



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

2. Scripture, Tradition, Natural Law **Texts from the** ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***

The Decalogue in Sacred Scripture

The word “Decalogue” means literally “ten words” (Ex 34:28; Dt 4:13; 10:4). God revealed these “ten words” to his people on the holy mountain. They were written “with the finger of God” (Ex 31:18; Dt 5:22.12) unlike the other commandments written by Moses. They are pre-eminently the words of God. They are handed on to us in the books of *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*. Beginning with the Old Testament, the sacred books refer to the “ten words” (for example Hos 4:2; Jer 7:9; Ez 18:5-9), but it is in the New Covenant in Jesus Christ that their full meaning will be revealed. (2056)

The context of the Exodus

The Decalogue must first be understood in the context of the Exodus, God’s great liberating event at the centre of the Old Covenant. Whether formulated as negative commandments, prohibitions, or as positive precepts such as: “Honour your father and mother”, the “ten words” point out the conditions of a life freed from the slavery of sin. The Decalogue is a path of life:

“If you love the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply.” (Dt 30:16)

This liberating power of the Decalogue appears, for example, in the commandment about the Sabbath rest, directed also to foreigners and slaves:

“You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Dt 5:15) (2057) **God’s law – the gift of God himself and his will**

The “ten words” sum up and proclaim God’s law: “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tables of stone and gave them to me.” (Dt 5:22.19) For this reason these two tables are called “the Testimony”. In fact, they contain the terms of the covenant concluded between God and his people. These “tables of the Testimony” were to be deposited in “the ark”. (Ex 25:16; 31:18; 32:15; 34:29; 40:1-2) (2058)

The “ten words” are pronounced by God in the midst of a theophany [a manifestation of God] (“The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire” (Dt 5:4.21)). They belong to God’s revelation of himself and his glory. The gift of the Commandments is the gift of God himself and his holy will. In making his will known, God reveals himself to his people. (2059)

The Commandments and the Covenant

The gift of the Commandments and of the Law is part of the covenant God sealed with his own. In *Exodus*, the revelation of the “ten words” is granted between the proposal of the covenant and its conclusion - after the people had committed themselves to “do” all that the Lord had said, and to “obey” it. (Ex 19; 24:7) The Decalogue is never handed on without first recalling the covenant (“The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb” (Dt 5:2)). (2060)

The Commandments take on their full meaning within the covenant. According to Scripture, man’s moral life has all its meaning in and through the covenant. The first of the “ten words” recalls that God loved his people first:

“Since there was a passing from the paradise of freedom to the slavery of this world, in punishment for sin, the first phrase of the Decalogue, the first word of God’s commandments, bears on freedom: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ (Dt 5:6).” (Origen) (2061)

The Commandments properly so-called come in the second place: they express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant. Moral existence is a *response* to the Lord’s loving initiative. It is the acknowledgement and homage given to God and a worship of thanksgiving. It is co-operation with the plan God pursues in history. (2062)

The covenant and dialogue between God and man are also attested to by the fact that all the obligations are stated in the first person (“I am the Lord”) and addressed by God to another personal subject (“you”). In all God’s commandments, the *singular* personal pronoun designates the recipient. God makes his will known to each person in particular, at the same time as he makes it known to the whole people:

“The Lord prescribed love towards God and taught justice towards neighbour, so that man would be neither unjust, nor unworthy of God. Thus, through the Decalogue, God prepared man to become his friend and to live in harmony with his neighbour. The words of the Decalogue remain likewise for us Christians. Far from being abolished, they have received amplification and development from the fact of the coming of the Lord in the flesh.” (St. Irenaeus) (2063)

The Decalogue in the Church’s Tradition

In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with example of Jesus, the tradition of the Church has acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue. Ever since St. Augustine, the Ten Commandments have occupied a predominant place in the catechesis of baptismal candidates and the faithful. The catechisms of the Church have often expounded Christian morality by following the order of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments state what is required in the love of God and love of neighbour. The first three concern love of God, and the other seven love of neighbour. (2064-5) (2067)

The Council of Trent teaches that the Ten Commandments are obligatory for Christians and that the justified man is still bound to keep them; the Second Vatican Council confirms: “The bishops, successors of the apostles, receive from the Lord... the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain salvation through faith, Baptism and the observance of the Commandments.” (Constitution on the Church) (2068)

The unity of the Decalogue

The Decalogue forms a coherent whole. Each “word” refers to each of the others and to all of them; they reciprocally condition one another. The two tables shed light on one another; they form an organic unity. To transgress one commandment is to infringe all the others. One cannot honour another person without blessing God his Creator. One cannot adore God without loving all men, his creatures. The Decalogue brings man's religious and social life into unity. (2069)

The Decalogue and the natural law

The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation. At the same time they teach us the true humanity of man. They bring to light the essential duties, and therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person. The Decalogue contains a privileged expression of the natural law:

“From the beginning, God had implanted in the heart of man the precepts of the natural law. Then he was content to remind him of them. This was the Decalogue.” (St. Irenaeus) (2070)

The commandments of the Decalogue, although accessible to reason alone, have been revealed. To attain a complete and certain understanding of the requirements of the natural law, sinful humanity needed this revelation:

“A full explanation of the commandments of the Decalogue became necessary in the state of sin because the light of reason was obscured and the will had gone astray.” (St. Bonaventure)

We know God's commandments through the divine revelation proposed to us in the Church, and through the voice of moral conscience. (2071)

The obligation of the Decalogue

Since they express man's fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbour, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, *grave* obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart. (2072)

Obedience to the Commandments also implies obligations in matter which is, in itself, light. Thus abusive language is forbidden by the fifth commandment, but would be a grave offence only as a result of circumstances or the offender's intention. (2073)

‘Apart from me you can do nothing’

Jesus says: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn 15:5) The fruit referred to in this saying is the holiness of a life made fruitful by union with Christ. When we believe in Jesus Christ, partake of his mysteries and keep his commandments, the Saviour himself comes to love, in us, his Father and his brethren, our Father and our brethren. His person becomes, through the Spirit, the living and interior rule of our activity. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 15:12.) (2074)

IN BRIEF

- **The gift of the Decalogue is bestowed from within the covenant concluded by God with his people. God's commandments take on their true meaning in and through this covenant. (2077)**
- **In fidelity to Scripture and in conformity with Jesus' example, the tradition of the Church has always acknowledged the primordial importance and significance of the Decalogue. (2078)**
- **The Decalogue forms an organic unity in which each “word” or “commandment” refers to all the others taken together. To transgress one commandment is to infringe the whole Law (cf. Jas 2:10-11). (2079)**
- **The Decalogue contains a privileged expression of the natural law. It is made known to us by divine revelation and by human reason. (2080)**
- **The Ten Commandments, in their fundamental content, state grave obligations. However, obedience to these precepts also implies obligations in matter which is, in itself, light. (2081)**
- **What God commands he makes possible by his grace. (2082)**

