

# Honoring our Parents

*Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you. ~ Deuteronomy 5:16*

**T**HE FIRST THREE COMMANDMENTS address our relationship with God himself; of the remaining seven addressing our relationship with our neighbor, the fourth commandment, directing us to please God by honoring our father and our mother, is at the head of the list. God's placement of the fourth commandment shows us his priority: after loving and honoring him, we next are to honor our parents, with whom he shared his power of creation of new life and to whom he gave his authority over these children.

The remaining six commandments are expressed as negative "thou shall nots," but the will of God concerning our parents is phrased as a positive commandment. And, unlike all the other commandments, to this one God attached a special blessing: *"that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you"* (Ex 20:12; see also Dt 5:16 above). This commandment is the very foundation of the family, the direct responsibility of children who owe their lives and their nurturing to their parents.

The foundation of the honor due to parents stems from the divine fatherhood *"from whom every family in Heaven and on earth is named"* (Eph 3:14). Respect for parents naturally derives from gratitude to those who have given life, a bond that is nourished by a natural affection: *"With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that through your parents you were born; and what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?"* (Sir 7:27-28).

The fourth commandment requires that children treat their parents with respect, reverence, obedi-

ence, gratitude, and love. The book of Proverbs reminds us of the care that parents lavish upon their children: *"When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you"* (Prv 6:22). Gratitude is especially owed to parents who have given their children not only natural life, but also supernatural life through Baptism, and have nourished this life within the "domestic church" of the family home. Children should respond to parental love and care not only by being respectful and obedient, but also by solicitude and reciprocal care, for *"whoever forsakes his father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers his mother is cursed by the*

*Lord"* (Sir 3:16). By this commandment, children also are expected to contribute to the harmony of the family. Filial respect helps promote this harmony, and it extends to sibling relationships. Respect and love for every member of the family brings true light and warmth to the home and family life.

As children grow to adolescence, it becomes harder to obey. Here Jesus' example

is instructive: at the age of twelve, on the threshold of adolescence, the Gospel of Luke tells us that he remained obedient to his parents (see Lk 2:51). Yet with responsibility increasing for their own decisions and actions, it is necessary for adolescents to weigh, in the light of their own consciences, the moral validity of a parental order. Rarely, it may be needful, even morally essential, for a son or daughter to refuse to obey a command that is in any way contrary to the law of God and the Church.

Adulthood changes the situation again: "Obedience toward parents ceases with the emancipation

*"This commandment is the very foundation of the family."*



of the children; not so respect, which is always owed to them" (CCC 2217). In our current society, we are busy about many things; in fact, so many things that the care of elderly parents can become an almost overwhelming task. Yet the fourth commandment is as appropriate for us in today's world as it was for the Israelites wandering in the desert. Today, adult children



*Jesus and the little child, by James Tissot, 1836-1902*

***“The fourth commandment is also one of the foundations of the social teaching of the Church.”***

are tempted to refuse to help aged parents. Yet we are admonished: *“O son, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and against your sins it will be credited to you; in the day of your affliction it will be remembered in your favor; as frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away”* (Sir 3:12-15; see also Tb 4:3). We are obliged to care for them and provide for them in accordance with our ability and financial resources. Love and respect, or their absence, will determine the culpability of children who, for example, place their parents in a nursing home or other facility. The motive must not be selfishness, but to ensure care that the children cannot provide.

In broader terms, God's command to honor, respect, and obey extends not only to parents but also to members of the extended family. In the book of Ruth, we are given one of the most beautiful expressions of this familial love in all of Sacred Scripture. The widowed Ruth begged Naomi, her mother-in-law, who was returning to her home in Bethlehem after the death of her husband: *“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you”* (Ru 1:16-17). Ruth's deep devotion

to Naomi was praised by their neighbors, who told Naomi that Ruth was *“more to you than seven sons”* (Ru 4:15).

The fourth commandment is also one of the foundations of the social teaching of the Church. It governs our relationship with teachers, employers, civil and other leaders, to the lawful administration of statutes and ordinances, and to our com-

munity and country. The commandment applies to all who are subordinate to justly-exercised authority. Respect for the dignity of the human person must animate all facets of human relationships. Failure to observe this commandment in all its ramifications in social life results in great harm to families, communities, and individuals.

The essence of the fourth commandment is love. Fulfilling the obligations of love has enormous benefits, while failure to do so is tremendously destructive: *“Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure. Whoever honors his father will be gladdened by his own children, and when he prays he will be heard. Whoever glorifies his father will have long life, and whoever obeys the Lord will refresh his mother; he will serve his parents as his masters. Honor your father by word and deed, that a blessing from him may come upon you. For a father's blessing strengthens the houses of the children, but a mother's curse uproots their foundations. Do not glorify yourself by dishonoring your father, for your father's dishonor is no glory to you. For a man's glory comes from honoring his father, and it is a disgrace for children not to respect their mother”* (Sir 3:3-11).

Jesus gave us his own example when, though he was God, he became a babe entrusted to human parents who loved and cared for him in countless ways. He shows us the way; we must follow.

(CCC 2197-2200, 2214-2220, 2234, 2239)

# The Sanctity of Human Life

*I call Heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live. ~ Deuteronomy 30:19*

**H**UMAN LIFE IS SACRED because God created us in his own image and likeness (see Gn 1:26-28). He intends us to be in a relationship with him. As our Creator, he alone is the Lord of Life; therefore, no one can claim the right to intentionally destroy another human being.

Each and every person must be respected. Human life must be protected absolutely from the moment of creation — the moment of conception. From

this moment on, every human being has the rights of a person, including the most important right of every person — the right to life. Scripture says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5). The miracle of life is something to be greatly respected and praised:

*For thou didst form my inward parts,  
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.  
Wonderful are thy works!*

*“As our Creator, he alone is the Lord of Life.”*



*The annual January March for Life in Washington, DC*



*“From the moment of conception until the moment of natural death, every person must be defended, protected, cared for, and healed to the best of our ability.”*

*Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth (Ps 139:13-15).*

Abortion, therefore, is contrary to the moral law. This has been the teaching of the Church since the first century. At the moment of conception, God creates a human person, with the dignity and rights of every human person, in his image and likeness. He calls us to protect and defend life. *“For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (Gn 9:5-6).*

Just as we are called to protect, care for, and respect the unborn, we are also called to protect, care for, and respect those who are sick or handicapped. Euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It, too, is contrary to the moral law. The dignity of the human person and the right to life is not limited to those who are healthy or “perfect.”

Directly acting or omitting care in such a way as to cause death is a grave offense. However, discontinuing medical procedures that are dangerous or extraordinary can be legitimate. Here, the intention is not to cause death, but rather it is an acceptance of the inability to prevent death.

From the moment of conception until the moment of natural death, every person must be defended, protected, cared for, and healed to the best of our ability. Abortion and euthanasia, therefore, are abhorrent crimes. Cooperation in either is a grave offense against God.

Suicide is also a grave offense against the sanctity

of human life. We are responsible to accept the gift of life from God and respect him as the author of life who alone decides when life begins and when life ends. God has placed us as stewards over life; we do not own it and so it “is not ours to dispose of” (CCC 2280).

However, the Church looks with compassion on those persons who, under the weight of extreme psychological illness and depression, are driven to the point of taking their own life. Such persons the Church commends to the mercy of God, who alone has means unknown to us to bring them to repentance and a share in Christ’s mercy and forgiveness.

Individuals can forfeit their right to absolute protection of human life. Situations that can justify killing another human being involve the legitimate defense of persons and societies, since these are founded on respect for the sanctity of one’s own life. Thus, for example, 1) the use of appropriate force to defend one’s own life against deliberate attack, 2) the use of the death penalty by the state as punishment for heinous crimes when lesser means are ineffective to protect society, and 3) the use of warfare to defend a society against an aggressor when all other forms of defense have failed, are all legitimate reasons.

In all cases, however, deliberate murder is never condoned. Abortion, euthanasia, and suicide are all tragic effects of a society that has ceased to value the intrinsic worth of the person. It is the responsibility of all Christians to preach the Gospel of life to all who are searching and struggling for life’s meaning and fulfillment. Only through our words and actions will Christ’s message be heard: *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).*

(CCC 2258-2283)

# Stealing, Lying, Cheating

*They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord. Let every one beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother; for every brother is a supplanter, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Every one deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. ~ Jeremiah 9:3-5*

**F**RAUD, CORRUPTION, tax evasion, shoddy work, waste, vandalism, deceptive advertising, paying unjustly low wages, jacking up prices, inflated expenses, manipulating prices by financial speculation, forgery, cheating on tests, plagiarism, slander and libel, perjury, flattery, "white lies" — the list of sins against the seventh and eighth commandments, which forbid stealing and lying, seems almost a catalog of modern economic and social behavior. Our daily headlines tell us that honesty — living the truth about ourselves, our neighbors, and what we are due in justice — is sometimes hard to find and always hard to live.

## "You Shall Not Steal"

Theft is the taking of something against an owner's wishes. This may be from an individual owner, such as in a robbery or burglary, or it may be from a more "abstract," collective owner, such as the owners of stock certificates. It may be tangible goods, such as money or electronic equipment, or it may be someone's ideas or words. It may be a theft of a right, such as someone's

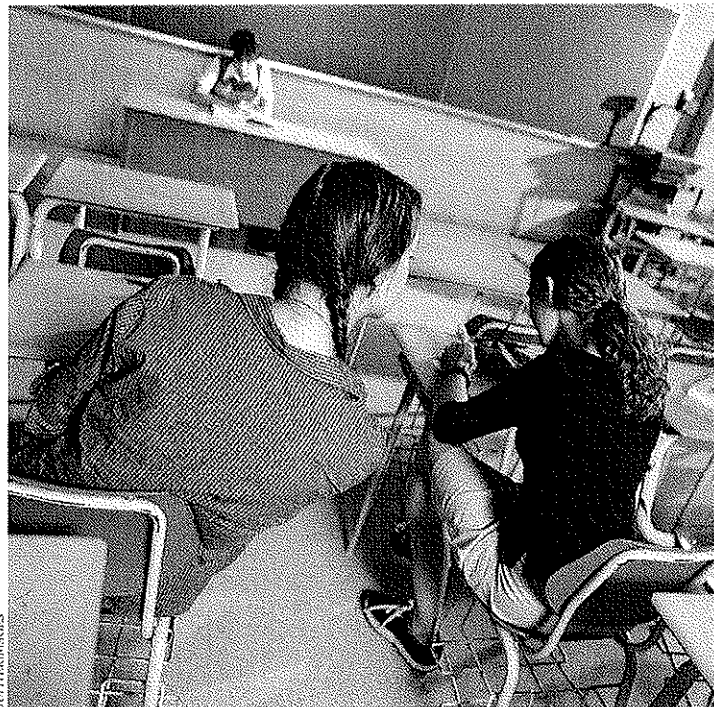
right to be fairly paid for his or her labor, or the right to be treated as more than just a source of labor, which is the sin of enslaving another. It may be a theft of trust, such as failure to keep a promise or honor a contract. It may be ignoring others' rights "in common," such as the right to clean air, safe food, and pure water. These all have in common unjust actions between individual persons and between institutions.

Sins against the seventh commandment *require reparation* in the form of return of stolen goods or its equivalent in time or money (see Lk 19:1-8). This is

a matter of justice, for accepting forgiveness without making reparation is a violation of essential fairness in dealings between members of the human community. (Reparation, or repair of the wrong, is the underlying concept of the Paschal mystery, for only Jesus as both God and man could offer infinite reparation for the wrong done to God by our sin.)

Actions that some people believe violate the seventh commandment may actually not be morally wrong. An excel-

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lent example is gambling. Provided we do not deprive ourselves of what we or others dependent on us need, gambling is not sinful. However, for some people it is not possible to limit their gambling to harmless entertainment. As with the use of alcohol, the use of gambling can become gravely sinful, especially if it becomes an addiction that leads to debt, the destruction of the economic support of a family, or any form of theft to make up for the losses. Another kind of taking that is not forbidden by the seventh command is that needed to keep oneself alive if there is no other way to do so. Justice requires that every person have food, cover for the body, and shelter, and if a person is refused these when they are immediately needed and can obtain them in no legitimate way, he or she is entitled to take what is needed (see CCC 2408). This does not, of course, justify failure to seek honest labor or to refuse it when offered, or choosing a life of perpetual begging. *“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need”* (Eph 4:28).

#### **“You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor”**

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting truth in our relations with others. We would find it impossible to live with another, says St. Thomas Aquinas, “if there were not mutual confidence that [we] were being truthful to one another”<sup>1</sup> (CCC 2469). The intention to deceive or lead someone into error is perhaps the most common sin against the eighth commandment. It is a direct offense against truth and the forthrightness of human interrelationships. A lie is the work of the devil, “the father of lies” (Jn 8:44). *The beginning of sin in our world was the lie of Satan, who used it to deceive our first parents* (see Gn 3:4). Cheating is a form of lying that many people believe harms no one but the cheater. However, as with all sin, there is damage done both to the sin-



*Sorrowful Woman, by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael*

ner and to the human community. A grade gained wrongly means that essential knowledge may not have been gained, and those dependent upon, say, an engineer or a physician may suffer direct harm. Passing off someone else’s ideas as one’s own is, in addition, theft of another’s thoughts and ideas.

Any action that causes harm to another’s reputation and honor is forbidden by the eighth commandment. This includes rash judgment (failure to interpret others words or actions as favorably as possible), detraction (revealing a truth unknown to others that could damage a reputation without sufficient cause), slander or calumny and libel (making harmful untrue statements about others — slander verbally, libel in print), and irony (belittling someone through malicious caricature of that person’s behavior). These are all sins against both justice and charity. Adulation helps to puff up another’s self-regard and thus encourages the sin of pride. Any encouragement or reinforcement of someone else in malicious acts and evil conduct is also a sin against the eighth commandment, since it is lying about what should be admired. Boasting and bragging, though possibly less grave, are offenses against truth and humility.

We all know people who pride themselves on their bluntness, in “letting the chips fall where they may.” This is a form of arrogance and uncharitable-

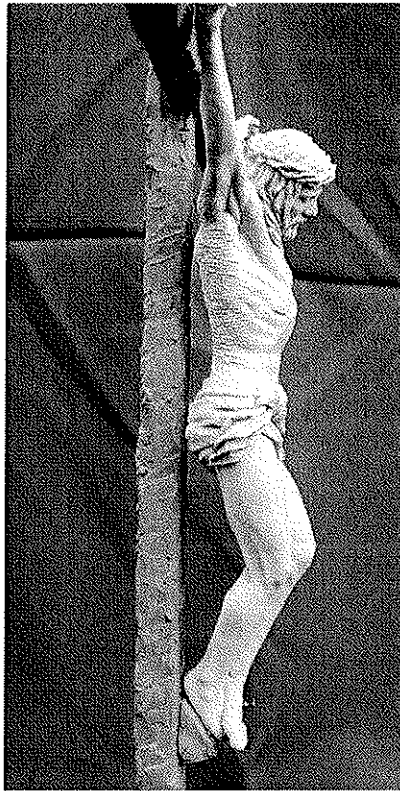
<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 109, 3 ad 1.



ness that is not sanctioned by the eighth commandment, for truthfulness requires discretion as well as honesty. We do not need to reveal all our thoughts and opinions about others' behavior, appearance, children, etc., for respect for the person of others prevents all that would cause injury. Although we may not lie in withholding the truth, it is not always wise, kind, or respectful to "tell all" or "tell it like it is."

Concerning discretion, it must also be remembered that not everyone who asks for the truth has the right to have it. Respect for the common or individual good, and the safety and privacy of others, may require being silent about what should not be known. The private lives of others should be honored by all who treasure human relationships. The keeping of secrets, especially those that, if revealed, would cause pain or harm, or those that involve giving our word not to reveal them, is a matter of honor. In the case of professionals, such as a counselor, physician, or lawyer, the keeping of secrets is essential to the trust relationship with the patient or client. Furthermore, all individuals working for the mass media — newspapers, periodicals, television, radio, and communications on the Internet — must see to it that they exercise a fair balance between the need to serve the common good and the respect due to individual rights and privacy. And finally, we must avoid purchasing or patronizing the products of organizations that regularly and, in some extreme cases with malice, libel others or violate their privacy for prurient purposes (that is, to satisfy vulgar curiosity).

The gravity of a lie depends on the intention of the deceiver, the circumstances involved, the nature and magnitude of the lie, and the extent of harm that results. As does the seventh commandment, so the eighth commandment *requires reparation* to the extent possible. This is the case even if an injured person forgives the liar. Since a lie most often has public consequences, the reparation also should be public.



*Crucifix, by Peter Kelley*

***“Lying words take wing, so to speak, and sometimes can no more be recaptured than can a swarm of stinging insects.”***

Secret reparation and moral satisfaction are required when public reparation is not possible. The tremendous evil of lying about another consists, partly, in the difficulty of making full reparation. Lying words take wing, so to speak, and sometimes can no more be recaptured than can a swarm of stinging insects. Lying is vicious, for it can sow discord, destroy trust, and disrupt social relationships, sometimes beyond repair: *“Beware then of useless murmuring, and keep your tongue from slandering; because no secret word is without result, and a lying mouth destroys the soul”* (Wis 1:11).

The sinfulness of a lie is particularly grave when the intention to deceive may lead to deadly consequences. This is most likely to occur when false witness is given in matters of criminal and civil law. When false witness is given under oath, the sin of perjury is committed. Any act or statement that helps to condemn

an innocent person, to exonerate a guilty person, or to alter the punishment of a convicted person in a way that fails to satisfy justice, is a severe compromise of the exercise of justice and the fairness of judicial decisions.

#### **“You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor’s Goods”**

The intention of the seventh and eight commandments, like all the others, is to foster and strengthen love for God and for our neighbors with whom we share our world. The tenth commandment is intended to enhance the workings of society by forbidding the secret sins of the heart of greed, envy, and covetousness, which are the root of theft and dishonesty. We are admonished to *“put away all guile and all malice and inincerity and envy”* (1 Pt 2:1) and, instead, to *“put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another”* (Eph 4:24-25).

(CCC 215, 2408-2415, 2464, 2469, 2475-2489, 2491-2492, 2494, 2496-2497, 2534, 2536, 2538)