

# Commandments!

The word Decalogue means literally ten words. God revealed these ten words to his people on the mountain. They are literally the words of God – handed on to us in the books of **Exodus and Deuteronomy**. It is in the New Testament that their full meaning is revealed in Jesus.

The Decalogue is understood best in the context of the Exodus, God's great freeing event. Whether formulated as negative commandments, prohibitions, or as positive precepts such as: Honour your father and mother, they point out the conditions of a life freed from the slavery of sin. **The Decalogue is a path of life.**

**If you love the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply.**

This liberating power of the Decalogue appears, for example, in the commandment about the sabbath rest, directed also to foreigners and slaves: **You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.**

The ten words sum up and proclaim God's law: "These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tablets of stone, and gave them to me." For this reason these two tablets are called the Testimony. In fact, they contain the terms of the covenant concluded between God and his people. These tablets of the Testimony were to be deposited in the ark.

The ten words are pronounced by God in the midst of a **theophany** - a manifestation of God. They belong to God's revelation of himself and his glory. The gift of the Commandments is the gift of God himself and his holy will. In making his will known, God reveals himself to his people.

In Exodus, the revelation of the ten words is granted between the proposal of the covenant and its conclusion - after the people had committed themselves to do all that the Lord had said, and to obey it.

The Commandments take on their full meaning within the covenant. According to Scripture, man's moral life has all its meaning in and through the covenant.

The first of the ten words recalls that God loved his people first:

Since there was a passing from the paradise of freedom to the slavery of this world, in punishment for sin, the first phrase of the Decalogue, the first word of God's commandments, bears on freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

**The Commandments express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant. Moral existence is a response to the Lord's loving initiative. It is the acknowledgement and homage given to God and a worship of thanksgiving. It is co-operation with the plan God pursues in history.**

**The Lord prescribed love towards God and taught justice towards neighbour, so that man would be neither unjust, nor unworthy of God. So God prepared man to become his friend and to live in harmony with his neighbour. The words of the Decalogue remain likewise Christians. Far from being abolished, they have received amplification and development from the fact of the coming of the Lord in the flesh.**

Ever since St. Augustine, the Ten Commandments have occupied a predominant place in the education of baptismal candidates and the faithful. In the 15th, the custom arose of expressing the commandments of the Decalogue in rhymed formulae, easy to memorize and in positive form. They are still in use today. The catechisms of the Church have often expounded Christian morality by following the order of the Ten Commandments.

The division and numbering of the Commandments have varied in the course of history. The Greek Fathers worked out a slightly different division, which is found in the Orthodox Churches and Reformed communities.

Basically they state what is required in the love of God and love of neighbour. The first three concern love of God, and the other seven love of neighbour.

As charity comprises the two commandments to which the Lord related the whole Law and the prophets ... so the Ten Commandments were themselves given on two tablets. Three were written on one tablet and seven on the other.

The Council of Trent teaches that the Ten Commandments are obligatory for Christians and that the justified man is still bound to keep them; the Second Vatican Council confirms: **The bishops, successors of the apostles, receive**

**from the Lord ... the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel ... so that all may attain salvation through faith, Baptism and the observance of the Commandments.**

### **To transgress one commandment is to infringe all the others.**

We can't honour another person without blessing God his Creator. We can't adore God without loving all people, his creatures. The Decalogue brings our religious and social life into unity.

The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation and teach us the true humanity of mankind. They bring to light the essential duties and fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person.

Since they express our fundamental duties towards God and towards our neighbours, the Ten Commandments reveal obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere.

Obedience to the Commandments also implies obligations in matter which is, in itself, light. Thus abusive language is forbidden by the fifth commandment, but would be a grave offence only as a result of circumstances or the offender's intention.

Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." The fruit referred to in this saying is the holiness of a life made fruitful by union with Christ. When we believe in Jesus Christ, partake of his mysteries and keep his commandments, the Saviour himself comes to love, in us, his Father and his brethren, our Father and our brethren. His person becomes, through the Spirit, the living and interior rule of our activity. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

### **Briefly then!**

- ✠ "What good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" - "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:16-17).
- ✠ By his life and by his preaching Jesus attested to the permanent validity of the Decalogue.
- ✠ The gift of the Decalogue is bestowed from within the covenant concluded by God with his people. God's commandments take on their true meaning in and through this covenant.
- ✠ In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with Jesus' example, the tradition of the Church has always acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue.
- ✠ The Decalogue forms an organic unity in which each word or commandment refers to all the others taken together. To transgress one commandment is to infringe the whole Law (cf. Jas 2:10-11).
- ✠ The Ten Commandments state grave obligations.
- ✠ What God commands he makes possible by his grace.

### **I. You shall have no other gods before me.**

The first commandment condemns polytheism (belief in more than one god). It requires us neither to believe in, nor to venerate, other divinities than the one true God. Scripture constantly recalls this rejection of idols, of silver or gold, the work of men's hands. **They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; ears, but do not hear.**

These empty idols make their worshippers empty: "Those who make them will become like them; so will all who put their trust in them." God, however, is the "living God" who gives life and intervenes in history.

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinising what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honours and reveres a creature **in place of God**, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.

Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and mammon."

Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.

Human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God. The commandment to worship the Lord alone integrates man and saves him from an endless disintegration.

God makes himself known by recalling his all-powerful, loving and liberating action in the history of the one he addresses: "I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The first word contains the first commandment of the Law: "You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him ... You shall not go after other gods." God's first call and just demand is that man accept and worship him.

The one and true God first reveals his glory to Israel. The revelation of the vocation and truth of man is linked to the revelation of God. Man's vocation is to make God manifest by acting in conformity with his creation "in the image and likeness of God":

The first commandment embraces faith, hope and charity. When we say *God* we confess a constant, unchangeable being, always the same, faithful and just, without any evil. It follows that we must necessarily accept his words, have complete faith in him, and acknowledge his authority. He is almighty, merciful and infinitely beneficent ... Who could not place all hope in him? Who could not love him when contemplating the treasures of goodness and love he has poured out on us? Hence the formula God employs in the Scripture at the beginning and end of his commandments: 'I am the Lord.'

## **2. You shall not make unto you any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: you shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.**

This commandment tells us to respect the Lord's name. It governs our use of speech in sacred matters.

Among all the words of Revelation, there is one which is unique: the revealed name of God. God confides his name to those who believe in him; he reveals himself to them in his personal mystery.

The gift of a name belongs to the order of trust and intimacy.

**The Lord's name is holy.** For this reason we must not abuse it. We should keep it in mind in silent, loving adoration.

Respect for his name is an expression of the respect owed to the mystery of God himself and to the whole sacred reality it brings to mind.

We should bear witness to the Lord's name by confessing the faith without giving way to fear. Preaching and catechizing should be permeated with adoration and respect for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second commandment forbids the abuse of God's name, i.e., **every improper use of the names of God, Jesus Christ, but also of the Virgin Mary and all the saints.**

To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Saviour, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love. **You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve,** says Jesus, recalling Deuteronomy.

To adore God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the *nothingness of the creature* who would not exist but for God. To adore God is to praise and exalt him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in the *Magnificat*, confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is his name. The worship of the one God sets us free from turning in on ourselves, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world.

In many circumstances, the Christian is called to make promises to God. Baptism and Confirmation, Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders always entail promises. Out of personal devotion, the Christian may also promise to God this action, that prayer, this alms-giving, that pilgrimage, and so forth. Fidelity to promises made to God is a sign of the respect owed to the divine majesty and of love for a faithful God.

## **3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that take his name in vain.**

The forbidding of false oaths – i.e. taking an oath or swearing is to take God as witness to what one affirms. It is to invoke the divine truthfulness as a pledge of one's own truthfulness. An oath engages the Lord's name. "You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name."

Rejection of false oaths is a duty toward God. As Creator and Lord, God is the *norm of all truth*. Human speech is either in accord with or in opposition to God who is Truth itself. When it is truthful and legitimate, an oath highlights the relationship of human speech with God's truth. A false oath calls on God to be witness to a lie.

A person commits perjury when making a promise under oath with no intention of keeping it, or when after promising on oath doesn't keep it. Perjury is a grave lack of respect for the Lord of all speech. Pledging oneself by oath to commit an evil deed is contrary to the holiness of the divine name.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained the commandment: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'"

But I say to you, Do not swear at all ... Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Jesus teaches that every oath involves a reference to God and that God's presence and his truth must be honoured in all speech. Discretion in calling upon God is allied with a respectful awareness of his presence, which all our assertions either witness to or mock.

**4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labour, and do all your work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord your God: in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.**

This commandment recalls the holiness of the sabbath: **The seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.**

In speaking of the sabbath Scripture recalls creation : "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it."

Scripture also reveals in the Lord's day a memorial of Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with mighty hand and outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

God entrusted the sabbath to Israel to keep as a sign of the irrevocable covenant . The sabbath is for the Lord, holy and set apart for the praise of God, his work of creation and his saving actions on behalf of Israel.

God's action is the model for human action. If God **rested and was refreshed** on the seventh day, we too ought to rest and should let others, especially the poor, be refreshed. **The sabbath brings everyday work to a halt and provides a respite. Its a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money.**

The Gospel reports many incidents when Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath. But Jesus never fails to respect the holiness of this day. He gives this law its authentic and authoritative interpretation: **The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.** With compassion, Christ declares the sabbath for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing. The sabbath is the day of the Lord of mercies and a day to honour God. The Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath.

**This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

The day of the Resurrection: the new creation

Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Because it is the first day, the day of Christ's Resurrection recalls the first creation. For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord's Day – Sunday: We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day (after the Jewish shabbat, but also the first day) when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead.

**Sunday – is the fulfilment of the Sabbath**

Sunday is expressly distinguished from the sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the sabbath. In Christ's Passover, Sunday fulfils the spiritual truth of the Jewish sabbath and announces our eternal rest in God.

The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public and regular worship as a sign of his universal beneficence to all. Sunday worship fulfils the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of the Creator and Redeemer of his people.

**Sunday Mass**

The Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life.

**Sunday is the day on which the paschal mystery is celebrated in light of the apostolic tradition and is to be observed as the foremost holy day of obligation in the universal Church.**

Also to be observed are the day of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Epiphany, the Ascension of Christ, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christi, the feast of Mary the Mother of God, her Immaculate Conception, her Assumption, the feast of Saint Joseph, the feast of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul, and the feast of All Saints (Holy Days of Obligation).

## 5. Honour your father and your mother: that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you.

This commandment shows us the order of charity. God has willed that, after him, we should honour our parents to whom we owe life and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God. We are obliged to honour and respect all those whom God, for our good, has vested with his authority.

It introduces the subsequent commandments which are concerned with particular respect for life, marriage, earthly goods, and speech. It constitutes one of the foundations of the social doctrine of the Church.

It includes and presupposes the duties of parents, instructors, teachers, leaders, magistrates, those who govern, all who exercise authority over others or over a community of persons.

Observing this commandment brings its reward: "Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Respecting this commandment provides, along with spiritual fruits, temporal fruits of peace and prosperity. Conversely, failure to observe it brings great harm to communities and to individuals.

## 6. You shall not kill.

**Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.**

In the account of Abel's murder by his brother Cain, scripture reveals the presence of anger and envy in man, consequences of original sin, from the beginning of human history. Man has become the enemy of his fellow man. God declares the wickedness of this fratricide: What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

The covenant between God and mankind is interwoven with reminders of God's gift of human life and man's murderous violence:

The Old Testament always considered blood a sacred sign of life.

Scripture specifies the prohibition contained in the commandment: "Do not kill the innocent and the righteous." The deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule and to the holiness of the Creator. The law forbidding it is universally valid: it obliges each and everyone, always and everywhere.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment, You shall not kill, and adds to it the proscription of anger, hatred and vengeance. Going further, Christ asks his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies. He did not defend himself and told Peter to leave his sword in its sheath.

## 7. You shall not commit adultery.

God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image..., God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion."

"God created man in his own image... male and female he created them"; He blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply"; "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created."

Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to bring children into the world, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.

"In creating men 'male and female,' God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity." "Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God."

Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way. The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fruitfulness: **Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.** All human generations proceed from this union.

Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins. In the Sermon on the Mount, he interprets God's plan strictly: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'. But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

## 8. You shall not steal.

This commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbour – wronging them in any way with respect to their goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of our labour.

## 9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

This commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offences against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant.

Truth as uprightness in human action and speech is called truthfulness, sincerity or candour. Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity and hypocrisy.

The disciple of Christ consents to "live in the truth," that is, in the simplicity of a life in conformity with the Lord's example, abiding in his truth. "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth."

## 10. You shall not covet your neighbour's house, you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is your neighbour's.

The heart is the seat of moral personality: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication..." The struggle against carnal covetousness entails purifying the heart and practising temperance: Remain simple and innocent, and you will be like little children who do not know the evil that destroys man's life.

The sixth beatitude says, **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.** "Pure in heart" refers to those who have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God's holiness, chiefly in three areas: charity; chastity or sexual rectitude; love of truth and orthodoxy of faith. There is a connection between purity of heart, of body and of faith:

The faithful must believe the articles of the Creed "so that by believing they may obey God, by obeying may live well, by living well may purify their hearts, and with pure hearts may understand what they believe."

The "pure in heart" are promised that they will see God face to face and be like him. Purity of heart is the precondition of the vision of God. Even now it enables us to see according to God, to accept others as "neighbours"; it lets us perceive the human body – ours and our neighbour's – as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty.

## Something to do at home:

Read Chapter 5 of the gospel of Matthew –  
How does Jesus tell us to respond to the Commandments?