

RCIA CLASS 24 - THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT  
AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH AND HONESTY

I. The ability to seek the truth and find it is crucial to the human person. As St. Pope John Paul II wrote, "One may define a human being . . . as one who seeks the truth." Fides et Ratio (1998) 28.

A. Without the ability to know truth in itself, we cannot really know about another person or any other thing; we can only know our feelings or opinions about them. Thus, without truth, there is a fundamental selfishness and limitation to the self.

B. Without the ability to know truth, reason loses all meaning. As St. Thomas Aquinas argued, reason cannot function without truth because: (1) reasoning means building upon some truths to arrive at other truths; and (2) without the ability to arrive at truth, reason has no purpose. See Summa Theologica, Part I, question 79, article 8. As the Vatican II Council pointed out, freedom of religion, speech, and reason are important precisely because we have an obligation to seek the truth and adhere to it once found. See Dignitatis Humanae (On the Dignity of the Human Person) 2.

C. Without an ability to know truth, there can be no ability to progress, or any real sense of progress. For, as C.S. Lewis argued in chapter 2 of Mere Christianity, without a definite sense of truth, and in particular truth of right and wrong, it would be meaningless to say that we are progressing, for progress implies some definite goal that one is progressing to.

D. And, without a sense of truth, there can be no real freedom. Freedom implies the ability to control one's desires for the sake of something else. But if the only thing one can know is one's own desires, thoughts, opinions, etc, then the most powerful one will always prevail. See St. Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus (1991) 41. As C.S. Lewis again argued in The Abolition of Man, it is only by seeking the objective truth and living by it that we rise above passions. Without a desire for the true, the good, the beautiful, the holy (which in the end come together as one in the eternal law of God) the only thing left as a motive is earthly desires, which will if unchecked control us. Real freedom involves the ability to go outside of the self to seek something beyond, and that implies one must know truth beyond oneself. As Jesus says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32.

E. Thus, the popular goal of being free from truth, so that one may define one's own truth, is a departure from the ability to love, to reason, to progress, or to be free. As Pope Benedict recently said, "Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present." Caritas in Veritate (2009) 5.

F. Thus, Jesus describes His goal as giving us the truth that sets us free. See John 8:31-32. And he said that those who desire the truth come to Him. See John 3:21, 18:37.

II. In order to be able to arrive at truth, we must be able to trust others.

A. We can only ascertain so many truths of our own sense experience. We must trust others regarding almost everything, from historical events, to current events we do not see, to laws

of any sort, to people's intentions and feelings. We must live by trust in order to know things. As St. Pope John Paul II wrote in section 31 of Fides et Ratio, "Human beings are not made to live alone. . . . There are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of personal verification. Who, for instance, could assess critically the countless scientific findings upon which modern life is based? . . . This means that the human being – the one who seeks the truth – is also the one who lives by belief."

B. Furthermore, any relationship or any community must be based upon peoples' mutual trust. Such is the case between children and parents, husband and wife, friends, teachers and students, business arrangement, etc. Without this trust, mutual activity and in fact any sort of bond must be very weak. Thus, in order to fulfill our vocations of knowing other people, through words and actions, we must be able to trust others. See Catechism 2468.

C. The desert fathers of the ancient Church, and especially Evagrius Ponticus, a monk of the fourth century, developed the idea of what is now called the capital vices by describing ways in which we tend to live in a false world. In particular the capital vices were described as logismoi, or false thoughts. There are thoughts of: (1) gluttony in believing one needs more of food, drink, possessions, knowledge etc., than one does; (2) lust in reducing another to an object and believing that pleasure will be the key to happiness; (3) avarice in relying upon wealth and power as the source of one's final security and sense of self-worth; (4) sadness in clinging onto an unreal happiness, based upon the past, the future or an unattained good; (5) anger in focusing on a real or imagined injury that blinds one to charity; (6) acedia in refusing the joy of the spirit in favor of some more visible, but less real joy; (7) vainglory so much relying upon doing great things and being applauded that one does not engage in humble labor or appreciate the accomplishments of others; and (8) pride in ignoring the need for grace and the help of others.

III. The eighth commandment and the call to truthfulness uphold this ability to trust.

A. The eighth commandment should be read on two levels: (1) prohibiting any bearing of false witness against a neighbor in the sense of any lies that deceive the neighbor; or (2) specifically prohibiting even more lies, or even partial truths, that damage a neighbor's reputation. It means both, with the latter sort of lying being particularly evil.

B. The prohibition on lying is based above all else upon the fact that lying draws us away from God, the source of all truth, and from each other by breaking down a community of trust.

1. Lies are assertions that something is true when it is not (or vice versa) and that are intended to deceive. Of their nature, they are falsehoods about God, whether the speaker intends it or not. For all things that exist either because God directly intended them or (as with sins) God willed to permit them. Thus, all lies are a claim that God intended or allowed something when He did not.

2. Lies also break down the ability to trust one another and thus damage all communications. See Catechism 2483, 2486. For St. Paul, the willingness to be truthful was a crucial way of building up the new church and showing conversion.

See, e.g., Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9; see also 1 Pet. 2:1; Rev. 21:8, 26, 22:15. Thus, Jesus described the devil as “a liar and the father of lies.” John 8:44.

3. Lies are more serious if: (1) they damage someone’s reputation; (2) they allow one to gain something of great value (e.g., lying on a resume); (3) they violate an oath or involve a particularly important occasion, as in a civil or ecclesial court; or (4) otherwise lead another person into grave harm. See Catechism 2476, 2484-2485.

4. One should also be careful about the sin of rash judgment, i.e. believing a negative statement about another person without just cause. See Catechism 2477. Exaggerating one’s own talents or accomplishments and caricaturing another person’s views or behaviors are also offenses against truth, with the former being vain and the latter contradicting charity. See Catechism 2481. Boasting is different from making the case for oneself or another when it is fitting to do so, such as a job interview or an application to a school. In such cases, it is reasonable to present the truth in a light favorable to one’s application.

5. Some statements, while not literally true, are not lies. Such things include: (1) fiction literature or entertainment; (2) social conventions, such as responses to questions such as “How are you?” or “Was the meal good?”; or (3) ambiguous statements that are not meant to deceive, but rather to avoid revealing harmful truths. In such cases, there is not the intent to deceive. Thus, they are acceptable as long as they do not cause damage in other ways.

C. Violating the obligation of secrets is also against the goals of the eighth commandment because it breaks down trust as well. See Catechism 2489-91.

1. Secrets can be natural or legal.

- A natural secret is information that should be kept secret because of the situation one is in; there need be no overt promise or request to keep it a secret. Thus, most people understand that personal requests for advice or comfort, internal business or security matters, things said during counseling meetings, and the like should be kept secret.

- Legal secrets are matters that should be kept secret because one has made an overt or implicit promise to keep it secret, or a law has required secrecy. Thus, if a person directly tells one that he wants one to keep a matter secret and one lets him continue, it is implied that one has agreed.

2. Except for the seal of confessional (a priest’s obligation never to reveal the sins a person has told him in the confessional), there can be some extraordinary situations that justify revealing a secret. But the situation must be truly grave enough to break the trust.

- The conferral of God’s mercy is so important that any violation of the seal of confession is not only unjustified but grounds for excommunication and expulsion from ministry.

D. Detraction, i.e. revealing even true faults about another person without sufficient cause, is also detrimental to the truth. See Catechism 2477.

1. Usually, even when there is real fault, the person usually has some excuse or mitigating circumstances, which a person usually has no opportunity to present in the face of detraction.
2. Even if a negative statement is totally true, it limits the person to some flaw or fault. The final truth about any person is the saint God calls that person to become. Thus, to focus attention away from God's will to a particular failing of the person to achieve that goal at the present is still usually on the whole deceptive even if the specific negative statement is itself true..
3. There can be times when negative statements are necessary to correct a fault or prevent a harm, but one must always ask whether in fact such is the case, and whether such correction or prevention can be done privately. See, e.g., Matt. 18:15-20.
4. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, detraction is a mortal sin if is motivated by a malicious intention (i.e. to harm the other person) or it recklessly causes grave dishonor. He says the injury done by detraction is no less, and may be more, than that done by physical assaults or robbery. See Summa Theologica II-II question 72 article 2.

E. Even arts, literature, and culture are meant to be at the service of truth, and can be judged as true or false.

1. For example, even fiction literature can be considered true if it presents goodness as good and attractive and evil as evil and ugly, and can be false if it presents good as unattractive and evil as attractive.
2. Art and music likewise can appeal to better or worse aspects of human nature. See Catechism 1156-1158, 2500-03.
3. In his famous 1999 Letter to Artists, Pope John Paul II described the role of artists, and by extension musicians, writers and others involved in culture, as expressing the creative goodness of God in "the beauty [that] is a key to the mystery and the call to transcendence." He concluded, "Artists of the world, may your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy. . . . May your art help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal."