

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

COMMANDMENTS 1-3

(Catechism nn. 2052-2195)

Good Law

Good law is one of the great benefits of a civilized life. There is no joy in having to negotiate chaotic traffic or a disorganized public service. If you have ever had a breakdown in health, and were fortunate enough to meet someone who was able to diagnose the problem accurately and organise for you a proper routine of medicine, diet and exercise, you know the value of good law. If you have ever been part of a team in which everyone was going his or her own way, and then you were fortunate enough to find a system that encouraged each person's initiative, but in such a way that the team functioned well as a team, you know the value of good law.

The law that governed the life of the people of ancient Israel was seen by them to be basic to their very existence as a people. They considered it to be a gift to them from God, the author of life itself and the one who formed them into a nation. They saw themselves as being privileged to have it and they delighted in it as in a treasured gift. This is expressed beautifully in Psalm 19:

'The law of the Lord is perfect, it revives the soul. The rule of the Lord is to be trusted, it gives wisdom to the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, they gladden the heart. The command of the Lord is clear, it gives light to the eyes.'

They had been slaves in Egypt, with no law to protect them, and no rights. God heard their cry, liberated them from oppression, led them to freedom, and gave them a law, a way to live, which they believed would lead them to experience the fullness of a life in which the deepest desires of their heart would be realised.

Among the many laws that regulated every aspect of their communal and personal lives, the 'Ten Words' ('Decalogue'), or as we generally call them the 'Ten Commandments', held a special place. They expressed in summary form the basic laws that they were to follow in their relations to God and to each other. These laws functioned as a kind of constitution of Israel, and the prophets used them as a basic reference point in their critique of the nation. Jesus himself lived by them and referred to them, as do the authors of the Newer Testament. For Jews and Christians alike they remain, still today, a basic rule of life.

The first three commandments focus on our relationship with God, for the inspired authors knew that this relationship is at the heart of our relationship with each other. It is these commandments that form the subject of this chapter.

The First Commandment

(Exodus 20:1-6 & Deuteronomy 5:6-10; Catechism n. 2083-2141)

The First Commandment begins:

'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:2-3).

Note that 'you' here and throughout the Decalogue is singular. God is addressing the people as a people and each member of the community is to hear the words addressed to him/herself personally.

We are being addressed by the One who has liberated us from slavery, and has borne us on eagles' wings and brought us to himself (19:4). We are his 'treasured possession'(19:5), called to be a 'priestly people and a holy nation'(19:6). The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt, with no law to protect them, and no rights. God heard their cry and liberated them from oppression. He is about to spell out the demands of living a life that is truly free.

The liberating and the offering of communion is unconditional, but cannot be automatic, for God is love and respects our freedom. Only a response of love opens the way for God's unconditional love to draw us into this extraordinarily intimate communion. God wants us to know what we need to do to respond to his love and to welcome the intimacy that he offers. God's answer to this need is summarized in the decalogue.

A positive expression of the first commandment is found in one of the most treasured texts of the Bible:

'Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is your God, Yahweh alone. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might'(Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

To love God is to be committed to do God's will. It is to avoid putting foreign gods before YHWH. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments is the greatest, he quoted this statement from Deuteronomy and added:

'This is the greatest and the first commandment'(Matthew 22:37-38).

The God who is revealing his will to us is the same God who heard the cry of the slaves in Egypt and raised up Moses to liberate them (Exodus 3:1-12). He is the Lord, a God

'merciful and gracious, persistent in his passionate concern, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'(Exodus 34:6).

We are to worship YHWH who hears the cry of the poor, the God revealed most beautifully by Jesus.

The Catechism lists a number of ways in which we can sin against the First Commandment, especially by sins against faith, hope and charity – the three theological virtues referred to in Chapter 30. We commit a sin against faith, when we refuse to accept as true what God has revealed to us (n. 2087-2089). The Catechism lists heresy, apostasy and schism. We commit the sin of heresy when we reject a specific truth that requires of us an obedience of faith. We commit the sin of apostasy when we totally repudiate the Christian faith. We commit the sin of schism when we break communion with the Church. We commit a sin against hope (n. 2090-2092) either by despair or presumption. We commit the sin of despair when we give up all hope of God's mercy. We commit the sin of presumption when we live as though we did not need grace, or when we leave everything to God with no intention of listening or responding to grace. We commit a sin against charity (n. 2093-2094) through indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, sloth, or, at the extreme, hatred of God.

First Commandment

It is in the context of the First Commandment that the Catechism speaks of the virtue of religion (n. 2095-2109). This includes the call to adoration, prayer and self-offering ('self-sacrifice'). It also includes the taking of vows. Religion is not a private matter, so there is also a social duty of worshipping with others, as well as a right to freedom of religion. To fail in any of these areas is to sin against the First Commandment.

The commandment not to have other gods before YHWH highlights the following sins: superstition (n. 2111), idolatry (n.2112-2114), divination and magic (n. 2115-2117), tempting God, sacrilege and simony (n. 2118-2122), atheism (n. 2123-2126) and agnosticism (n. 2127-2128).

The First Commandment continues:

'You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or be enslaved by them'(Exodus 20:4-5).

'Idols'(images in stone, clay or metal) are an obvious danger in a world where such images were rife. We can make idols of our own will, our own desires. Even the words of the Bible or the words in which we are accustomed to express our faith in God can be an 'idol'.

Some quote this commandment as though it forbade pictures or images of Jesus and the saints. They forget that God chose to reveal himself in Jesus, and that holy people are sacraments, reminding us of the wonderful things that God does in our world. People who treasure such images know that it is not the images that they are worshipping, but God who is revealed in his saints. Moreover, it is precisely the virtue of religion that inspires artists to give expression to their faith in sculpture, painting, music, drama, poetry and in crafting words to express what it is that we believe. Images of the saints are no more than a reminder of those who have lived the life of discipleship, and so a stimulus to our following their example. All prayer is addressed to God. Just as we ask people here to pray for us, so, through our faith in the 'communion of saints'(see Chapter 15), we do not let death come between us, and so we are free, should we so choose, to continue to ask God's holy ones to intercede for us.

The First Commandment concludes:

'For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments'(Exodus 20:5-6).

To speak of God as 'jealous' is to say that there is no substitute for real love, and that the source of real love is God and no other. God does not want us misdirecting our love, giving ourselves to false 'gods'. God assures us of his 'steadfast love'. We can be confident that God will never break the covenant. We are called to trust that God is with us and to walk with God into our future knowing that God will be there with us and for us. We are called to 'love' this God who has freed us and to 'keep' his commandments that spell out the path of freedom and life. Sin has effects.

We cannot just pretend these effects away. If we are obstinate and unrepentant, God cannot pretend that things are other than what we have chosen them to be. We can use the word ‘punishment’ provided we realize that punishment for sin is self-inflicted. These concluding words to the First Commandment highlight a most significant difference between evil and good as regards their effects. The effects of evil peter out in three or four generations; the effects of good go on forever.

The Second Commandment

(Exodus 20:7 & Deuteronomy 5:11; Catechism n. 2142-2167)

The Second Commandment reads:

‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.’

This goes much further than ensuring that we refer to God in a polite way, or that we refrain from perjury, or from taking oaths in a trivial way, though it includes these (see Sirach 23:23:9-11; Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12). It applies to everything that we do in God’s name. The person who claims to be speaking for God, but whose words do not come from God is breaking the second commandment. The person or institution that, in God’s name, behaves in ways that are not consistent with the action of God in the Exodus or in Jesus is breaking the second commandment. Anyone who would attempt, however subtly, to confine God within the limits of human words or customs is breaking the second commandment, for they are attempting to confine God within the limits of human language or custom.

When we reflect on the injustices that have been done in God’s name, and on the imperfect images of God that have been imposed on people in God’s name, we begin to realise how radical this second commandment is. We must be very careful when we call on God to support our teaching. Prophecy, theology, liturgy and prayer can be genuine and they can be false. They can be authentic expressions of genuine religious encounters with the living God, or they can be substitutes for such an encounter. The second commandment demands the utmost care of us when we speak or act in God’s name.

The Catechism speaks of respecting the sacred, and lists the sins we can commit against the second commandment. They include breaking promises that we have made in God’s name (n. 2147); blasphemy (n. 2148); taking oaths carelessly (n. 2149-2151); and perjury (lying under oath, n. 2152).

The Catechism adds a note on the value of having a Christian name – a reminder of our link with God and with the religious community (n. 2156-2159).

Third Commandment

The Third Commandment

(Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Catechism n. 2168-2195)

The Third Commandment reads:

‘Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your slave, man or woman, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your slave, man or woman, may rest as well as you.’

The Exodus version of the commandment refers to God’s action in creating:

‘For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it’(Exodus 20:11).

The version found in Deuteronomy refers instead to God’s redemptive action in the Exodus:

‘You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm: therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath holy’(Deuteronomy 5:15).

We are to observe the Sabbath as a reminder of the action of God in liberating us from slavery.

The third commandment has powerful symbolic value. Underlying it is the command to work: we have the obligation and the privilege of continuing God’s creative and redeeming action of bringing order out of chaos. There is, however, a danger that we will think that everything depends upon us. There is also the danger that the systems of authority that are basic to social organisation will appear absolute, and that those under authority will be treated as of lesser dignity than those who exercise authority. There is a danger – one with which we are unfortunately all too familiar – that human beings will be reduced to being resources in the striving for economic advancement. The seventh day, therefore, stands as a symbol of our need for God and of our equality before him. This day is to be set aside so that everyone may ‘rest’, so that everyone may have the space to attend to God, to remember God’s action and to celebrate God’s love.

The Jewish Sabbath (n. 2168-2173)

It was particularly at the time of the Babylonian Exile that the Sabbath became an important element in Jewish self-identity. Unable to go to the temple, the exiles came together (this is the meaning of the word ‘synagogue’) on the Sabbath to remember and to pray. It was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant.

‘You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people ... Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant’(Exodus 31:13,16).

‘If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord’ (Isaiah 58:13-14).

The Christian Sunday (n.2174-2195)

In the first decade of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Christian community in Magnesia (n. 9; quoted Catechism n. 2175):

‘Former adherents of the ancient customs have since obtained a new hope. So they have given up keeping the Sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord’s Day instead, the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to Jesus and his death. That death is the mystery that has moved us to become believers and endure tribulation to show that we are disciples of Jesus Christ our teacher.’

About the same time Ignatius wrote to the community in Ephesus (n.5.2):

‘Let no one be under any illusion; a person who excludes himself from the sanctuary is depriving himself of the Bread of God, for, if the prayer of one or two individuals has such efficacy, how much more powerful is that of the bishop together with the whole church.’

We are reminded of the words in the Letter to the Hebrews (10:25; quoted Catechism n. 2178):

‘Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another.’

The Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Liturgy writes (n. 106):

‘By a tradition handed down from the apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day, which day is appropriately called the Lord’s day or Sunday. For on this day Christ’s faithful should come together into one place so that, hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, resurrection and glory of the Lord Jesus, and may give thanks to God who has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, unto a living hope. The Lord’s day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work.’

Justin Martyr (d. 165), in his First Apologia (n. 65-67; see Catechism n. 1345 & 2174) describes how Christians celebrated Sunday in the middle of the Second Century:

‘On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves . . . and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.

Days of Obligation

‘When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks (*eucharisteô*) that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: “Amen”. When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the “eucharisted” bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.’

Over the centuries, certain solemn feasts were celebrated by the whole community coming together for the Eucharist. The complexities of modern living make it harder to carry on such practices. However, the Catechism lists certain holy days when the faithful are obliged to attend Mass: Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Corpus Christi, Mary Mother of God, Immaculate Conception, Assumption, Joseph, Peter & Paul, All Saints. The Catechism states (n. 2181):

‘The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or when dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave [*gravis*] sin.’

Local Bishops’ Conferences can determine which obligations hold in the local church. In Australia, only Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Corpus Christi and Assumption are holy days of obligation. Epiphany, Ascension and Corpus Christi have been transferred to the nearest Sunday, so, apart from Sundays, the faithful are expected to come together to celebrate Mass only when Christmas or the feast of the Assumption fall on a weekday.

On the subject of work on such days, the Catechism has this to say (n. 2185):

‘The faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s Day, the carrying out of the works of mercy, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body ... They should see to it that legitimate excuses do not lead to habits prejudicial to religion, family life and health.’