



## **THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT**

*“You shall not steal”*

### **1. Respect for Persons and their Goods**

#### **Texts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church**

*“You shall not steal.” (Ex 20:15; Dt 5:19; Mt 19:18)*

The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbour and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of men's labour. For the sake of the common good, it requires respect for the universal destination of goods and respect for the right to private property. Christian life strives to order this world's goods to God and to fraternal charity. (2401)

#### **THE UNIVERSAL DESTINATION AND THE PRIVATE OWNERSHIP OF GOODS**

##### ***The common stewardship of mankind***

In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labour and enjoy their fruits. (Cf. Gen 1:26-29) The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. The appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons, and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge. It should allow for a natural solidarity to develop between men. (2402)

##### ***Private property***

The *right to private property*, acquired or received in a just way, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind. The universal destination of goods remains primordial, even if the promotion of the common good requires respect for the right to private property and its exercise. (2403)

In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all his family. (2404)

*Political authority* has the right and duty to regulate the legitimate exercise of the right to ownership for the sake of the common good. (2406)

#### **RESPECT FOR PERSONS AND THEIR GOODS**

##### ***Temperance, justice and solidarity***

In economic matters, respect for human dignity requires the practice of the virtue of *temperance*, so as to moderate attachment to this world's goods; the practice of the virtue of *justice*, to preserve our neighbour's rights and render him what is his due; and the practice of *solidarity*, in accordance with the golden rule and in keeping with the generosity of the Lord, who “though he was rich, yet for your sake... became poor so that by his poverty, you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). (2407)

##### ***Sins against the respect for the goods of others – theft, fraud, unjust wages***

The seventh commandment forbids *theft*, that is, usurping another's property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing...) is to put at one's disposal and use the property of others. (2408)

Even if it does not contradict the provisions of civil law, any form of unjustly taking and keeping the property of others is against the seventh commandment: thus, deliberate retention of goods lent or of objects lost; business fraud; paying unjust wages; forcing up prices by taking advantage of the ignorance or hardship of another.

##### ***Other sins against the seventh commandment***

The following are also morally illicit:

- \* speculation in which one contrives to manipulate the price of goods artificially, in order to gain an advantage to the detriment of others;
- \* corruption in which one influences the judgement of those who must make decisions according to law;
- \* appropriation and use for private purposes of the common goods of an enterprise; work poorly done;
- \* tax evasion;
- \* forgery of checks and invoices;
- \* excessive expenses and waste.

Wilfully damaging private or public property is contrary to the moral law and requires *reparation*. (2409)

##### ***Promises, contracts, commutative justice, reparation***

*Promises* must be kept and *contracts* strictly observed to the extent that the commitments made in them are morally just. A significant part of economic and social life depends on the honouring of contracts between physical or moral persons - commercial contracts of purchase or sale, rental or labour contracts. All contracts must be agreed to and executed in good faith. (2410)

Contracts are subject to *commutative justice* which regulates exchanges between persons and between institutions in accordance with a strict respect for their rights. Commutative justice obliges strictly; it requires safeguarding property rights, paying debts and fulfilling obligations freely contracted. Without commutative justice, no other form of justice is possible. (2411)

In virtue of commutative justice, *reparation for injustice* committed requires the restitution of stolen goods to their owner.

Jesus blesses Zacchaeus for his pledge: "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk 19:8). Those who, directly or indirectly, have taken possession of the goods of another, are obliged to make restitution of them, or to return the equivalent in kind or in money, if the goods have disappeared, as well as the profit or advantages their owner would have legitimately obtained from them. Likewise, all who in some manner have taken part in a theft or who have knowingly benefited from it - for example, those who ordered it, assisted in it or received the stolen goods - are obliged to make restitution in proportion to their responsibility and to their share of what was stolen. (2412)

### ***Gambling, enslavement***

*Games of chance* (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement. Unfair wagers and cheating at games constitute grave matter, unless the damage inflicted is so slight that the one who suffers it cannot reasonably consider it significant. (2413)

The seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason - selfish or ideological, commercial or totalitarian - lead to the *enslavement of human beings*, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit. St. Paul directed a Christian master to treat his Christian slave "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother,... both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philem 16) (2414)

### ***Respect for the integrity of creation***

The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present and future humanity. (Cf. Gen 1:28-31) Use of the mineral, vegetable and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. (2415)

### ***The stewardship of animals***

*Animals* are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. (Cf. Mt 6:26; Dan 3:79-81) Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals. (2416)

God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. (Cf. Gen 2:19-20; 9:1-4) Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is a morally acceptable practice if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives. (2417)

It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons. (2418)

### **IN BRIEF**

- **"You shall not steal" (Ex 20:15; Dt 5:19). "Neither thieves, nor the greedy..., nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:10). (2450)**
- **The seventh commandment enjoins the practice of justice and charity in the administration of earthly goods and the fruits of men's labour. (2451)**
- **The goods of creation are destined for the entire human race. The right to private property does not abolish the universal destination of goods. (2452)**
- **The seventh commandment forbids theft. Theft is the usurpation of another's goods against the reasonable will of the owner. (2453)**
- **Every manner of taking and using another's property unjustly is contrary to the seventh commandment. The injustice committed requires reparation. Commutative justice requires the restitution of stolen goods. (2454)**

