

RCIA CLASS 19 - THE FIRST THREE COMMANDMENTS, DUTIES TO GOD
AND THE VIRTUES OF FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE.

I. The Bible gives the Ten Commandments are listed twice, both in the context of the People of God to be set apart and live out well the new freedom He gives us.

A. Moses gave the Ten Commandments at least twice, first at Mount Sinai right after the Exodus from Egypt and then when the Chosen People were about to enter the Promised Land. See Ex. 20:2-17; Duet. 5:6-21. The content of the commandments is the same in the two occasions, but the numbering is slightly different.

- Emphasizing the need to avoid idolatry, the first version begins with two commandments on that point, the first one prohibiting other gods, and the second one prohibiting the making of graven idols. It has one commandment at the end prohibiting envy, both of goods and of people.

- Emphasizing the willingness to respect others even in thought, the second version has two commandments at the end prohibiting envy; it combines the commandments at the beginning against idols and graven images.

- The Catholic Church has historically used the second version; most Protestants and Orthodox use the first version.

B. The Ten Commandments' focus on justice and a call to the freedom that allows us to be in control of our desires, rather than be controlled by them.

- The Ten Commandments present the most basic principles about a just and reasonable society. The first three Commandments describe justice to God; the Fourth Commandment refers to justice within a family; the next four commandments refer to justice towards others in action; and the final two commandments deal with justice in thought.

- The principles behind all of these commandments are a matter of natural law, discernable by anyone with reason, even had there been no revelation. Here revelation strengthens reason and clarifies what reason can discern naturally, e.g. by letting us know God's name and by revealing what the Sabbath Day should be. See Catechism 2070-71.

- Both versions of the Ten Commandments begin by recounting that God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt. The idea is that God has liberated them to be His People and is now giving instructions about how to remain His free, wise and holy People and never again fall under the domination of foreign powers, whether other nations or sins.

C. The Ten Commandments set forth principles to being of a life of holiness, but God then challenges us further. See Mark 10:17-31. Thus, for example, the Beatitudes and the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit build upon the Commandments and bring them more to the heights of sanctity. See, e.g., Matt. 5:2-12; Luke 3:20-22; Mark 8:34-38; John 15:25-26; Acts 1:8; Gal. 5:22-23; Joel 3:1-2.

II. The First Commandment expresses the controlling principle of a good and true life, i.e. honoring God as God and not having other gods.

A. All people have a natural understanding that they should worship God (or whatever divine that they believe in.) This natural understanding is called the virtue of religion, and is a part of the virtue of justice. See Vatican II Council, Notrae Aetate (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions) (1965) 2; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 81. art. 1-5. The first and highest duty of the human person is to seek the truth about God and adhere to it as he best understands. See Vatican II Council, Dignitatis Humanae (Decree on Religious Liberty) (1965) 3.

B. Now that God has revealed Himself to us, we have a deeper calling to render Him the worship due to Him, and to enter into the friendship He calls us to. Faith, hope and charity are the primary virtues that define this relationship. See Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:3-7; 1 Thess. 1:2-4, 5:8.

- Faith is the personal trust we have in God and, by extension, in all that He reveals by Scriptures and the Church. It uses reason, but is not bound by reason, for it goes to things unseen by physically or by reason alone. See Heb. 11:1. Faith deals more with the intellect, but it must bring about effects in one's heart and will, in one's actions and intentions, in order for it to be effective. "Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead." James 2:17. As Pope Francis wrote in his 2013 encyclical Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith) 21, "We come to see the difference, then, which faith makes for us. Those who believe are transformed by the love to which they have opened their hearts in faith. By their openness to this offer of primordial love, their lives are enlarged and expanded. 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (*Gal 2:20*)."

- Hope is the trust we place in God that He will work with us and all His people for our salvation and will make all things work out for our good, the good of the Church, and the salvation of the human race. See Rom. 8:28. This virtue does not inherently involve a belief that things will get better on earth, but rather gives us a confidence that God guides His Church to proclaim the Gospel through all time and space and will guide each person to salvation if he is willing. See, e.g., Matt. 16:13-23, 28:16-20; John 16:33. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his 2007 encyclical Spes Salvi (Saved in Hope) 31, we have various greater or lesser hopes based upon things that we wish to accomplish and/or enjoy on this earth and "we need these greater or lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the greatest hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves cannot attain . . . what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is truly life."

- Charity is that perfect love God has for us and the love we are meant to show to others for God's sake. See, e.g., John 13:31-35; 1 John 4:7-21. It celebrates the goodness of God and the goodness God has given to each person. This virtue thus

creates in us a longing to help others realize the goodness and glory that God has prepared for them. It generally involves the emotions, but runs much deeper than them. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his 2005 encyclical Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) 18, “In the gradual unfolding of this encounter [with God], it is revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love. . . . Contact with the visible manifestations of God’s love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect. Acknowledgement of the living God is one path toward love, and the ‘yes’ of our will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love.”

C. Sins against the First Commandment involve either a refusal to worship anything or the worship of false gods.

1. Such things as voluntary doubt, irreverence, indifference to the spiritual realm, and the like are sins that involve the refusal to commit to anything.

- A person may think that refusing to recognize or care about anything above himself leads to greater freedom. But this view is self-delusion, for none of us can be his own master in control of all things. As C.S. Lewis explains in The Abolition of Man, when a person or a society tries to be “free” of all transcendental values, what is left is mere desire, which ends up controlling one’s life, individually or as a society. See The Abolition of Man (1947) ch. 3. When one thinks he is acting entirely without constraint of values, he is governed by his own desires, and is thus a slave of them. See, e.g., John 8:31-38. And the end of all earthly desire is death, which without Christ puts an end to all things. See Rom. 6.

- Honest doubts in themselves are not sinful, but rather a call one to search for the truth all the more. Biblical examples of this search include such people as Nathaniel and, it appears, Nicodemus. See John 2:43-51, 3:1-21. Likewise, the emotion of doubt and difficulties in understanding are not themselves sinful unless invited, but rather are often challenges to engage the heart and mind more into our relationship with God.

- There can certainly be struggles to arrive at the truth. And God is at work in the midst of those struggles, even when a person is far from the truth. What is an offense against God is the flight from truth, the refusal to engage even in the quest for truth. Cf. Catechism 2128. For, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his 2009 encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth) 3, “Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions, the word ‘love’ is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite.”

2. Another type of sins against the first commandment is the worship of false

gods. In an older era (and in some New Age religions) this worship was of a named god, e.g., Baal, Zeus, Apollo, Gaia the earth goddess, etc. More often now it is the worship of things, e.g., money, physical desires, popular opinion, the state, celebrities, etc. See Col. 3:5; Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium (2013) 55 (condemning the “idolatry of money.”) If someone cares more about any such things that God (e.g., forming one’s values by popular culture or entertainment rather than the Bible), such things have become a god.

- People may also have a false notion of the true God, thinking for example, that He is bound by superstitious practices (e.g., must grant a request if one prays a certain prayer) or that He does not care about minor human affairs. Once again, sometimes error is without blame, but even then, one should strive to overcome it.

D. Freedom of religion is important precisely because we have an obligation to search out for God and, having found Him, freely to choose to worship Him. The right and the responsibility are bound together. See Catechism 2108; Vatican II Council, Dignitatis Humanae (1965) 2. Freedom of religion does not mean that we have no moral obligation to seek the truth and adhere to it once found.

E. Art and other forms of culture, both sacred and secular, are meant to show invisible truths in visible form, often in a manner that cannot be expressed verbally. True beauty points to a reality beyond itself. See St. John Paul II, Letter to Artists (1999.)

III. The Second Commandment reflects the glory and power of God’s name.

A. We cannot have a personal friendship with anyone without knowing his name. And so God has revealed His names to us. In the Old Covenant, God revealed His name in part (e.g., “I am who am,” “Adonai” or “a personal Lord,” “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” “El Shaddai”, which means “God Almighty.”) See, e.g., Gen. 17:1; Ex. 3:6, 13. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, came and revealed God even more personally, through Himself. He also gave us the name of God “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” that we may be united with Him. See, e.g., Matt. 28:28; Phil 2:9-10; Rev. 19:13.

- The ancient Jews recognized the power of God’s name, for it was at the core of their relationship with Him. See, e.g., Ps. 72:19, 124:8; 135:1; Joel 3:5.

- The name of Jesus then conferred great power upon the early Christians, for it expressed their friendship with Jesus. Thus, for example, the disciples of Jesus were able to work great wonders through the name of Jesus. See, e.g., Luke 10:72; Acts 3:6. The name of Jesus is so powerful that the opponents of the Christians wanted to forbid even pronouncing it. See Acts 5:40-42.

- Jesus promised that prayers offered in His name, i.e. in the midst of our relationship with Him, would be very powerful. See, e.g., Matt. 18:20; John 15:26, 16:24.

B. Thus, the name of God is to be treated with great reverence and respect as His great and powerful gift to us, as expressing in verbal form His inexpressible love for us.

1. We rightfully invoke God's name in prayer and in witnessing to the truth. His name is most powerful in the sacraments, which begin and end by an invocation of the Trinity. And in fact, Catholic prayers generally begin and end with the sign of the Cross, invoking both the Trinity and the Cross through which we have access to full love of God.

2. Invoking the name of God is meant to give us a sense of the sacred, or wonder, thanksgiving and reverence for God's work. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, we praise God "not indeed for His sake, but for our sake; since by praising Him our devotion is aroused toward Him. . . And as man, by praising God ascends in his affections toward God, so much is he withdrawn from things opposed to God. . . The praise of the lips is also profitable to others by inciting their affection for God." Summa Theologica II-II q. 91 art. 1.

3. Oaths (e.g., in trials and in taking a high office) using God's name can be taken if the matter is grave enough to warrant calling upon Him for assurance of the truth of a statement of the performance of an action. Trivial using of oaths is very wrong, both because it diminishes the power of oaths and is a temptation to perjury. Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions against using oaths. See Matt. 4:33-37; see also James 5:12. However, this caution has historically been understood as an important consideration limiting the use of oaths, not forbidding them altogether. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 89 art. 2. Thus, for example, St. Paul at times took oaths for the performance of an action or to attest to the truth. Acts 18:18, 21:23; 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal 1:20.

4. Sins against the name of Jesus also include blasphemy (disparaging the name of God or the name of a saint or angel), false oaths, and the breaking of solemn promises. It is also wrong to use the name of God or even the name of a saint or someone holy for a negative or unfitting reason. For, even when people use God's name in vain without meaning anything by it, that fact shows a disrespect for the precious gift God has given us and diminishes our ability to witness to the faith and to invoke His name in prayer. As George Washington wrote to a friend during the Revolutionary War, "The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish, and wicked practice, or profane cursing and swearing (a vice heretofore little known in an American Army) is growing into fashion. . . . We can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety, and folly; added to this it is a vice so mean and low, without any temptation, that every man of sense, and character, detests and despises it." General Orders, August 3, 1776.

IV. The Third Commandment is meant to protect one day a week at least for God and for all of the higher things in life.

A. Moses gave two explanations for the Third Commandment, and those explanations help us to understand the wisdom behind it.

- In the first version, Moses explained that the Sabbath is important because it recalls the primordial order of creation. The idea is that we need at least one day a

week that we set aside to recall the origin and goal of all things, the glory of God. See Ex. 20:8-10.

- In the second version, Moses reminded the people that they were slaves in Egypt. The idea is that they should never again be slaves to commerce, business, politics, etc., that they cannot even take one day a week off. See Duet. 5:12-15.

B. The fact that some day during the week should be a time of rest and renewal is a matter of natural law, which almost all societies have understood throughout time and space. We know that this Sabbath Day is Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians through the revelation of Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

- The Jews have Saturday as their Sabbath, reflecting the order of creation. For Genesis uses a seven day structure to describe creation, with the seventh day symbolizing the fulfillment of creation as resting with God. See St. John Paul II Apostolic Letter Dies Domini (1998) 8-10. In fact the word Sabbath comes from the Jewish term sabbat, meaning rest. The prophets warned that, if the Israelites fail to observe the Sabbath, their nation would come to an end. But if it is kept, God would make them prosper. See, e.g., Is. 56:1-8; Jer. 17:24-27;

- From her earliest days, the Church has celebrated the Sabbath on Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection. See, e.g., St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians 9; St. Justin the Martyr, First Apologia 67; see also Dies Domini 19-22. The fact that the Sabbath is both the eighth day of the previous week and the first day of the new week reflects that that the that the Resurrection is both the completion of the old order and beginning of the new creation that will lead to the eternal Sabbath in heaven. See Dies Domini 18.

C. Positively, the Third Commandment calls for attendance of Mass on Sunday (or Saturday evening), prayerfulness and charity on Sunday, and use of the day for the building up of the Church, society and human nature.

- Rest is a part of the Sabbath, for it helps us to take a break from the ordinary aspects of life and focus on the lasting goal of renewal. And this calling should be seen not as a burden, but rather as a part of a renewal and restoration of human affairs. Thus, far from contradicting the Sabbath, works of charity add to it. See, e.g., Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6. Likewise, the Sabbath Day should be considered a time of strengthening and renewing the most important human relationships, of family and of friends, of church and of culture.

- Deliberately missing Mass on Sunday without a reason or for a trivial reason is a grave sin because it expresses a lack of concern about our relationship with Jesus and His Church. See Catechism 2181; Dies Domini 47.

- All pastors, and all priests of this and most American dioceses, have the authority to replace the Sunday obligation with another pious devotion if necessary on a case by case basis. A more regular dispensation requires the bishop's approval.

- When there is a good reason to miss Mass on Sunday (e.g., illness, difficult driving conditions, being in an area where no Mass is available), it is highly advisable to set aside an hour in prayer to replace the Mass. It is not the same as being at Mass, but it is sometimes the best that one can do.

D. People should avoid unnecessary business and ordinary labor and commercial transactions on the Sabbath so that the day can be dedicated more to the Lord. Obviously, there are some exceptions to this rule for things that are needed. See, e.g., Mark 2:23-28. But the fact that there are exceptions does not eliminate the overall idea of the Sabbath being a time of renewing creation in ourselves and the world around us. Taking a day off from regular labor and activities in order to focus on better things even naturally makes us happier and supernaturally gives us greater access to the glory of heaven. See Is. 58:13-14.