



THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not kill”

1. Respect for Human Life

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Human life is sacred

“You shall not kill.” (Ex 20:13; cf. Dt 5:17.)

“You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill: and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement’. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement.” (Mt 5:21-22.)

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. (2258)

The witness of sacred history

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.” (Gen 4:10-11) (2259)

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

“For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.” (Gen 9:5-6.)

The Old Testament always considered blood a sacred sign of life. This teaching remains necessary for all time. (2260)

Scripture specifies the prohibition contained in the fifth commandment: “Do not slay the innocent and the righteous” (Ex 23:7). 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. (2261)

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment, “You shall not kill” (Mt 5:21), 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. (2262)

Legitimate defence

The legitimate defence of persons and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing. “The act of self-defence can have a double effect: the preservation of one's own life; and the killing of the aggressor... The one is intended, the other is not.” (St. Thomas Aquinas) (2263)

Love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality. Therefore it is legitimate to insist on respect for one's own right to life. Someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow:

“If a man in self-defence uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repel force with moderation, his defence will be lawful... Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defence to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one's own life than of another's.” (St. Thomas Aquinas) (2264)

Legitimate defence can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. The defence of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility. (2265)

The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behaviour harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offence. *Punishment* has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offence. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people's safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party. (2266)

Assuming the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to *the death penalty*, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor. If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offence incapable of doing harm – without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself – the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent. (2267)

Intentional homicide

The fifth commandment forbids *direct and intentional killing* as gravely sinful. The murderer and those who cooperate voluntarily in murder commit a sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance.

Infanticide, fratricide, parricide and the murder of a spouse are especially grave crimes by reason of the natural bonds which they break. Concern for eugenics or public health cannot justify any murder, even if commanded by public authority. (2268)

The fifth commandment forbids doing anything with the intention of *indirectly* bringing about a person's death. The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger. *Unintentional killing* is not morally imputable. But one is not exonerated from grave offence if, without proportionate reasons, he has acted in a way that brings about someone's death, even without the intention to do so. (2269)

Abortion

Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” (Jer 1:5) (2270)

Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law:

“You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish.” (The Didache)

“God, the Lord of life, has entrusted to men the noble mission of safeguarding life, and men must carry it out in a manner worthy of themselves. Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes.” (Vatican II) (2271)

Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offence. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life. A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication *latae sententiae*, by the very commission of the offence, and subject to the conditions provided by Canon Law. The Church does not thereby intend to restrict the scope of mercy. Rather, she makes clear the gravity of the crime committed, the irreparable harm done to the innocent who is put to death, as well as to the parents and the whole of society. (2272)

The right to life of the human embryo

The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is *a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation*.

The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death. (2273)

Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.

Prenatal diagnosis is morally licit, if it respects the life and integrity of the embryo and the human foetus and is directed toward its safeguarding or healing as an individual... It is gravely opposed to the moral law when this is done with the thought of possibly inducing an abortion, depending upon the results: a diagnosis must not be the equivalent of a death sentence.

It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material. Certain attempts to *influence chromosomal or genetic inheritance* are not therapeutic but are aimed at producing human beings selected according to sex or other predetermined qualities. Such manipulations are contrary to the personal dignity of the human being and his integrity and identity which are unique and unrepeatable. (2274)

Euthanasia

Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible. (2276)

Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. (2277)

Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. The error of judgement into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded.

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of ‘over-zealous’ treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected. (2278)

Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such it should be encouraged. (2279)

Suicide

Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honour and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of. (2280)

Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God. (2281)

If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal. Voluntary co-operation in suicide is contrary to the moral law. Grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. (2282)

We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives. (2283)

IN BRIEF

- **“In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10). (2318)**
- **Every human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred because the human person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of the living and holy God. (2319)**
- **The murder of a human being is gravely contrary to the dignity of the person and the holiness of the Creator. (2320)**
- **The prohibition of murder does not abrogate the right to render an unjust aggressor unable to inflict harm. Legitimate defence is a grave duty for whoever is responsible for the lives of others or the common good. (2321)**
- **From its conception, the child has the right to life. Direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, is a “criminal” practice, gravely contrary to the moral law. The Church imposes the canonical penalty of excommunication for this crime against human life. (2322)**
- **Because it should be treated as a person from conception, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for and healed like every other human being. (2323)**
- **Intentional euthanasia, whatever its forms or motives, is murder. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. (2324)**
- **Suicide is seriously contrary to justice, hope and charity. It is forbidden by the fifth commandment. (2325)**