaves towards them, sensitive to a person’s dignity’(n. 2521).

We are not separated individuals. We are persons in relationship. We have an obligation not only to strive for personal purity, but to work with others to create an environment that nourishes purity and truth:

‘Christian purity requires a purification of the social climate. It requires of the communications media that their presentations show concern for respect and restraint. Purity of heart brings freedom from widespread eroticism and avoids entertainment inclined to voyeurism and illusion’(Catechism n. 2525).

In relation to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, the Catechism mentions the vices of avarice (n. 2536), and envy (n. 2538).

We conclude our treatment on the ninth and tenth commandments by reflecting on the key virtue that protects us against the many sins that can corrupt our heart and lead to immoral behaviour: the virtue of detachment. In *‘The Way of Silent Love’*(pages 84-86) a Carthusian monk writes:

‘There is no peace without detachment. There is no detachment without effective renunciation. There it is, the hard saying! Our passions carry us towards what is pleasing and delightful, towards what we love. Thus they cause us to avoid what is unpleasant and hurtful, the things we fear or hate. The way of resurrection is the way of death, a curtailment of life, a mortification of the senses etc. Today, as always, we don’t want it. But listen to Christ: “If you would follow me, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” ... In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ... The true contemplative doesn’t need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God. The true contemplative realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from him. He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it.’

The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so. In the final paragraph of Book One of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross writes:

Our Deepest Longings

‘In self dispossession the heart is at rest. It wants nothing. Because it is grounded on Jesus not on itself. It does not matter whether it feels elated or dejected.’

Teresa of Avila writes:

‘Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you; all things pass; God never changes; patience attains all; the one who has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.’

In his *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin writes:

‘Everything is needed, because the world will never be large enough to provide our taste for action with the means of grasping God, or our thirst for receiving with the possibility of being invaded by him. Yet, nothing is needed, for, as the only reality which can satisfy us lies beyond the transparencies in which it is mirrored, everything that fades away and dies between us will serve only to give reality back to us with greater purity’ (page 122).

This leads him to pray:

‘Raise me up, then, O matter, to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantments can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come’ (page 154).

In her *To Believe in Jesus*, Ruth Burrows writes:

‘For the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy our senses, we must take care not to so encompass ourselves with the good things of this world that our need for God is not experienced. If our desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire for a feeling or emotion, then we will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace ... We cannot seek God always and serve our neighbour with a disinterested love until we have looked at ourselves, and then positively denied this self-seeking and worked against it’ (page 71).

PART FOUR
CHRISTIAN PRAYER
(Catechism nn. 2558-2865)

See my website (www.mbfallon.com). Click on 'Prayer' towards the bottom of the left menu for my book 'Yielding to Love' (now out of print), and various other text and audio files on Prayer.

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