

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

COMMANDMENT 7

(Catechism nn. 2401-2463)

The prophets

The Seventh Commandment (Catechism n. 2401-2463)

The seventh commandment reads: ‘You shall not steal (Greek: *kleptô*)’ (Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:19). It is quoted by Jesus (Matthew 19:18, and Paul includes among those who will not inherit God’s kingdom ‘the thief (Greek: *kleptês*) and the swindler (Greek: *harpax*)’ (I Corinthians 6:10).

The Hebrew Prophets

This commandment was certainly not understood as protecting possessions unjustly acquired, or luxuries held in the face of deprivation and poverty. The prophets again and again accuse the rich of stealing from the poor. Let us listen to Amos:

‘Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring something to drink!” The Lord Yahweh has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, says Yahweh’ (Amos 4:1-3).

‘Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria ... Are you better than other kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory, O you that put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence? Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away’ (Amos 6:1-7).

‘Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” Yahweh has sworn: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds’ (Amos 8:4-7).

We find similarly powerful denunciations in Isaiah:

‘I looked for justice [*mishpat*] but behold a cover up [*mispah*].

I looked for righteousness [*tsedaqah*] but behold a cry of distress [*tse‘aqah*].

The words look alike and sound alike, but the realities they stand for are very different. Isaiah, like the other prophets, is speaking out against injustice, especially injustice that is made to look and sound all right because those perpetrating it control the law and the systems that can hide the injustice.

The text continues:

‘Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! Yahweh of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant ...

... Ah, you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, whose feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but who do not regard the deeds of Yahweh, or see the work of his hands! Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge; their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst ... People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled’ (Isaiah 5:8-17).

The Universal Destination of Goods and Private Ownership (n. 2401-2406)

The Catechism acknowledges that we have a right to private property:

‘The appropriating of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping people to meet their basic needs and the needs of those in their charge’ (n. 2402).

However, this is within the context that ‘The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race’ (n. 2402).

‘The right to private property acquired by work or received in a just way (2nd edition), does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind. The universal destination of goods remains primordial even if the promotion of the common good requires respect for the right to private property and its exercise’ (n. 2403).

The Catechism makes the following two points:

‘The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence’ (n. 2404).

‘Political authority has the right and duty to regulate the legitimate exercise of the right to ownership for the sake of the common good’ (n. 2406).

We might reflect on the following papal statements:

‘Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities’ (Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* 1967 n. 23).

‘Christian tradition has never upheld the right to private property as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right, common to all, to use the goods of the whole of creation: the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone’ (JPII *Laborem Exercens* 1981, n.14).

‘Ownership of the means of production, whether in industry or agriculture, is just and legitimate if it serves useful work. It becomes illegitimate, however, when it is not utilised or when it serves to impede the work of others, in an effort to gain a profit which is not the result of the overall expansion of work and the wealth of society, but rather is the result of curbing them or of illicit exploitation, speculation or the breaking of solidarity among working people. Ownership of this kind has no justification, and represents an abuse in the sight of God and mankind’ (JPII *Centesimus Annus* 1991 n. 43).

Respect for Persons and their Goods (Catechism n. 2407-2418)

While we are to respect persons and their right to possess goods, it is not theft to take another person's goods in a case of urgent necessity (n. 2408). The Catechism (n. 2409) declares the following to be immoral: deliberately keeping what another has lent or lost; paying unjust wages; forcing up prices; doing poor work; evading tax; forgery; waste and excessive spending.

It goes on to treat the following topics: the morality of contracts (n. 2410); commutative justice – that is to say, justice in the area of exchange/transactions (n. 2411); the obligation to make restitution (n. 2412); the morality of gambling (n. 2413), and slavery (n. 2414). Domestic slavery was part of the economic system prevailing when Christianity began. While Paul does not put any energy into opposing the system (his urgent focus was on Jesus and his revelation), his words, if followed, undermined it, with the accent on love (read the beautiful letter to Philemon). In this matter, as in others, the Church was slow to oppose slavery – a sober reminder to all of us of how blind we can be to the sins that are endemic in our culture.

The Social Teaching of the Church (n. 2419-2425)

The Catechism states:

‘The Church’s Social Teaching proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgment; it gives guidelines for action’(n. 2423).

We refer the reader back to chapter 32 where we examined this matter and listed the principal official church documents where we can find the Church’s Social Teaching.

Economic Activity and Social Justice (n. 2426-2436)

The Catechism reminds us:

‘Economic life is not meant solely to multiply goods produced and increase profit or power; it is ordered first of all to the service of persons, of the whole human person, and of the entire human community’(n. 2426).

This may seem an obvious thing to say, but many economic rationalists seem not to have heard it.

The Catechism speaks of the importance and place of work (n. 2427). We will deal with this in the following chapter.

It touches on the topic of negotiation between different interest groups (n. 2430), the responsibility of the State in economic activity (n. 2431), employment, a just wage and strikes (n. 2433-2435).

The Second Vatican Council reminds us:

‘The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all. That which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity’(*Apostolate of the Laity* n. 8.5).

‘Christians engaged actively in modern economic and social progress and in the struggle for justice and charity must be convinced that they have much to contribute to the prosperity of humankind and to world peace. Let them, as individuals and as members of communities, give a shining example to others. Endowed with the skill and experience so absolutely necessary for them, let them preserve a proper sense of values in their earthly activity in loyalty to Christ and his Gospel, in order that their lives, individual as well as social, may be inspired by the spirit of the Beatitudes, and in particular by the spirit of poverty’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.72).

Justice for the Poor (n. 2443-2449)

After a brief look at Justice and Solidarity among nations (n. 2437-2442), the Catechism concludes its treatment by focusing on the poor. We have already heard Amos and Isaiah. Worshipping YHWH as the Redeemer God, we are not surprised to find this topic central to the Torah and the Prophets. The following are typical:

‘If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry’ (Exodus 22:23).

‘I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts’ (Malachi 3:5).

The Newer Testament, too, returns, again and again, to God’s love for the poor, and the call for charity and justice. John the Baptist declared:

‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise’ (Luke 3:11).

Jesus’ teaching is summed up in his parable on the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). We think also of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man is condemned, not because he did anything to hurt Lazarus, but because he did nothing to help him. Among Jesus’ many powerful sayings on this topic we find the following:

‘Give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you’ (Luke 11:41).

And his warning:

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal’ (Matthew 6:19).

This is a topic dear to the heart of James:

‘If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?’ (James 2:15-16).

‘Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten.

Justice for the Poor

‘Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one. Does not God oppose you?’(James 5:1-6).

Paul writes:

‘Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction’(1Timothy 6:9).

As we would expect, this has always been a favourite topic in Christian homilies. In the *Letter of Barnabas* (2nd century) we read:

‘The fast of my choice is this: relax all your iniquitous restrictions, loosen the shackles of your oppressive covenants, let your ruined debtors go free, and tear up all your unjust agreements. Break up your bread into portions for the starving; and if you see a man who is in want of clothing, fit him out yourself. Bring in the homeless under your own roof. You are not to withdraw into yourselves and live in solitude, as though God had already pronounced you holy. Come and take your full share in the meetings, and in deliberating for the common good’(2,10; 3:1).

Once again we refer the reader back to chapter 32 where we quote similar statements from Saint Basil and Saint Chrysostom.

In Chapter 32 we also touched on the Church’s teaching that we are to make a preferential option for the poor. Pope John-Paul II in his Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987 n. 42) writes:

‘One of the characteristic themes and guidelines dealt with by the Magisterium in recent years is the option or love of preference for the poor. This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness ... It cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the rich man who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (Luke 16:19-31).’

In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981 n. 8), he writes:

‘New movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subjects of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to the cause of the “poor”, for it considers it to be its mission, its service, a proof of its fidelity to Christ, so that it can truly be the Church of the poor.’

In his Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991 n. 57-58), he writes:

‘The preferential option for the poor is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society – not only economic but cultural and spiritual poverty as well ... Promoting justice is a matter of helping entire peoples which are at present excluded or marginalised to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which in fact our world abundantly produces; it requires above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power, which today govern societies.’

There are many indices of poverty. Some people are “poor” from only one point of view, while others are “poor” from many points of view. However, the greatest poverty is to be deprived of love, and not to recognise this is to run the risk of distorting the gospel and also of undervaluing what people are already doing in the cause of justice, and so of adding to the oppression that saps people’s energy. The implications of this are that a preferential option for the poor can take place in any genuine human interaction anywhere. It is a matter of one’s entry point into that interaction and the dynamic that takes place there, and of the direction that the energy of the interaction takes.

