

Topic 30: The Fourth Commandment, the Family

The fourth commandment is a connecting point between the previous three and the six subsequent ones: family relationships reveal the mysterious interpenetration between divine and human love that is at the origin of each person. Parents have the responsibility to create a home, a family space where love, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and selfless service can be lived.

10/05/2022

Position of the fourth commandment in the Decalogue

In the traditional formulation of the Decalogue that we use (Cf. *Catechism*, 2066), the first three commandments refer more directly to love for God and the other seven to love for our neighbour (cf. *Catechism*, 2067). In fact, the supreme precept to love God and the second, similar to the first, to love one's neighbour for God's sake, summarise all the commandments of the Decalogue (cf. Mt 22:36-40; *Catechism*, 2196).

It is not by chance that the fourth commandment appears precisely in this position, as a point of connection and transition between the three preceding and the six following commandments.

Family relationships (and in a radical way fatherhood/motherhood/filiation) reveal the mysterious interpenetration between divine and human love which is at the origin of each person. Hence love for one's parents – and the family communion which stems from it (cf. *Catechism*, 2205) – participates in a particular way in God's love.

In turn, loving one's neighbour “as oneself” has a special naturalness in the family. Each member of a family in a certain way shares in the identity of the others, in their own personal being: the others in our family are in a real sense “our own.” That is why the family is the original place where each person is welcomed and loved unconditionally: not because of what they have or what they can provide or achieve, but because of who they are.

Personal and social significance of the family

While the fourth commandment is addressed to children in their relationship with their parents, it also extends, with different manifestations, to kinship relations with the other members of the family group and to behaviour towards elders and superiors in any sphere. Finally, it also implies and refers to the duties of parents and of those who exercise authority over others (cf. *Catechism*, 2199).

Thus, “the fourth commandment illuminates the other relationships in society. In our brothers and sisters we see the children of our parents; in our cousins, the descendants of our ancestors; in our fellow citizens, the children of our country; in the baptized, the children of our mother the Church; in every human person, a son or daughter of the One who

wants to be called ‘our Father.’ In this way our relationships with our neighbors are recognized as personal in character. The neighbor is not a ‘unit’ in the human collective; he is ‘someone’ who by his known origins deserves particular attention and respect” (*Catechism*, 2212).

As the Church’s Magisterium has often stressed, “family life is an initiation into life in society” (cf. *Catechism*, 2207). As the natural setting for educating the person for love, it is the most effective instrument for making society more human and building up the world.^[1] Families “should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor” (*Catechism*, 2208).

On its part, society has a grave duty to support and strengthen marriage and the family founded on it,

recognising its authentic nature, fostering its success and ensuring public morality (cf. *Catechism*, 2210).

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Duties of children and parents

The Holy Family is a model which shows with particular clarity the features willed by God for every family: love and service; education and freedom; obedience and authority; etc.

a) Children should respect and honour their parents, try to give them joy, pray for them and respond loyally to their love and care and the sacrifices they make for them. These duties should be for them a “most sweet precept.”

Divine fatherhood, the source of human paternity (cf. Eph 3:14-15), is the foundation of the honour due to

parents (cf. *Catechism*, 2214).

“Respect for parents (filial piety) derives from gratitude towards those who, by the gift of life, their love and their work, have brought their children into the world and enabled them to grow in stature, wisdom, and grace. ‘With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother.

Remember that through your parents you were born; what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?’ (Sir 7:27-28)” (*Catechism*, 2215).

Filial respect is shown in docility and obedience. “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord” (Col 3:20). As long as they are subject to their parents, children must obey them in whatever they indicate for their own good and that of the family. This obligation ceases when children leave home, but the respect they owe

to their parents never ceases (cf. *Catechism*, 2216-2217).

Naturally, were parents to command something contrary to the Law of God, children should put God's will before the wishes of their parents, since "it is necessary to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

"The fourth commandment reminds grown children of their responsibilities toward their parents. As much as they can, they must give them material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress" (*Catechism*, 2218).

The family situation is not always ideal. Here, too, God's providence allows for difficult, painful or, at first glance, less than ideal family situations: single-parent families, separations, violence or a lack of love, etc. It may be helpful to consider that the fourth

commandment “does not speak of parents’ goodness; it does not ask that fathers and mothers be perfect. It speaks about an act of the child, apart from the merits of the parents, and says something extraordinary and liberating: even if not all parents are good and not every childhood serene, all children can be happy, because achieving a full and happy life depends on the proper recognition of those who have brought us into the world . . . Many saints and countless Christians, after a painful childhood, have lived a luminous life, because, thanks to Christ they became reconciled with life” (Pope Francis, General Audience, 19 September 2018).

In these situations and always, children should avoid judging their parents and condemning them. On the contrary, as they mature, they should learn to forgive and to be understanding, without denying the

reality of what they have experienced, but trying to consider and evaluate it from God's perspective, both with regard to their parents and their own lives.

b) On their part, parents are to receive with gratitude, as a great blessing and sign of trust, the children God sends them. In addition to caring for their material needs, they have a grave responsibility to give them an upright human and Christian education. The role of parents in the formation of their children is so important that, when it is lacking, it is difficult to make up for it.^[3] The right and the duty of educating their children are, for parents, primordial and inalienable.

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Parents have the responsibility to create a home, a family space where love, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and selfless service can be lived.

Such a home is the most appropriate and natural environment for the formation of children – and all those who are part of it – in virtues and values.

There, by example and word, they must teach children to know themselves; to live freely and generously, with joy and sincerity; to be honest; to be open to dialogue with anyone; to accept, with the depth appropriate to their age, the truths of the faith; to enter into a life of simple and personal piety; to try, naturally and starting again whenever necessary, to ensure that their daily conduct corresponds to their condition as children of God; to live with a sense of personal vocation; etc.

In dedicating themselves to their educational mission, parents should be convinced that, since they are carrying out their own vocation, they

can count on God's grace. In the face of the objective difficulty of the task, it will be of great help to them to know by faith that, however important and necessary the various human means may be, supernatural means should always be put first.

Parent should strive to have great respect and love for the uniqueness of their children and for their freedom, teaching them to use it well and responsibly.^[5] Here, as in so many other aspects of family education, the example of their own conduct is fundamental and very fruitful.

In dealing with their children, they should learn to combine affection and fortitude, vigilance and patience. It is important that they become good friends with their children and gain their trust, which is essential for educating them effectively. To do so, they need to spend time with them,

having a good time, listening, taking an interest in their concerns, etc.

As part of the fortitude in charity that their task requires, they should also know how to correct when necessary, for “what son is there whom his father does not correct?” (Heb 12:7); but with due moderation, bearing in mind the Apostle’s advice: “Fathers, do not go too far in reproofing your children, lest they become fainthearted” (Col 3:21).

Parents should never abdicate their responsibility here, leaving the education of their children in the hands of other persons or institutions, although they can – and sometimes must – count on the help of those who are worthy of their trust (cf. *Catechism*, 2222-2226).

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for

them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, 6). Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise" (*Catechism*, 2229).

On the other hand, it is natural that the Christian educational atmosphere of a family offers very favourable conditions for the birth of vocations of self-giving to God in the Church, also as a development of all the sowing done by the parents, with God's grace, for so many years.

In these and in all other cases, they should not forget that "family ties are important but not absolute. Just as the child grows to maturity and

human and spiritual autonomy, so his unique vocation which comes from God asserts itself more clearly and forcefully. Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it. They must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus (cf. Mt 16:25): ‘He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Mt 10:37)” (*Catechism*, 2232).

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The divine vocation of a son or daughter is a great gift of God to a family. Parents should try to respect and support the mystery of this call, even if they may not fully understand it or find it difficult to accept the implications they know or sense. The right dispositions towards the vocation of one’s children are cultivated and strengthened first and foremost in prayer. It is there that

trust in God matures, which makes it possible to moderate the tendency towards protection, avoiding its excesses, and the realistic attitudes of faith and hope are strengthened which can best help and accompany the children in their discernment or decisions.

Other duties of the fourth commandment

a) *Towards those who govern the Church.* The faithful should have a “true filial spirit towards the Church” (*Catechism*, 2040). This spirit should be manifested towards those who govern the Church.

The faithful “promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church. Nor should they omit to pray for those placed over them, for they keep

watch as having to render an account of their souls, so that they may do this with joy and not with grief (cf. Heb 13:17).”^[7]

This filial spirit is shown first of all in loyal adherence and union with the Pope, the visible head of the Church and Vicar of Christ on earth, and with the Bishops in communion with the Holy See: “Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a wonderful passion, for in him we see Christ. If we deal with the Lord in prayer, we will go forward with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even in the face of events we do not understand or which produce sighs or sorrow.”^[8]

b) *With regard to civil authorities.* “God's fourth commandment also enjoins us to honor all who for our good have received authority in society from God. It clarifies the duties of those who exercise

authority as well as those who benefit from it" (*Catechism*, 2234),^[9] always in view of the common good.

Among the duties of citizens are (cf. *Catechism*, 2238-2243):

- to respect just laws and carry out the legitimate commands of those in authority (cf. 1 Pet 2:13);
- to exercise one's rights and fulfil one's duties as a citizen;
- to participate responsibly in social and political life.

"The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction

between serving God and serving the political community. ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ (Mt 22:21). ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29)” (*Catechism*, 2242).

c) *Duties of the civil authorities.* Those who exercise any authority must exercise it as a service and be aware that every exercise of power is morally conditioned. No one may do, order or establish what is contrary to the dignity of persons (in the first place, of the one who acts), to the natural law and to the common good (Cf. *Catechism*, 2235).

The exercise of authority must manifest a just hierarchy of values so that it facilitates the exercise of freedom and responsibility for all men and women. Those who govern must seek distributive justice with wisdom, taking into account the

needs and contribution of each person and fostering concord and social peace; and they should be careful not to adopt dispositions which lead to the temptation to oppose personal interests to that of the community (cf. *Catechism*, 2236).

“Political authorities are obliged to respect the fundamental rights of the human person. They will dispense justice humanely by respecting the rights of everyone, especially of families and the disadvantaged. The political rights attached to citizenship can and should be granted according to the requirements of the common good. They cannot be suspended by public authorities without legitimate and proportionate reasons. Political rights are meant to be exercised for the common good of the nation and the human community.” (*Catechism*, 2237).

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2196-2257.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 209-214; 221-254; 377-383; 393-411.

Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 19 March 2016.

^[1] Cf. *Familiaris consortio*, 43.

^[2] Cf. *Ibid.*, 252-254.

^[3] Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, 3.

^[4] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, 36; *Catechism*, 2221 and *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 239.

^[5] And, “when they reach the appropriate age, children have the duty and the right to choose their profession and their state in life” (*Catechism*, 2230).

^[6] “And, as we are consoled by the joy of finding Jesus —three days He was gone!— debating with the doctors of Israel (Luke 2:46), your soul and mine will be left deeply impressed by the duty to leave our home and family to serve our heavenly Fathe” (Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, 5th Joyful Mystery).

^[7] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 37.

^[8] Saint Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 13.

^[9] Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 377-383; 393-398; 410-411.

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