



## **THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT**

***“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour”***

### ***1. Offences against the Truth***

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

*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” (Ex 20:16; cf. Dt. 5:20.)*

*“It was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn’.” (Mt 5:33.)*

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription 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. (2464)

#### **LIVING IN THE TRUTH**

##### ***God is the source of all truth – Jesus is the Truth***

The Old Testament attests that *God is the source of all truth*. His Word is truth. His Law is truth. His “faithfulness endures to all generations” (Ps 119:90) Since God is “true”, the members of his people are called to live in the truth. (Rom 3:4) (2465)

In Jesus Christ, the whole of God's truth has been made manifest. “Full of grace and truth”, he came as the “light of the world”, *he is the Truth*. (Jn 1:14; 8:12) “Whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (Jn 12:46). The disciple of Jesus continues in his word so as to know “the truth [that] will make you free” and that sanctifies. (Jn 8:32) To follow Jesus is to live in “the Spirit of truth”, whom the Father sends in his name and who leads “into all the truth”. (Jn 16:13). (2466)

##### ***The need for truthfulness***

Man tends by nature toward the truth. He is obliged to honour and bear witness to it. It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth. (2467)

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, dissimulation and hypocrisy. (2468)

“Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another” (St. Thomas Aquinas). The virtue of truth gives another his just due. Truthfulness keeps to the just mean between what ought to be expressed and what ought to be kept secret: it entails honesty and discretion. (2469)

The disciple of Christ consents to “live in the truth”: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth” (1 Jn 1:6). (2470)

#### **TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE TRUTH**

##### ***Witnesses of the Gospel***

Before Pilate, Christ proclaims that he “has come into the world, to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18:37). The Christian is not to “be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8). In situations that require witness to the faith, the Christian must profess it without equivocation, after the example of St. Paul before his judges. We must keep “a clear conscience toward God and toward men” (Acts 24:16). (2471)

The duty of Christians to take part in the life of the Church impels them to act as *witnesses of the Gospel* and of the obligations that flow from it. This witness is a transmission of the faith in words and deeds. All Christians by the example of their lives and the witness of their word, wherever they live, have an obligation to manifest the new man which they have put on in Baptism, and to reveal the power of the Holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at Confirmation. (2472)

##### ***The supreme witness to the truth - martyrdom***

*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude. “Let me become the food of the beasts, through whom it will be given me to reach God” (St. Ignatius of Antioch). (2473)

The Church has painstakingly collected the records of those who persevered to the end in witnessing to their faith. These are the acts of the Martyrs. They form the archives of truth written in letters of blood:

“I bless you for having judged me worthy from this day and this hour to be counted among your martyrs... You have kept your promise, God of faithfulness and truth. For this reason and for everything, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him, who is with you and the Holy Spirit, may glory be given to you, now and in the ages to come. Amen.” (The Martyrdom of St Polycarp) (2474)

## OFFENCES AGAINST TRUTH

### ***False witness and perjury***

Christ's disciples have "put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24). By "putting away falsehood", they are to "put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander" (1 Pt 2:1). (2475)

*False witness and perjury.* When it is made publicly, a statement contrary to the truth takes on a particular gravity. In court it becomes false witness. When it is under oath, it is perjury. Acts such as these contribute to condemnation of the innocent, exoneration of the guilty or the increased punishment of the accused. They gravely compromise the exercise of justice and the fairness of judicial decisions. (2476)

### ***Rash judgement, detraction, calumny, boasting and flattery***

*Respect for the reputation* of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury. He becomes guilty:

- \* of *rash judgement* who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbour;
- \* of *detraction* who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;
- \* of *calumny* who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgements concerning them. (2477)

To avoid rash judgement, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbour's thoughts, words and deeds in a favourable way. (2478)

Detraction and calumny destroy the *reputation and honour of one's neighbour*. Honour is the social witness given to human dignity, and everyone enjoys a natural right to the honour of his name and reputation and to respect. Thus, detraction and calumny offend against the virtues of justice and charity. (2479)

Every word or attitude is forbidden which by *flattery, adulation or complaisance* encourages and confirms another in malicious acts and perverse conduct. Adulation is a grave fault if it makes one an accomplice in another's vices or grave sins. Neither the desire to be of service nor friendship justifies duplicitous speech. Adulation is a venial sin when it only seeks to be agreeable, to avoid evil, to meet a need or to obtain legitimate advantages. (2480)

*Boasting* or bragging is an offence against truth. So is *irony* aimed at disparaging someone by maliciously caricaturing some aspect of his behaviour. (2481)

### ***Lying***

"A *lie* consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving" (St. Augustine). The Lord denounces lying as the work of the devil: "You are of your father the devil,...there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44). (2482)

Lying is the most direct offence against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error. By injuring man's relation to truth and to his neighbour, a lie offends against the fundamental relation of man and of his word to the Lord. (2483)

*The gravity of a lie* is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims. If a lie in itself only constitutes a venial sin, it becomes mortal when it does grave injury to the virtues of justice and charity. (2484)

By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbour into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity. The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray. (2485)

### ***The effects of lying and the duty of reparation***

Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgement and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships. (2486)

Every offence committed against justice and truth entails the *duty of reparation*, even if its author has been forgiven. When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly. If someone who has suffered harm cannot be directly compensated, he must be given moral satisfaction in the name of charity. This duty of reparation also concerns offences against another's reputation. This reparation, moral and sometimes material, must be evaluated in terms of the extent of the damage inflicted. It obliges in conscience. (2487)

### IN BRIEF

- "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" (Ex 20:16). Christ's disciples have "put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24). (2504)
- Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and guarding against duplicity, dissimulation and hypocrisy. (2505)
- The Christian is not to "be ashamed of testifying to our Lord" (2 Tim 1:8) in deed and word. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith. (2506)
- Respect for the reputation and honour of persons forbids all detraction and calumny in word or attitude. (2507)
- Lying consists in saying what is false with the intention of deceiving one's neighbour. (2508)
- An offence committed against the truth requires reparation. (2509)