



THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

2. “You shall have no other gods”

Texts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

“YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME”

The first commandment forbids honouring gods other than the one Lord who has revealed himself to his people. It proscribes superstition and irreligion. Superstition in some sense represents a perverse excess of religion; irreligion is the vice contrary by defect to the virtue of religion. (2110)

Superstition

Superstition is the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition. (2111)

Idolatry

The first commandment condemns *polytheism*. It requires man neither to believe in, nor to venerate, other divinities than the one true God. Scripture constantly recalls this rejection of “idols, [of] silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.” These empty idols make their worshippers empty: “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.” (Ps 115:4-5, 8) God, however, is the “living God” (Josh 3:10; Ps 42:3; etc.) who gives life and intervenes in history. (2112)

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinising what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honours and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Mt 6:24) Many martyrs died for not adoring “the Beast” refusing even to simulate such worship. Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God. (2113)

Human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God. The commandment to worship the Lord alone integrates man and saves him from an endless disintegration. Idolatry is a perversion of man's innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who “transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God.” (Origen) (2114)

Divination and magic

God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints. Still, a sound Christian attitude consists in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it. Improvidence, however, can constitute a lack of responsibility. (2115)

All forms of *divination* are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honour, respect and loving fear that we owe to God alone. (2116)

All practices of *magic* or *sorcery*, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons. Wearing charms is also reprehensible. *Spiritism* often implies divination or magical practices; the Church for her part warns the faithful against it. Recourse to so-called traditional cures does not justify either the invocation of evil powers, or the exploitation of another's credulity. (2117)

Irreligion

God's first commandment condemns the main sins of irreligion: tempting God, in words or deeds, sacrilege and simony. (2118)

Tempting God consists in putting his goodness and almighty power to test by word or deed. Thus Satan tried to induce Jesus to throw himself down from the Temple and, by this gesture, force God to act. Jesus opposed Satan with the word of God: “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.” (Dt 6:16) The challenge contained in such tempting of God wounds the respect and trust we owe our Creator and Lord. It always harbours doubt about his love, his providence and his power. (2119)

Sacrilege consists in profaning or treating unworthily the sacraments and other liturgical actions, as well as persons, things or places consecrated to God. Sacrilege is a grave sin especially when committed against the Eucharist, for in this sacrament the true Body of Christ is made substantially present for us. (2120)

Simony is defined as the buying or selling of spiritual things. To Simon the magician, who wanted to buy the spiritual power he saw at work in the apostles, St. Peter responded: “Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!” (Acts 8:20) Peter thus held to the words of Jesus: “You received without pay, give without pay.” (Mt 10:8) It is impossible to appropriate to oneself spiritual goods and behave toward them as their owner or master, for they have their source in God. One can receive them only from him, without payment. (2121)

The minister should ask nothing for the administration of the sacraments beyond the offerings defined by the competent authority, always being careful that the needy are not deprived of the help of the sacraments because of their poverty. The competent authority determines these 'offerings' in accordance with the principle that the Christian people ought to contribute to the support of the Church's ministers. "The labourer deserves his food." (Mt 10:10) (2122)

Atheism

"Many... of our contemporaries either do not at all perceive, or explicitly reject, this intimate and vital bond of man to God. Atheism must therefore be regarded as one of the most serious problems of our time." (Vatican II) (2123)

The name "atheism" covers many very different phenomena. One common form is the *practical materialism* which restricts its needs and aspirations to space and time. *Atheistic humanism* falsely considers man to be "an end to himself, and the sole maker, with supreme control, of his own history." Another form of contemporary atheism looks for the liberation of man through economic and social liberation. It holds that religion, of its very nature, thwarts such emancipation by raising man's hopes in a future life, thus both deceiving him and discouraging him from working for a better form of life on earth. (2124)

Since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion. The imputability of this offence can be significantly diminished in virtue of the intentions and the circumstances. "Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion." (Vatican II) (2125)

Atheism is often based on a false conception of human autonomy, exaggerated to the point of refusing any dependence on God. Yet, "to acknowledge God is in no way to oppose the dignity of man, since such dignity is grounded and brought to perfection in God..." "For the Church knows full well that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart." (Vatican II) (2126)

Agnosticism

Agnosticism assumes a number of forms. In certain cases, the agnostic refrains from denying God; instead he postulates the existence of a transcendent being which is incapable of revealing itself, and about which nothing can be said. In other cases, the agnostic makes no judgement about God's existence, declaring it impossible to prove, or even to affirm or deny. (2127)

Agnosticism can sometimes include a certain search for God, but it can equally express indifferentism, a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience. Agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism. (2128)

"YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FOR YOURSELF A GRAVEN IMAGE..."

The divine injunction included the prohibition of every representation of God by the hand of man. Deuteronomy explains: "Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure..." (Dt 4:15-16) It is the absolutely transcendent God who revealed himself to Israel. "He is the all", but at the same time "he is greater than all his works". He is "the author of beauty". (Sir 43:27-28; Wis 13:3) (2129)

Nevertheless, already in the Old Testament, God ordained or permitted the making of images that pointed symbolically toward salvation by the incarnate Word: so it was with the bronze serpent, the ark of the covenant and the cherubim. (2130)

Basing itself on the mystery of the incarnate Word the seventh ecumenical council at Nicaea (787) justified against the iconoclasts the veneration of icons - of Christ, but also of the Mother of God, the angels, and all the saints. By becoming incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new "economy" of images. (2131)

The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, "the honour rendered to an image passes to its prototype", and "whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it." (St. Basil) The honour paid to sacred images is a "respectful veneration," not the adoration due to God alone:

"Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is." (St. Thomas Aquinas) (2132)

IN BRIEF

- **Superstition is a departure from the worship that we give to the true God. It is manifested in idolatry, as well as in various forms of divination and magic. (2138)**
- **Tempting God in words or deeds, sacrilege and simony are sins of irreligion forbidden by the first commandment. (2139)**
- **Since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the first commandment. (2140)**
- **The veneration of sacred images is based on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is not contrary to the first commandment. (2141)**

