



## THE 4<sup>TH</sup> COMMANDMENT

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“Honor thy father and thy mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

-Deuteronomy 5:16

### **The Second Table of the Decalogue**

The fourth commandment begins the second table of the Decalogue: those laws that govern our relations with other people. This commandment is the only commandment written in the *positive* terms of duties to be fulfilled. It covers several areas:

- i) (directly) Duties to parents and family
- ii) (indirectly) Duties to the state and society
- iii) (remotely) Duties to anybody in authority

“There is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom. 13:1), therefore we are obliged to honor and respect all those whom God, for our good, has vested with His authority.

### **The Family-A Trinitarian Work**

This commandment is addressed expressly to children, as the child/parent relationship is the most universal, but it concerns relations with extended family members as well. To honor our father and mother means also to render honor, affection and gratitude towards elders and ancestors. Respect for Traditions of the faith falls under the fourth commandment because by honoring Tradition we honor those fathers in the faith who went before us and persevered till the end.

It is the consent of the spouses that brings about a family, which is ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation of children. A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, constitute a family in its fullness. The family is the most basic cell of social life. It is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has a duty to recognize it.

The family is the very image of the Trinity: through the exchange of love between the man and wife, happiness is engendered and new life is brought forth in the form of children, just as the Holy Spirit is the love which proceeds from the communion between the Father and the Son. With the procreation of children, mankind reflects the Father’s creative work (CCC 2205).

The family is the first school where faith, hope, charity, prayer, faith, moral values, self-sacrifice and responsibility are learned. “Family life is an initiation into life in society” (CCC 2207).

## Centrality to Society

Because of its importance, the family must be regarded as central to any society and ought to be recognized as such by the civil government. Governments must not only acknowledge the family, but work actively to strengthen and support them, as the good of the whole society rises or falls with the wellbeing of the family. "Civil authority should consider it a grave duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality, and promote domestic prosperity" (CCC 2211).

With regards to the family, the political community has to ensure the following:

- the freedom to establish a family, have children, and raise them according to the family's moral and religious convictions.
- the protection of the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of marriage.
- the right to private property, free enterprise, to obtain work and shelter and to emigrate.
- the right to medical care and assistance, in keeping with each country's institutions.
- the protection of security and health, especially relating to dangers such as drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.
- freedom to associate with other families and so to have representation before civil authority.

The fourth commandment causes us to see the unity of the human race. It illuminates other relationships in society:

*In our brothers and sisters we see the children of our parents; in our cousins, the descendants of our ancestors; in our fellow citizens, the children of our country; in the baptized, the children of our mother the Church; in every human person, a son or daughter of the One who wants to be called "our Father." In this way our relationships with our neighbors are recognized as personal in character. The neighbor is not a "unit" in the human collective; he is "someone" who by his known origins deserves particular attention and respect.*

-CCC 2212

But living well in society is not simply a matter of fulfilling duties and responsibilities; all our human interactions ought to be motivated by charity and a genuine care for the other person.

## Duties of Children & Parents

The source of all fatherhood is the divine fatherhood of God, and it is from this fatherhood that comes the foundation of honor owed to parents. Respect for parents (*filial piety*) ought to come

from *gratitude* towards those who, by their gift of life, have brought their children into the world and enabled them to grow in stature, wisdom and grace.

Filial respect is manifested by docility and obedience. “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Eph. 6:1). Filial respect extends to other brothers and sisters, as well as to teachers and anybody whom the parents have placed the child under. But as with all obedience, the duty to obey ends when the order is morally wrong or sinful, in which case there is an obligation to resist it.

Though obedience ends when the child becomes an adult, strictly speaking, respect and honor are due to parents even after the children are grown. Obedience ceases with emancipation; not so respect, which is always owed.

Part of honoring mother and father is taking responsibility for caring for them in their old age, and in times of illness, loneliness or distress:

*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...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...*

-Sirach 3:3-6,12-13

Jesus also recalls this duty in the New Testament (see Mark 7:10-12).

In the supernatural order, filial gratitude is due “to those from whom [children] have received the gift of faith, the grace of baptism, and the life of the Church” (CCC 2220). This “spiritual fatherhood” ought to include parents, but can also include catechists, priests, grandparents and any other teacher of the faith. For this reason Paul calls himself a spiritual father of his disciples (see: 1 Cor. 4:15; Phil. 2:22; 1 Thess. 2:11) and priests are called “Father” in the Catholic Church

The fourth commandment also includes the duties of parents towards their children. Parental duties extend beyond mere natural sustenance to education and spiritual formation. “The right and the duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable” (FC 36). Besides being in conformity with natural affection, parental education of children is a way that parents honor their Father in heaven, who wills that the little ones come unto Him (Matt. 19:14).

The subject of parental education of children is very broad. In a nutshell, parents have the following obligations and rights with regards to the moral and spiritual formation of their children (with CCC references):

### Obligations

- The duty to educate their children in the virtues, teaching them sound judgment, self-mastery, respect, fidelity and disinterested service (2223).

- To teach their children to subordinate the material and instinctual to the interior and spiritual (2223).
- The grave obligation of setting a good example, lest their children be scandalized and fall away from the faith, which is a serious sin (2223; also Luke 17:1-2).
- The duty to correct and discipline their children with love and wisdom. “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Prov. 13:24). (see also: Sir.30:1-2, Eph. 6:4)
- The duty to evangelize children and educate them in the faith, beginning from the earliest years (2226).
- The duty to provide for material, physical and spiritual needs (2228).

### Rights

- The right to choose a school for their children that corresponds to their own convictions. This right is *fundamental* and ought to be guaranteed by the civil authorities (2229).
- Right of both children and adults to choose their own profession and state in life.

Though family ties are important, they are not absolute, and must be subordinated to the spiritual life, morality and pursuit of holiness. Parents and children must realize that the first vocation of the Christian is to *follow Jesus*, and this comes prior to family ties. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means accepting the invitation to belong to God’s family (see Matt. 12:49) and this must govern all other relationships. Jesus said, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37).

### **Civil Authority**

The fourth commandment also enjoins honor and obedience to the lawfully governing civil authorities. There are two main reasons for this: the duties of the government towards its citizens are akin to the duties of parents to their children, and because all political authority comes from God the Father and thus reverence for it is reverence to Him (see John 19:10-11, Rom. 1-17).

Civil authority must be judged morally in reference to its divine origin. No civil power can command or establish what is contrary to natural law or the dignity of persons. Civil authority is meant to give outward expression to a just hierarchy of values in order to facilitate the exercise of freedom and responsibility by all. Civil power must be wielded in terms of service, not of domination:

*Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among*

*you must be your servant, and whoever would be first must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*

-Matt. 20:25-28

**CCC 2237:** “*Political authorities* are obliged to respect the fundamental rights of the human person. They will dispense justice humanely by respecting the rights of everyone, especially of families and the disadvantaged. The political rights attached to citizenship can and should be granted according to the requirements of the common good. They cannot be suspended by public authorities without legitimate and proportionate reasons. Political rights are meant to be exercised for the common good of the nation and the human community.”

The political authority is a *juridical person*, which means that it has the same rights as an individual person would: the right to sustain itself, to legitimate self-defense and to do those things morally permissible for its continued well-being.

### **Duties of Citizens**

*Patriotism* is the virtue of filial respect due to the state from its citizens and is a type of charity. Patriotism consists of gratitude for the opportunities and benefits given to the citizen by the state, in participation in its political processes as far as is possible, and in being solicitous for its well-being and continued existence. Patriotism does not imply a need to support the state in whatever it does, nor in a duty to help the state carry out actions which are immoral.

*Submission* to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, exercise the right to vote, and help defend one’s country:

*Pay to all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*

-1 Pet. 2:13,16

*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*

-Matt. 22:21

St. Paul exhorts us to offer prayers for the well-being of the governing authorities (1. Tim. 2:2), and thus intercessions for the government have always been part of the Canon of the Mass since the earliest times.

*Refusal of obedience* to civil authority when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community (“We must obey God rather than men,” Acts 5:29). However, even if a citizen is obliged to refuse obedience in a matter that is contrary to the moral law or their conscience, they still are not therefore permitted to refuse obedience in what is objectively demanded of them by the common good.

*Armed resistance* to authority is never permissible unless the following five conditions are met:

- There are certain, grave, and prolonged violations of fundamental rights.
- All other means of redress have been exhausted.
- Such resistance will not provoke worse disorders.
- There is well-founded hope of success.
- It is impossible to reasonably foresee any better solution.

### **The Political Community and The Church**

Only the divinely revealed religion clearly recognizes man's ultimate destiny and his purpose. For this reason, political schemes and ideologies which claim to have a comprehensive vision of man that is restricted to political, economic or social spheres is to be rejected. The Church invites political authorities to measure their judgments and decisions by the inspired truth about God and man.

The Church, because of her mission and nature, is not in any way to be confused with the political community. She is a sign and safeguard of the transcendent character of man. However, it is part of the Church's mission "to pass moral judgment even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls require it. The means, and the only means, she may use are those which are in accord with the Gospel and the welfare of all men according to the diversity of time and circumstances" (CCC 2246).

### **Conclusion**

The fourth commandment governs the manner in which we relate to those in authority, both familial and societal. Every society's judgments reflect a vision of man and his destiny. Without the light the Gospel sheds on God and man, societies easily become totalitarian (CCC 2257).

For Further Reading: Sir.3:1-13; Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 7:10-12; John 19:10-11; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:13-14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 2197-2257; Scott Hahn, *First Comes Love*; Kimberly Hahn, *Life Giving Love*; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965); Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981)