



THE 8TH COMMANDMENT & PRECEPTS

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“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

-John 8:32

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

-Ex. 20:16

The God Who is Truth

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth to others. This commandment flows from our basic vocation to bear witness to the God Who is Truth. Therefore, any undermining of the truth is an undermining of God’s covenantal relationship with man and is an offense against the holiness of God, “Who can neither deceive nor be deceived” (Vatican I, *Dei Filius*).

God Himself is truth, and thus those who are part of God’s family are called to live in truth, for thus they conform themselves better to the image of their Maker. “The sum of Your word is truth; and every one of Your righteous ordinances endures forever” (Ps. 119:60). In Jesus Christ is revealed the fullness of truth, for He is the one who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). It is through the truth that the Holy Spirit sanctifies the Christian, for the truth is not just informative but transformative, because the Truth is a Person. To come to the truth is to come to Christ, Who prayed to the Father for the Church: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

“What is truth?”

Pilate’s skeptical question to Jesus in John 18:38 has been asked by many persons throughout history in an attempt to define exactly what is the nature of truth.

Truth is a statement that corresponds to reality. Thus, if the sky is blue, and we say, “The sky is blue,” this statement is said to be true because it corresponds to what actually is. But what about if there is a disagreement about what the reality actually is to which the truth corresponds? How do we determine when we are telling a lie and when we are telling the truth?

Traditional Catholic teaching holds that telling the truth means speaking in conformity with the mind; i.e., that what you say accords with what you are thinking. Furthermore, that the words or manner of speaking that you use conveys the same idea in the mind of the receiver as is in your mind (see the chart on the top of the next page).

Truth as uprightness in human action and speech is called truthfulness, sincerity, or candor. Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy.

-CCC 2468

Bearing Witness to Truth

The functioning of society presupposes that men tell the truth to one another. If there were no mutual confidence that we were telling the truth to each other, any community whatsoever would be impossible. Therefore, just on a natural level, truth is a necessary prerequisite for any civil interaction between persons.

In the life of the Christian, the duty to bear witness to the truth is connected with Christ's mandate to preach the truth to all men. "In situations that require witness to the faith, Christians must profess it without equivocation, after the example of St. Paul before his judges" (CCC 2471).

Martyrdom is the supreme witness to the truth and is a bearing witness even unto death. By his death, the martyr bears witness to Christ, to the truth of the faith and the doctrine of the Church. All people have a natural right to life and an obligation to defend their life if need be, but the calling to bear witness to the truth of the faith is higher, and thus when the faith is in question, it is better to die than to deny its veracity.

Offenses Against Truth

Christ's disciples are called to "put away falsehood" (Eph. 4:25) and not say or do anything injurious to truth. There are several ways one can sin against the truth, many of them concerned with respecting the reputation of other persons:

False witness is a statement contrary to the truth told in court. If it is done under oath, it becomes *perjury*. Lies told in public take on a particular gravity, and both are mortal sins, especially when they harm an innocent person.

Rash judgment is the assumption as true, without sufficient foundation, of the moral faults of another.

Detraction occurs when one, without good reason, discloses another's faults and failings to a person who does not need to know them.

Calumny is the damaging of another's reputation by false statements made against them. In civil law, it is called slander, but it is always wrong, even if there is no civil penalty attached.

Flattery, adulation or *complaisance* are forbidden and become grave when they confirm another in wicked deeds. They are venial sins if they only seek to be agreeable or to avoid evil.

Boasting or *bragging* is an offense against truth, as are *irony* and *sarcasm* aimed at disparaging someone by maliciously caricaturing some aspect of his behavior.

Many of these offenses have to do with destroying the reputation and honor of one's neighbor. *Honor is the social witness given to human dignity*. Everybody enjoys a natural right to the honor

of his name and reputation and to respect. Destroying them offends the virtues of justice and charity.

The Lie

Lying is the most fundamental way of sinning against the truth. *A lie consists of speaking a falsehood with the intent of deceiving.* St. Thomas Aquinas adds to this that a lie is a statement at variance with the mind. Jesus denounces lying as a work of the devil: [Satan] was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him...for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

The gravity of a lie depends on several factors: the nature of the truth deformed, the circumstances, the intent of the one lying, and the harm suffered by the victims. A lie is always a mortal sin when it does injury to another.

The purpose of speech is to communicate knowledge to others, and all lies are to be condemned in principle. However, there are three degrees or types of lies, each of differing gravity:

1) *Injurious or hurtful lies*- an injurious lie is one told for the purpose of bringing harm to another and is the most serious type of lie.

2) *Officious lies*- an officious, or white, lie is such that it does nobody any injury: it is a lie of excuse, or a lie told to benefit somebody. However, it is a venial sin and ought to be avoided, as it engenders in the one who does it a disregard for truth and can lead to injurious lies.

3) *Jocose lies*- jocose lies are told for the purpose of affording amusement and are not lies in the true sense of the word; of course what is said merely and obviously in joke cannot be a lie. An example of a jocose lie is using a deception to get somebody to come to a certain place for their surprise birthday party. Such a joke proceeds not from malice, but from the natural human enjoyment of surprise and amusement. However, jocose lies can easily turn into injurious lies when the joke becomes sarcastic or hurtful. Therefore, we ought to moderate our jocosity and not get carried away.

The Catechism says with regards to lying: “Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships” (CCC2486).

Every offense against truth carries with it the duty to make reparation, even if its author has already been forgiven.

Is it ever permissible to lie?

Though lying is condemned absolutely in Scripture and Tradition, what are we to do in cases where the situation seems to call for us putting forth a falsehood as true in order to stave off a perceived greater evil? Moral theologians have wrestled with this question throughout the centuries, and the controversy continues to this day.

Catholic Tradition has established a few principles to work from, however:

First and foremost, *lying is always wrong*, the only difference being whether the lie constitutes a mortal or venial sin.

However, in situations where communication of the truth is not desirable or would even be dangerous, there are several ways a person can get around the moral dilemma. It should be pointed out that none of these methods are to be used without serious reason. Misuse of these methods itself is sinful and an offense against truth.

Guarded Speech refers to language that has a commonly accepted meaning contrary to the literal meaning of the words. Thus, when a secretary tells a caller that her boss is “away from his desk,” the caller understands that this is a term that conventionally means that the boss is unavailable, whether or not he is literally away from his desk. Since it would be uncharitable to say, “He’s here, but he doesn’t want to talk to you,” society accepts this convention as a polite way of saying the same thing.

Circumlocution is a method whereby the speaker, while feinting as though answering the question, actually avoids the question altogether and shifts the emphasis of the conversation to another topic. For example, a policeman says, “Were you speeding back there?” And you reply, “What? Me, speeding? C’mon officer! You think I’d speed?” Notice how you give the impression of giving an answer when in reality none has been given. Circumlocution is not permissible without serious reason.

Equivocation, also called Mental Reservation, is a controversial method whereby the speaker makes a statement that can be interpreted as the truth, but can also be taken in another sense; i.e., it is an intentional ambiguity spoken with the purpose of deceiving someone else. There are two kinds of mental reservation, one allowable, one not:

Broad Mental Reservation: the true meaning of the words is actually discernible to someone who applies careful scrutiny to the statement. It is licit if there is a serious matter wherein preservation of the good requires a deception of this nature. For example, your roommate comes home in a drunken rage and angrily demands, “Where is my gun? I’m gonna go teach that guy a lesson!” You know very well that his gun is in the top drawer, but you look around and say, “I don’t see it anywhere!” It is true that you do not see the gun, and this can be drawn out of the literal wording of your statement, but nevertheless the purpose (deceiving your roommate and keeping him from getting his gun) is accomplished while you have not told an outright lie, either.

Strict Mental Reservation: this means that nobody but the speaker could possibly discern the true meaning of the statement. For example, a servant breaks a window. The master

asks, "Did you break the window?" He replies, "No, I did not," but what he means is, "No, I did not break it *with a hatchet*." Since there is no way to determine the truth of the statement, it is considered a lie and is not permissible.

Respect for Truth

The right to communicate the truth to another is not unconditional but must be subordinated to fraternal love and charity. This means that we must use prudence to determine whether or not it is appropriate to reveal the truth to somebody who asks for it (CCC 2488). Charity, as well as a respect for the truth, ought to dictate the response to every request for information or communication.

The *secrecy of the Sacrament of Confession* is sacred and cannot be broken under any pretext whatsoever. Canon 983§1 of the *Code of Canon Law* states "it is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner for any other reason."

Professional secrets (those of political office holders, soldiers, physicians, lawyers) or other confidential information must be kept secret, save in exceptional cases where keeping the secret would cause grave harm, and where the harm can only be avoided by divulging the secret. Even if not confided in secrecy, *private information prejudicial to another person* is not to be divulged without a grave and proportionate reason. Everyone should maintain an appropriate reserve regarding persons' private lives.

Interference by the media in the private lives of persons is to be condemned to the extent that it infringes upon their privacy and freedom.

Communications & Media

The information provided by the media is at the service of the common good. Society has a right to information based on truth. The Catechism says:

The proper exercise of this right demands that the content of the communication be true and - within the limits set by justice and charity - complete. Further, it should be communicated honestly and properly. This means that in the gathering and in the publication of news, the moral law and the legitimate rights and dignity of man should be upheld.

-CCC 2494

Civil authorities have responsibility to ensure that the true and just freedom of information is safeguarded. They ought to strive to make sure that public morality is not endangered by the media. The Church condemns the practice of totalitarian states of systematically falsifying the truth, exercising control of opinion through the media, manipulating defendants and witnesses at trials and strangling and repressing everything they consider "thought crimes."

Truth, Beauty & Sacred Art

Goodness is accompanied by spiritual joy and moral beauty. The truth is beautiful in itself. Truth can find other expressions in humanity besides in words, above all when it attempts to evoke what is beyond words: the depths of the heart, the exaltation of the soul or the mystery of God. Before God expressed Himself through human words, He expressed Himself through His creation (see Wis. 13:3-5). Likewise, man, “in the image of God,” expresses the truth by the beauty of his artistic works. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God’s activity in what He has created.

“Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God - the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,” in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” This spiritual beauty of God is reflected in the most holy Virgin Mother of God, the angels, and saints. Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier.

For this reason bishops, personally or through delegates, should see to the promotion of sacred art, old and new, in all its forms and, with the same religious care, remove from the liturgy and from places of worship everything which is not in conformity with the truth of faith and the authentic beauty of sacred art.”

-CCC 2502-2503

The Precepts of the Church

The precepts of the Church are set in the context of the moral life bound to and nourished by the liturgical life (CCC 2041).

These precepts are positive ecclesiastical laws whose purpose is to “guarantee to the faithful an indispensable minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort” and are in no way to be seen as exhausting the Christian life. Indeed, one who fulfills *only* the precepts does only the bare minimum and is in greater danger of falling into sin through weakness or neglect of charity. The precepts are found in CCC 2041-2043.

The First Precept: You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (This is called the “Sunday obligation.” It can be fulfilled on the vigil Mass of the Saturday the night before, but Sunday remains the normative day for Catholic worship. If you are late to Mass, the obligation is considered fulfilled so long as you make it before the Eucharistic liturgy. If you miss the Eucharistic liturgy, you have not fulfilled the obligation).

The Second Precept: You shall confess your sins at least once a year (This was mandated by Lateran IV in 1215 and was traditionally done during Lent in preparation for Easter. Once a year is a bare minimum; if you want to have any sort of regular sacramental life, you ought to consider making confession at least monthly. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have both recommended it *weekly*).

The Third Precept: You shall humbly receive your Creator in Holy Communion at least during the Easter Season (guarantees at least a minimal reception of the Lord's Body and Blood in conjunction with the highest Holy Day of the Church's liturgical year and conforms to the words of Christ in John 6:53: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you").

The Fourth Precept: You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church (is meant to ensure a proper period of asceticism and penance in preparation for the liturgical feasts. They help us master our instincts and attain freedom of heart).

The Fifth Precept: You shall help provide for the needs of the Church (the faithful are obliged to assist in meeting the material needs of the Church insofar as they are able).

For Further Reading: Ps. 119; John 17:17-19; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 2464-2513, 2041-2043; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, II-II, q. 110, a.1-4