

Topic 28: The First and Second Commandments

The first commandment of the Decalogue is the only possible foundation for a truly successful human life. The highest reason for human dignity consists in our vocation to communion with God. Love for God must include love for those God loves. The second commandment forbids any inappropriate use of God's name and in particular blasphemy.

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The first commandment

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:5). These words of Deuteronomy call all men and women to believe in God, to hope in Him and to love Him above all things (cf. *Catechism*, 2134).

Although we usually express this mandate succinctly with the formulation “you shall love God above all things,” in reality, “the first commandment embraces faith, hope, and charity” (*Catechism*, 2086). This is so because charity enables us to love in the divine way. But it is not possible for us to be moved to the love that God deserves without truly knowing him, with the light of faith, and without recognising Him as the

highest good to which we aspire and which we have the confidence to attain, through hope.

Jesus himself confirmed that the first commandment is “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:28-30). It is essential for the life of every person that this commandment truly takes its proper place: it is the *first* commandment, not only in the order of the Ten Commandments, but also in the importance for each person’s life, because it is the only possible foundation for shaping a full and authentic human life.

Meaning of the first commandment

Our freedom allows us to set a wide variety of goals and to move towards

them by making choices. Many of these ends are sought as means to other ends. But there is always one, which we can call the *ultimate end*, which we do not want for another end, but for itself. This is the goal which each person considers to be their highest good, and to which one subordinates one's choice and pursuit of all intermediate ends. A person makes decisions and conducts himself according to whether he considers that something brings him closer to this ultimate end or not; whether such actions favour this end more or less so; he judges with the same criteria whether the efforts and sacrifices that one or other intermediate ends would require are worthwhile. The ultimate end which each person chooses determines the order of love in their life.

But if someone chooses, or acts as if they have chosen, the wrong final end, which is not capable of fulfilling

their life, even though it seems to promise it (fame, riches, power...), all their decisions about intermediate ends are conditioned by this disordered love; and freedom, subjected to this lie in its exercise, ends up damaging, or even destroying, the person (cf. for example, *Catechism*, 29).

For we are made *to God's measure*:
“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: ‘The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully

according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 19,1)" (*Catechism*, 27).

All our good is in God, and apart from Him there is no true and complete good. This is, objectively, our ultimate end. Although we may not know it, or may not understand it clearly at times in our life, only God can fulfil our desire for happiness. And any love that does not lead us to God, and that leads us away from Him, is at the same time a betrayal of ourselves and a condemnation to future frustration.

Our heart is made to love God and to allow itself to be filled with his love; there is no substitute or genuine alternative. Therefore, the only adequate measure to accept the infinite Love God offers us is "everything": to love with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our

strength. If we do not give our heart a love to the measure of its desires, our heart “will seek revenge... and will breed worms instead” (Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, 204).

Love for God

The love for God referred to in the first commandment entails:

a) Choosing Him as the ultimate end of everything we decide to do. This means seeking to do everything out of love for Him and for His glory: “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). “*Deo omnis gloria*. All glory to God.”^[1] There must be no end preferred to this, because no love deserves to be above the love of God: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). A love that

excludes or subordinates love for God is neither authentic nor good.

b) Fulfilling his will with works: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). We are called to carry out God’s will also when it demands sacrifice: “not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42) – convinced that this is worth it, because there lies our greatest good.

God’s will is that we should be holy (cf. 1 Thess 4:3), that we should follow Christ closely (cf. Mt 17:5), doing what is necessary to live according to the guidance of his commandments (cf. Jn 14:21). “Do you really want to be a saint? Carry out the little duty of each moment: do what you ought and concentrate on what you are doing.”^[2] —

c) Living with the awareness that we are indebted to God – the debt of a child to our good father – and wanting to correspond to his love. He first loved us, created us free and made us his children (cf. 1 Jn 4:19). Sin is a rejection of God’s love (cf. *Catechism*, 2094), but God always forgives and always gives Himself to us: God’s logic is one of superabundance. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10; cf. Jn 3:16). Each Christian can say, along with Saint Paul, that Christ “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). “To correspond to such great love, we must give ourselves completely.”^[3]
This response is not a feeling, but an act of the will which may or may not be accompanied by sensible manifestations.

The desire to correspond out of love leads to the commitment to cultivate,

in various ways,^[4] our relationship with God. This personal contact with Him, in turn, forms and nourishes our love. This is why the first commandment includes various manifestations of religion:

– “*Adoration* is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator” (*Catechism*, 2628). This is the most fundamental attitude of religion (cf. *Catechism*, 2095). “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Mt 4:10). “May your prayer always be a real and sincere act of adoration of God.”^[5] The adoration of God frees us from the various forms of idolatry, also those present today, which lead to slavery.

– *Thanksgiving* (cf. *Catechism*, 2638), because all that we are and all that we have comes from God: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you

boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor 4:7).

– *Petition*: for forgiveness for the actions and attitudes that separate us from God (sin); and for help, also for others, the Church and the whole of humanity. Jesus includes these two types of petition in the Lord’s Prayer. The Christian’s prayer of petition is filled with trust, because it is a filial plea made through Christ: “if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you” (Jn 16:23; cf. 1 Jn 5:14-15).

– Love is also manifested in sacrifice, which is the offering of a good to God as an expression of the interior surrender of one’s own will, that is to say, of obedience. Christ redeemed us by the Sacrifice of the Cross, which manifests his perfect obedience to the Father unto death (cf. Phil 2:8).

– Prayer and sacrifice are inseparable: “prayer grows in value with sacrifice.”^[6] Both, in their

various forms, are part of the worship of God, which is called worship of *latria* or adoration. The act of worship *par excellence* is the Holy Mass, in which Christ himself offers to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, perfect adoration, thanksgiving, petition for forgiveness of sins and supplication for his grace. Christians, made members of Christ by baptism, have received the capacity to offer ourselves in Him, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. In this way, we allow Jesus to take up our sacrifices and present them, united to his, to the Father through the Holy Spirit (cf. *Catechism*, 2100).

– Love for God should be manifested in the dignity of worship: observance of the liturgical prescriptions of the Church, the “good manners” of piety, ^[7] care and cleanliness of the objects destined for divine worship. “That woman in the house of Simon the

leper in Bethany, who anoints the Master's head with precious ointment, reminds us of our duty to be generous in the worship of God. All beauty, richness and majesty seem little to me.”^[8] —

Faith and hope in God

Faith, hope and charity are the three “theological” virtues (virtues that are directed towards God). The greatest of these is charity (cf. 1 Cor 13:13), which gives “form” and supernatural “life” to faith and hope (just as the soul gives life to the body). But charity presupposes faith, because only those who know God – as the fruit of their freedom – can love Him. Charity also presupposes hope, because only those who place their desire for happiness in union with God can love Him. Otherwise each person will love, to their own detriment, that in which they have placed their desires.

Faith is a gift of God, a light in the intelligence that enables us to know the truth that God has revealed and to assent to it, to make it our own. This theological virtue implies believing what God has revealed, but also believing God himself who has revealed it (trusting in Him).

There is and can be no opposition between faith and reason. Reason, guided by the light of faith, is indispensable for assimilating faith and deepening in it, making (to use one way of expressing it) God's way of viewing of reality more and more our own.

Doctrinal formation is important in order to attain a firm faith and thus to nurture love for God and for others out of love for God: for holiness and apostolate. The *life of faith* is a life supported by and consistent with faith.

Hope is also a gift of God which leads us to desire union with Him, in which our happiness consists, without being discouraged by considering it unattainable, because we trust that God will give us this union. He will grant us, even if we do not know how, the ability and the means to attain this goal (cf. *Catechism*, 2090).

We Christians should “rejoice in hope” (cf. Rom 12:12), because if we are faithful, the happiness of heaven awaits us: the face to face vision of God (1 Cor 13:12), which is known as *the beatific vision*. “If children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17).

The Christian life is a path of happiness, not only in the future, but also on this earth. Already now, through the certainty that true hope

gives us, we “taste” eternal happiness in advance. But while our earthly life lasts, we know that this happiness is compatible with pain and with the Cross. Hope enables us to live in the certainty that it is worthwhile to work and suffer, out of love,^[9] so that, with our cooperation, God’s marvellous plans for our life may be fulfilled.

“Hope does not disappoint! It is not based on what we can do or be, nor even on what we may believe in. Its foundation, that is, the foundation of Christian hope, is what we can be most faithful and certain of, that is to say, the love that God himself has for each of us” (Pope Francis, General Audience, 15 February 2017).

Love for others and oneself out of love for God

In answering the question about the first commandment, which we recalled above, Jesus goes on to add:

“A second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). He is not referring to this commandment as the second of the Ten Commandments, but rather to the second essential core, together with love for God, which includes several commandments of the Decalogue. Jesus describes this precept as “like” the first: it is distinct from the first commandment, and is not equivalent or interchangeable with it, but it is also inseparable from it. Therefore its importance is similar to that of the first commandment.

Love for God must include love for those God loves. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 Jn 4:20-21). One cannot love God without loving

all men and women, created by God in the divine image and likeness and called to be his children by grace (cf. *Catechism*, 2069).

“We are to behave as God’s children towards all God’s sons and daughters”:^[10]—

a) Behaving as a child of God, as another Christ. Love for others has as its rule the love of Christ: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples.” The Holy Spirit has been sent into our hearts so that we may love as children of God, with Christ’s own love (cf. Rom 5:5).

b) Seeing others as children of God and as Christ: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Wanting for them their true good, what God

wants: that they may be holy and therefore happy. The first manifestation of charity is apostolate. This charity also leads to concern for the material needs of others. To understand – to make one’s own – their spiritual and material needs. Knowing how to forgive. Having mercy (cf. Mt 5:7). “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful... Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong” (1 Cor 13:4-6). Fraternal correction (cf. Mt 18:15).

The commandment “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22:39) also expresses that there is a right love for oneself, which leads one to look at oneself and to value oneself as God does, and to seek for oneself the good that God wants: holiness and, therefore, happiness in Him.

There is also a disordered love of self, selfishness, which inclines one to put one's own will above that of God and one's own interests above the service of others. A proper self-love cannot exist without a struggle against selfishness. This effort involves self-denial, self-giving to God and to others. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25). Man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."^[11]

Sins against the First Commandment

Sins against the first commandment are sins against the theological virtues:

a) Against faith: atheism, agnosticism, deliberate doubt,

religious indifferentism, heresy, apostasy, schism, etc. (cf. *Catechism*, 2089). It is also contrary to the first commandment to voluntarily endanger one's own faith. Contrary to the worship of God are sacrilege, simony, certain practices of superstition, magic, etc., and Satanism (cf. *Catechism*, 2111-2128).

B) against hope: despair of one's own salvation (Cf. *Catechism*, 2091), and, at the opposite extreme, the presumption that divine mercy will forgive sins without conversion or contrition, or without the need for the sacrament of Penance (cf. *Catechism*, 2092). It is also contrary to this virtue to place the hope of one's ultimate happiness in something outside God.

c) Against charity: any sin is contrary to charity, but directly opposed to it is the rejection of God and also lukewarmness, which leads to not

seriously desiring to love Him with our whole heart.

The second commandment

The second commandment of the Decalogue is: *You shall not take God's name in vain*. This commandment obliges us to honour and respect the name of God (cf. *Catechism*, 2142), which is not to be pronounced “except to bless, praise and glorify” this name (*Catechism*, 2143).

Otherwise, man loses, to a greater or lesser extent, the sense of reality: he forgets who God is and who he is, and falls into the temptation of mankind's first sin.

“A name expresses a person's essence and identity and the meaning of this person's life. God has a name; he is not an anonymous force” (*Catechism*, 203). However, God cannot be encompassed by human concepts, nor is there an idea capable of representing Him, nor a name that

can exhaustively express the divine essence. God is “Holy,” which means that He is absolutely superior, that He is above every creature, and that He is transcendent.

Nevertheless, so that we can invoke God and address him personally, in the Old Testament “God revealed himself progressively and under different names to his people” (*Catechism*, 204). The name that he manifested to Moses indicates that God is being by essence, that He has not received being from anyone, and that everything proceeds from Him: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ . . . this is my name for ever”” (Ex 3:14-15; cf. *Catechism*, 213). Out of respect for God’s holiness, the people of Israel did not pronounce his name but substituted the title “Lord” (*Adonai* in Hebrew; *Kyrios* in Greek) (cf. *Catechism*, 209). Other names for

God in the Old Testament are: *Elohim*, which is the plural of “fullness” or “greatness” and conveys God’s majesty; *El-Saddai*, which means powerful, omnipotent.

In the New Testament, God makes known the mystery of his inner life: that He is one God in three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christ teaches us to call God “Father” (Mt 6:9): *Abba* is an informal and intimate Hebrew way of saying Father (cf. Rom 8:15). God is the Father of Jesus and also our Father, although he not Father in the same way towards us as towards Christ. Jesus is the only-begotten Son and we are sons by adoption. But this special “*adoption*” makes us truly children of His (cf. 1 Jn 3:1), brothers and sisters of Christ (Rom 8:29), because the Holy Spirit has been sent into our hearts and we share in the divine nature (cf. Gal 4:6; 2 Pet 1:4). We are children of God in Christ.

Consequently, we can truly address God as “Father,” as Saint Josemaría advises: “God is a Father who is full of tenderness, of infinite love. Call him 'Father' many times a day and tell him – alone, in your heart – that you love him, that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his son.”^[12] —

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray: “Hallowed be thy name.” The term ‘hallow’ is to be understood here in the sense of “to recognize as holy, to treat in a holy way” (*Catechism*, 2807). This is what we do when we worship, praise or give thanks to God. But the words “hallowed be thy name” are also one of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: in saying them we ask that his name be hallowed through us, that is, that by our life we might bring glory to Him and lead others to glorify Him (cf. Mt 5:16). “The sanctification of his name among the nations depends

inseparably on our *life* and our *prayer*” (*Catechism*, 2814).

Respect for the name of God also demands respect for the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the saints and of the holy realities in which God is present in one way or another. This includes, first of all, the Holy Eucharist, which is the true presence of Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, among us.

The second commandment forbids any inappropriate use of God’s name (cf. *Catechism*, 2146), and in particular *blasphemy*, which “consists in uttering against God – inwardly or outwardly – words of hatred, reproach, or defiance. It is also blasphemous to make use of God’s name to cover up criminal practices, to reduce peoples to servitude, to torture persons or put them to death. Blasphemy... is in itself a grave sin” (*Catechism*, 2148).

The second commandment also forbids swearing falsely (cf. *Catechism*, 2150). To swear is to make God a witness to what one affirms (for example, to give a guarantee of a promise or a testimony). It is licit to take an oath when it is necessary and when it is made with truth and justice: for example, in a trial or when assuming an office (cf. *Catechism*, 2154). Outside of such cases, our Lord teaches us not to swear: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (Mt 5:37; cf. Jas 5:12; *Catechism*, 2153).

The name of the Christian

“Man is the only creature on earth God has willed for itself.”^[13] Man is not “something” but “someone,” a person. “He is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake,’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that he was

created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity” (*Catechism*, 356). In Baptism, each person receives a name which represents their unrepeatable uniqueness before God and others (cf. *Catechism*, 2156, 2158). To baptise is also called “to christianise.” The proper name of every baptised person is Christian, follower of Christ: “In Antioch the disciples [those who were converted after being evangelised] were for the first time called Christians” (Acts 11:26).

God calls each person by one’s name (cf. 1 Sam 3:4-10; Isa 43:1; John 10:3; Acts 9:4). He loves each one personally. From each one He expects a response of love: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” No one can replace us in that response. Saint Josemaría encourages us to meditate “calmly, that divine admonition

which fills the soul with disquiet and which at the same time tastes as sweet as honey from the comb: *redemi te et vocavi te nomine tuo: meus es tu* (Is 43:1); I have redeemed you and called you by name: you are mine! Let us not steal from God what belongs to Him. A God who has loved us to the point of dying for us, who has chosen us from all eternity, before the creation of the world, so that we may be holy in his presence (cf. Eph 1:4).”^[14]

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[1] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 780.

[2] *Ibid.*, 815. Cf. *ibid.*, 933.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, 87.

[4] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 91.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, 263.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 81.

[7] Cf. *Ibid.*, 541.

[8] *Ibid.*, 527. Cf. Mt 26:6-13.

[9] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, 26.

[10] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 36.

[11] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

[12] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 150.

[13] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

^[14] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*,
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