



THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not covet your neighbour’s goods”

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

“You shall not covet... anything that is your neighbour's You shall not desire your neighbour's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.” (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21.)
“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Mt 6:21.)

I. THE DISORDER OF COVETOUS DESIRES

The intentions of the heart

The tenth commandment unfolds and completes the ninth, which is concerned with concupiscence of the flesh. It forbids coveting the goods of another, as the root of theft, robbery and fraud, which the seventh commandment forbids. “Lust of the eye” leads to the violence and injustice forbidden by the fifth commandment. Avarice, like fornication, originates in the idolatry prohibited by the first three prescriptions of the Law. (Wis 14:12) The tenth commandment concerns the intentions of the heart; with the ninth, it summarizes all the precepts of the Law. (2534)

The sensitive appetite leads us to desire pleasant things we do not have, e.g., the desire to eat when we are hungry, or to warm ourselves when we are cold. These desires are good in themselves; but often they exceed the limits of reason and drive us to covet unjustly what is not ours and belongs to another or is owed to him. (2535)

Greed and avarice

The tenth commandment forbids *greed* and the desire to amass earthly goods without limit. It forbids *avarice* arising from a passion for riches and their attendant power. It also forbids the desire to commit injustice by harming our neighbour in his temporal goods:

“When the Law says, ‘You shall not covet’, these words mean that we should banish our desires for whatever does not belong to us. Our thirst for another’s goods is immense, infinite, never quenched. Thus it is written: ‘He who loves money never has money enough’ (Sir 5:8)” (Roman Catechism) (2536)

It is not a violation of this commandment to desire to obtain things that belong to one’s neighbour, provided this is done by just means. Traditional catechesis realistically mentions “those who have a harder struggle against their criminal desires” and so who “must be urged the more to keep this commandment”:

“... merchants who desire scarcity and rising prices, who cannot bear not to be the only ones buying and selling so that they themselves can sell more dearly and buy more cheaply; those who hope that their peers will be impoverished, in order to realize a profit either by selling to them or buying from them... physicians who wish disease to spread; lawyers who are eager for many important cases and trials.” (Roman Catechism) (2537)

Envy

The tenth commandment requires that *envy* be banished from the human heart. When the prophet Nathan wanted to spur King David to repentance, he told him the story about the poor man who had only one ewe lamb that he treated like his own daughter and the rich man who, despite the great number of his flocks, envied the poor man and ended by stealing his lamb. (2 Sam 12:1-4) Envy can lead to the worst crimes. (Cf. Gen 4:3-7; 1 Kings 21:1-29): “Through the devil’s envy death entered the world” (Wis 2:24):

“We fight one another, and envy arms us against one another... If everyone strives to unsettle the Body of Christ, where shall we end up? We are engaged in making Christ’s Body a corpse... We declare ourselves members of one and the same organism, yet we devour one another like beasts.” (St. John Chrysostom) (2538)

Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another’s goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbour it is a mortal sin:

St. Augustine saw envy as “the diabolical sin”. “From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbour, and displeasure caused by his prosperity.” (St. Gregory the Great) (2539)

Envy represents a form of sadness and therefore a refusal of charity; the baptized person should struggle against it by exercising good will. Envy often comes from pride; the baptized person should train himself to live in humility:

“Would you like to see God glorified by you? Then rejoice in your brother’s progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because his servant could conquer envy by rejoicing in the merits of others, God will be praised.” (St. John Chrysostom) (2540)

II. THE DESIRES OF THE SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit who satisfies our hearts

The economy of law and grace turns men’s hearts away from avarice and envy. It initiates them into desire for the Sovereign Good; it instructs them in the desires of the Holy Spirit who satisfies man’s heart.

The God of the promises always warned man against seduction by what from the beginning has seemed “good for food... a delight to the eyes... to be desired to make one wise.” (Gen 3:6) (2541)

The Law entrusted to Israel never sufficed to justify those subject to it; it even became the instrument of “lust”. The gap between wanting and doing points to the conflict between God’s Law which is the “law of my mind”, and another law “making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members”. (Rom 7:23; cf. 7:10) (2542)

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Rom 3:21-22) Henceforth, Christ's faithful “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” they are led by the Spirit, and follow the desires of the Spirit. (Gal 5:24) (2543)

III. POVERTY OF HEART

Renouncing all for the sake of the Gospel

Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them “renounce all that [they have]” for his sake and that of the Gospel. (Lk 14:33) Shortly before his passion he gave them the example of the poor widow of Jerusalem who, out of her poverty, gave all that she had to live on. The precept of detachment from riches is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven. (2544)

All Christ's faithful are to “direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by an adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty” (Vatican II, the Church) (2545)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (Mt 5:3) The Beatitudes reveal an order of happiness and grace, of beauty and peace. Jesus celebrates the joy of the poor, to whom the Kingdom already belongs:

“The Word speaks of voluntary humility as ‘poverty in spirit’; the Apostle gives an example of God's poverty when he says: For your sakes he became poor’ (Cor 8:9).” (St. Gregory of Nyssa) (2546)

The Lord grieves over the rich, because they find their consolation in the abundance of goods. (Lk 6:24) “Let the proud seek and love earthly kingdoms, but blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” (St. Augustine) Abandonment to the providence of the Father in heaven frees us from anxiety about tomorrow. (Mt 6:25-34) Trust in God is a preparation for the blessedness of the poor. They shall see God. (2547)

IV. “I WANT TO SEE GOD”

God alone is the goal of all our desires

Desire for true happiness frees man from his immoderate attachment to the goods of this world so that he can find his fulfilment in the vision and beatitude of God. “The promise [of seeing God] surpasses all beatitude... In Scripture, to see is to possess... Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive.” (St. Gregory of Nyssa) (2548)

It remains for the holy people to struggle, with grace from on high, to obtain the good things God promises. In order to possess and contemplate God, Christ's faithful mortify their cravings and, with the grace of God, prevail over the seductions of pleasure and power. (2549)

On this way of perfection, the Spirit and the Bride call whoever hears them (Rev 22:17) to perfect communion with God:

“There will true glory be, where no one will be praised by mistake or flattery; true honour will not be refused to the worthy, nor granted to the unworthy; likewise, no one unworthy will pretend to be worthy, where only those who are worthy will be admitted. There true peace will reign, where no one will experience opposition either from self or others. God himself will be virtue's reward; he gives virtue and has promised to give himself as the best and greatest reward that could exist... ‘I shall be their God and they will be my people...’ (Lev 26:12) This is also the meaning of the Apostle's words: ‘So that God may be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28). God himself will be the goal of our desires; we shall contemplate him without end, love him without surfeit, praise him without weariness. This gift, this state, this act, like eternal life itself, will assuredly be common to all.” (St. Augustine) (2550)

IN BRIEF

- **“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21). (2551)**
- **The tenth commandment forbids avarice arising from a passion for riches and their attendant power. (2552)**
- **Envy is sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to have them for oneself. It is a capital sin. (2553)**
- **The baptized person combats envy through good-will, humility and abandonment to the providence of God. (2554)**
- **Christ's faithful "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24); they are led by the Spirit and follow his desires. (2555)**
- **Detachment from riches is necessary for entering the Kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (2556)**
- **“I want to see God” expresses the true desire of man. Thirst for God is quenched by the water of eternal life (cf. Jn 4:14). (2557)**