The Ten Commandments – an Overview

Sin: Original, Mortal, Venial

"If you will enter into life, keep the Commandments" (Matt. 19:17).

Besides believing what God has revealed, we must keep His law. The law of God is contained in both natural and revealed law.

Natural law is imprinted by God in the hearts and minds of all men. It teaches the most important rules of morality: homage due to God, treatment of others as we expect others to treat us, the evil of willful injury to oneself, the virtue of truth and honesty. Thus natural law is a definite expression of God's will, requiring obedience.

For example, a child, or a pagan, who has never heard of the 10 Commandments, feels guilty when he does something wrong. He has an instinctive knowledge of the law of nature written by God in his heart, telling him what is right and what is wrong (Rom. 2:14-15).

Besides the natural law, there is the revealed law, chiefly composed of the 10 Commandments and the 2 precepts of charity (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18).

The 10 Commandments, which were given to the Jews through Moses (Exod. 20:1-17), were not revoked by Jesus; on the contrary they were amplified and fulfilled (John 14:15). And they were never revoked either by the Apostles nor the Church (1 John 2:3-4).

God's law - that divine reason and will of God - is perceived by men through the light of the intellect, by the voice of their conscience. Conscience is that judgment by which we decide what we should do as good, or avoid as evil.

If we always obey the dictates of our conscience, we shall never offend God. However, we must be fully instructed so that our conscience operates correctly and efficiently:

- We may have an erroneous conscience - when we think that something right is wrong or that something wrong is right. An erroneous conscience arises from ignorance or a faulty knowledge of the law. IF a person with an erroneous conscience believes something right is wrong, and yet does it, he is guilty of sin, because he has violated his conscience, and therefore willed to do wrong.

- We may have a doubtful conscience - when we do not know whether something is right or wrong. The person has the duty and responsibility to inform himself. If he is not sure whether something is wrong, but strongly suspects it is, and does it, he has sinned against his conscience.

- We may have a scrupulous conscience - when we see sin where there is none. When a scrupulous person is tempted, he worries himself sick, believing he has committed sin, even when he has not yielded to the temptation one inch, when he has actually resisted and hated it.

- We may have an unscrupulous or lax conscience - where we convince ourselves that we are all too weak to resist sin, and so all sin is negligible. "To err is human," is the excuse. This is the opposite of the scrupulous conscience.

Why Commandments

The 10 Commandments are recommended as headings for study into Christian behavior; they come from God and are warnings about particular evil tendencies in human nature; and they are traditional and known to everybody.

Many people feel that the Commandments are a restraint on their personal liberty. Rules for conduct are resented, and their authority is questioned. Why must we go to Mass every weekend; why can't there be divorce when marriage has obviously broken down beyond repair and remarriage; what authority can come between 2 people who love one another?

There is not a single entity in the whole universe that doesn't live under commandments: and the commandments are, so to speak, built in - a pig cannot fly, the planets keep to the courses determined for them, the sun and moon appear at certain times (so regular that weather forecasters predict the times; also high and low tides), apples trees produce apples and never plums. Without order, life would be chaotic, unpredictable, unlivable. Order depends on every creature being what it was made to be, keeping the law of its nature.

A human being is of a certain kind, with certain built-in rules of conduct. God's will is that people should keep these rules of conduct and so be the kind of creature that He made them.

It is unreasonable in a human being either to resent the rules which are part of his being or to make different rules. The only rules on which we will work are the ones implied in our nature. We do not say: "I'll run my car on water instead of gas." We do not say: "I'll step out of this plane when it's over my house, and save the tedious drive through traffic from the airport." The car is not made that way: we are not made that way physically. Personally we are not made for atheism, adultery, murder, lying and theft: and they are as damaging to us as drinking poison would be to the body.

When a person becomes conscious of himself as designed, he must worship the Designer, accepting the design. Acceptance of the design, and all that it implies of steady fulfillment of the design in behavior, means acceptance of God's will as the permanent standard of right conduct. It also means agreement with God about happiness. Human happiness is the completeness of the person, so that nothing is lacking to him. It is attainable only by being what God meant the human person to be. The attainment of happiness is only by doing the will of God.

Religion begins there, in awe of God as the Creator of the person, and in a personal response to God's implied question: "Will you be what I made you to be?" The human being answers "Yes," and continues throughout life a dialogue with God, offering self to God to do His will whenever a decision has to be made.

What is needed at all times is prayer; a habit of constant prayer. The dialogue with God should become continuous. Religion then will not be a school-life conformity or a chameleon-like anonymity in society, but a deliberate direction of self to God. (You will not be merely part of the herd. You are and always will be a son or daughter of your heavenly Father.)

Prayer and acceptance of God's design for us includes:

- An awareness or consciousness of God's excellence and His concern for you and me as persons;
- A docile or willing-to-learn attention to God, so as to know what He wants us to do; and,
- A readiness to do His will as soon as it is known.

10 Commandments

The Commandments of God, Exodus 20

Then God delivered all these commandments:

1. I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down and worship them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. For the Lord will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, your God. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you. In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
4. Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything else that belongs to him.

(St. Joseph Edition of the Holy Bible: Confraternity Douay, 1963)

The Ten Commandments

1. I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt not have strange gods before Me.
2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
3. Remember thou keep holy the Lord's day.
4. Honor thy father and thy mother.
5. Thou shalt not kill.
6. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
7. Thou shalt not steal.
8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor,
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.

(The New Baltimore Catechism, No. 2, Official Revised Edition, 1953, p. 90)

There is some controversy among Christian bodies on the numbering of the Commandments. The Catholic Church divided the last Commandment into two separate Commandments at the Council of Trent, 1545-63.

They are sometimes called the "Decalogue," which means ten words or precepts. They are written on two stone tablets: the first three, relating particularly to God being on one; and the remaining seven, which relate immediately to our neighbors and ourselves, being on the other. These Commandments are of themselves aways binding under pain of sin. They teach us our morals, or what we must do to be saved. They can never be altered.

Sin: Original, Mortal and Venial

Notes:
The Church had defined that when Adam, the first man, broke God's commandment in Paradise, he lost the holiness and justness with which God had endowed him. His sin brought on him God's wrath and indignation. It also made him subject to death, with which God had previously threatened him. With death came captivity under the devil's power. By his sin Adam was changed for the worse in body and soul.

Nor did Adam's sin injure only himself. It hurt his descendants. He lost holiness and justice for us, too. He passed on not only death and bodily pains to the human race but also sin, which is the death of the soul.

That is the Church's teaching, solemnly defined at the General Council of Trent in Italy (1545-1563).

Adam never existed as merely natural man. He always possessed supernatural life. He was never a mere creature of God; he was always His son; he always had a created share in God's own life. Eve possessed it too. Adam was the human race; it was all contained in him. He wife was "the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20).

Thus wonderfully endowed, Adam and Eve knew God naturally in a perfect human (and therefore limited) way; they knew Him, too, in a way that surpassed their natural human powers. He was the center of their lives; they lived in Him and enjoyed His intimate presence in prayer. He spoke to them and they spoke to Him.

Adam and Eve sinfully asserted themselves against God. Their sin was disobedience, not impurity. Before they disobeyed, their passions were perfectly subjected to reason. Adam enjoyed not only his natural life as man but also supernatural life, which enabled him to share in God's life. God warned him that if he disobeyed His grave command he would die. Both of Adam's lives were affected by his disobedience. (This story is confirmed by other books of the Bible: Ecclesiasticus 25:33; Wisdom 2:24; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:14; Romans 5:12; John 8:44.)

Adam showed God that he did not love Him. Love was in the beginning, the first requisite for supernatural life. If love is absent, that life is absent too. So when Adam sinned, his supernatural life left him; supernaturally he was dead. He no longer had the power eventually to see God face to face.

His natural life alone was left but that had been affected, too. He no longer possessed the gift of integrity. He had rebelled against the proper relationship between himself and God. He had upset the harmony God had placed in His creation.

Original Sin

Original sin is in us as an habitual sin, an unrighteous state. Supernatural life, which would have been there if Adam had not sinned, is not there because Adam did sin.

How are we guilty? Certainly not personally before we come to the use of our reason. We are guilty because of our nature. We derived it ultimately from Adam; ours and his are one and the same blood-stream. We descend from Adam by sexual generation. In that way his sin is transmitted to us. The following quotation from Odo of Cambrai from the 12th century will clarify

matters:

> "The sin with which we sinned in Adam is natural in me, personal in Adam. It is graver in Adam, less grave in me. For I sinned in him not as who I am but as what I am. It was not I that sinned in him but what I am; as man I sinned, not as Odo, as substance not as person. Substance exists only in the person, therefore the sin of the substance is the sin of the person; but it is not a personal sin. Personal sin is that which I commit as who I am, not as what I am, by which I sin as Odo not as man, as person not as nature."

Did the devil gain anything by his victory over Adam? It is hard to answer precisely. It was a victory, but temporarily at best. Adam and Eve had only know Truth and Goodness. They were not prepared for lies and deception. They were much like our children: lacking the sophistication and experience to deal with people and situations. They were told by God what to do and what not to do; somewhat the way we train our children not to talk to strangers. After their fall God came to their defense and rescue, much the same as we do when our children fail to follow our guidance. And the motivation of God and us is the same: love.

The devil was a fallen angel. His natural power was greater than man's. He had discovered man's weakness when he made Adam sin. He could play on it and lead men to yet more sin. He said to our Lord: "The kingdoms of this world have been made over to me" (Luke 4:6). What did he mean? Undoubtedly that because of Adam's sin all mankind is, in a certain sense, under his power. He is always the Adversary, always the Tempter. St. Paul tells us: "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against Principalities and Powers, against rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). And St. Peter: "Be sober and watch: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goes about seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

One of the former officials of Nazi Germany, Hans Frank, was on trial at Nuremberg shortly after World War II with several other accused war criminals. He had become a Catholic while in prison and was now found guilty of several crimes during the war and given the penalty of death. In his final statement to the Catholic chaplain before he died, he said, "We did not imagine at the start of our road that turning away from God could have such destructive and deadly consequences."

We can be sure that when we turn our back on God, there will be, without fail, deadly consequences, very often in this life and certainly in the next. The way we turn our back on God is by sinning, by violating God's plan for us.

Original and Actual Sin

There a 2 kinds of sin:

1) Original Sin - is that sin which our first parents committed and which every person born into this world inherits because of his origin from Adam and Eve. Original sin is wiped away through Baptism.

2) Actual Sin - is that sin which we commit ourselves. Sin is the only enemy that can bring eternal ruin to us. Many other things might cause us difficulty: a mistake may mean a loss of friends, or money; sickness might mean the loss of health; the devil can make living up to God's law more difficult. But only sin can ruin us spiritually and eternally.

Actual sin is any willful thought, desire, word, action, or omission forbidden by the law of God. There are 2 general classes of sins: Original and Actual. Generally, when we speak of "sin" we mean actual sin.

10 Commandments

Mortal Sin

Mortal sin is a grievous offense against the law of God. Any willful thought, desire, word, action or omission, in serious violation of God's law, is a mortal sin. Examples of mortal sin are blasphemy, willful murder, adultery, arson, robbery, etc. Apostasy is a great, mortal sin.

Mortal sin occurs as soon as God is no longer our final end in our thoughts, words and actions. Each mortal sin we commit is a 3-fold insult to Almighty God: it insults Him by rebellion or disobedience, by ingratitude, and by contempt.

The word "mortal" come from the Latin mors, which means death. It is deadly because it deprives the sinner of sanctifying grace, the supernatural life of the soul. Without sanctifying grace, the soul is displeasing to God, unclean, and can never behold Him or be with Him in heaven.

St. John Chrysostom (345-407) said: "Sinners are dead while they live, and the just live after they are dead."

Mortal sin, besides depriving the sinner of sanctifying grace:

1) Makes the soul an enemy of God. Through mortal sin, the sinner becomes a stranger to Divine Love and his heart turns cold because he has put out the flame of charity by grave sin. Thus a sinner the more he sins, becomes more insensitive to evil; his will is so weakened that all conscience is lost, and he falls into greater and greater sins and more easily. "Whoever wishes to be a friend of this world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

2) Takes away the merit of all its good actions. During all the time that the sinner remains in mortal sin, all his good works do not help him to heaven: he earns no merits until he gives up his state of mortal sin. A person who dies in mortal sin gains nothing, however numerous the good works he may have performed in life. Why, because he has not repented and asked for mercy and forgiveness from his loving Lord.

3) Deprives the man the right to everlasting happiness in heaven. However numerous the merits previously earned by the sinner, however many his good works, if he dies with only one mortal sin on his soul he goes to hell forever.

4) Makes it deserving of everlasting punishment in hell. Is this not something to be feared? It is because mortal sin presupposes a hatred of God (Matt. 25:41).

Three conditions are necessary to make a sin mortal:

1) The thought, desire, word, action or omission must be seriously wrong or considered seriously wrong. The matter must be grave: apostasy, murder, blasphemy adultery, etc.

2) The sinner must be mindful of the serious wrong. He must have full knowledge and reflection or attention, and know that what he does is grievous.

3) The sinner must fully consent to commit sin or the crime. He must do it of his own free will, saying or thinking deliberately, "I will do this."

Therefore children who have not fully reached the "age of reason" (the intellectual and moral capacity to know right and wrong, virtue and sin), retarded persons, mentally disturbed persons cannot commit mortal sin; they cannot fully realize what they do. In cases of suicide we have to leave all judgment to God for only He knows the conditions of

the persons and what was truly in their hearts at that critical moment.

Mortal sin is a great evil, the greatest evil in the world, a greater evil than disease or poverty, because it separates us from God.

1) It is a rebellion against and contempt of God, an act of ingratitude to Him who has given us life and all we have (1 Cor. 3:16).

2) It is like crucifying Christ again (Heb. 6:6). We can never fully realize the malice of mortal sin. We can get a small idea of it by remembering that God sent His own beloved Son to suffer and die to save us from the consequences of sin.

3) Mortal sin must be a most appalling thing to make a just and merciful God create hell for the everlasting punishment of the rebellious angels and of sinners who die with even only one mortal sin (Tobias 12:10).

One day St. Frances Chantal was nursing a leper. Someone standing by remarked that she might in that work contract the disease. "I fear no leprosy but the leprosy of sin," was her reply.

Venial Sin

Venial sin is a less serious offense against the law of God, which does not deprive the soul of sanctifying grace, and which can be pardoned even without sacramental confession.

The word "venial" come from the Latin venialis, meaning easily pardonable. Even the most just of mortals falls into venial sin again and again. The most imperfect person attains a very high degree of perfection, with God's help, as soon as he can avoid all "deliberate" venial sin.

Examples of venial sin are: impatience, slight faultfinding, lies that harm nobody - little "white lies."

A sin can be venial in 2 ways:

1) When the evil is done is not seriously wrong. If we sin against God in matters of slight importance, we commit venial sin. When a child grumbles when told by his mother to open the window (he opens the window, thus obeying her) is not committing serious wrong; it is a venial sin.

2) When the evil done is seriously wrong, but the sinner sincerely believes it is only slightly wrong, or does it on the spur of the moment, without sufficient reflection, or without full consent of the will.

Swearing and cursing are serious offenses, but when a man hits his thumb with a hammer he may be reacting to his pain rather than deliberately swearing and cursing. He needs to learn self-control.

If a man, in a sudden outburst of anger, insults his wife, children or a friend seriously, he commits a venial sin for lack of sufficient reflection and consent. Continual physical or verbal abuse is another matter and serious.

A distinction exists between venial sins and imperfections or character faults. Imperfections are faults that arise from ignorance or weakness, not from a bad will. For instance, involuntary distractions in prayer, "white lies" told while telling a story or in exaggerations or jokes, bad manners that hurt no one, are imperfections. We should, however, try to avoid all imperfections,

for they are not praiseworthy, are often a cause of irritation to others.

How Venial sin can do us harm:

1) By making us less fervent in the service of God. Although venial sin is not a grievous offense against God, it is nevertheless a great moral evil, second only to mortal sin.

2) By weakening our power to resist mortal sin. If often committed, venial sin weakens the will, lessens our power to resist evil, and makes it easier for us to fall into mortal sin (Luke 16:10).

3) By making us deserving of God's punishments in this life or in purgatory. Venial sin deprives us of many actual graces we need for resisting temptation. When a mirror is dusty, it cannot reflect the image clearly; similarly the mirror of the soul, when dusty with venial sin, cannot reflect the light of grace and justice. God will not bestow His blessings and graces on one whose soul is disfigured by venial sin.

Venial sin deprives us of heaven for a time. If we die with venial sins on our souls, or without fully satisfying for them, we have to expiate for them in purgatory (Matt. 12:36).

A great desire not to offend God in the least is the best proof of love and loyalty towards our heavenly Father.

We can keep from committing sin:

- by praying and by receiving the sacraments;
- by remembering that God is ever present and sees and knows all;
- by recalling that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit;
- by keeping occupied with work or play;
- by promptly resisting the sources of sin within us; and,
- by avoiding the near occasions of sin. The near occasions of sin are all persons, places or things that may easily lead us into sin.

Turning Back to God

From our point of view, sin on the surface looks attractive, and after all every one of us is looking for happiness. Many seek that happiness in money - and as so many who have attained it will tell you, that is not the solution to happiness; honors and worldly pleasures are not what they were "cracked up to be." So, too, sin always looks better beforehand. The Catholic Church never said that sin would not give some pleasure, but it is momentary and much less than anticipated, while our hearts still seeks lasting happiness.

However deeply we have cast ourselves into sin, God is ready to stretch out a helping hand to get back into His grace. And to one who has returned from sin, Christ has reminded us that it is cause for celebration (Luke 15:23-24). The return of a sinner to God brings peace and happiness not only to him but to the angels of heaven (Luke 15:7).

A Closing Word

The Ten Commandments are an immense benefit to mankind. Life is only possible because the vast majority of people keep most of the Ten Commandments most of the time. These divine Laws, far from depriving man of his liberty, restrain license; they are intended by God to bring order, and order brings peace. Moreover, the Commandments of God clearly point out the only sure way to eternal happiness.

The last day our Lord was in the Temple, a lawyer asked Him: "Which commandment of the law is the greatest?" Jesus in His reply summed up the whole of the Commandments and gave the whole purpose of man's life when He said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law" (Matt. 22:37-40).