

INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLICISM

## Chapter 26

# The Eighth Commandment

*God is the source of all truth  
and wills the truth in our relationships.*

# The Eighth Commandment

Jeremy went to confession on Saturday afternoon. He told the priest that he had to confess the sin of lying. The priest inquired what lie he had told. He responded that he had become angry because his friend, Jim, was dating a girl who had turned him down for a date. In order to get even, he told several of his schoolmates that Jim was selling drugs.

The priest thought for a moment and said, "Would you consider doing the following penance? After you leave confession, will you tell the first ten friends you meet you are a poor loser and a liar?"

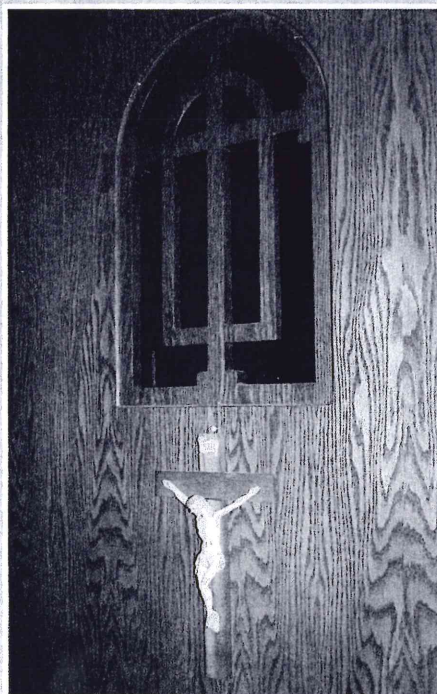
Jeremy objected strongly, "I can't do that. Are you trying to ruin my reputation? If I did that, no one would trust me."

"What about what you did to Jim's reputation?" responded the priest.

Jeremy was silent.

"I am not surprised you don't wish to harm your reputation, but you should have considered Jim's reputation before you lied. For your penance, I want you to tell all the people to whom you told this story that you lied and that you are sorry for what you said."

Jeremy agreed to do the penance and left the confessional resolved to make up for what he had done.



## THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Ex 20:16)

The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offenses against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant. (CCC 2464)

The eighth commandment requires that we speak the truth, particularly in what concerns others. We are obliged to speak with them honestly and to honor their good names because of the human dignity that belongs to all people. Being truthful links us to the Lord in a very fundamental way: for God himself is the origin of truth.

The Old Testament attests that *God is the source of all truth*. His Word is truth. His Law is truth. His “faithfulness endures to all generations.”<sup>1</sup> Since God is “true,” the members of his people are called to live in the truth.<sup>2</sup> (CCC 2465)

Indeed, respecting the truth not only links man to God but allows people to live in communities. Trust and truth have a close relationship: where there is no truth, there is no trust, for trust is based on the belief that one can rely on the words of another. “Man tends by nature towards the truth. He is obliged to honor and bear witness to it...” (CCC 2467). This tendency toward truth allows men to trust each other enough to form communities. When the truth is not adhered to, human relations are damaged. “Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another.”<sup>3</sup>

## THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (Jn 8:31-32)

Jesus clearly says that those who wish to be his followers must accept his teachings, live his word, and his truth will set them free—free from the bondage of sin and death.

Indeed, being truthful in all things gives us true freedom, whereas telling lies binds us to the evil of sin. We can see this in the old saying that a liar must remember every lie he tells to keep from getting caught.

This means that one lie can force us to lie over and over again. When one chooses to become a liar, it is similar to the experience of falling into quicksand. Just as the person in quicksand is drawn in deeper by the struggle to become free, the liar is drawn deeper into the sinful habit by his attempt to avoid being caught.

In our culture, it has become customary to accept so-called “white lies” told to avoid hurting another’s feelings. Though not serious enough by themselves to endanger a person’s soul, white lies are still sins. In addition, these small lies can lead to bigger ones. It is, in fact, a short step from

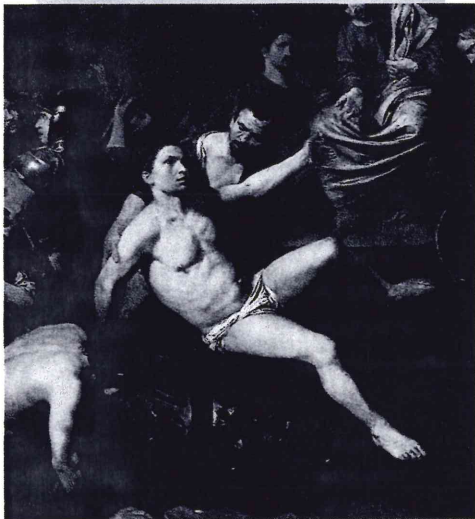
*You shall not  
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# The Eighth Commandment

*The person who gives his life for his beliefs is called a martyr.*



## *St. Lawrence*

A Christian martyr of Spanish birth who died in Rome in 258, one of the most venerated saints since the 4th century. He was ordained deacon by Pope Sixtus II and met his death shortly after the pope's own martyrdom. Lawrence was ordered by the Roman prefect to surrender the Church's treasures to him, whereupon Lawrence indicated the poor and sick around him, saying, "Here are the treasures of the Church." For this he was condemned to be roasted alive, a torture he underwent with calm and courage.

telling these "white lies" to lying in order to cover up almost anything. This is because lying, no matter what it is about, leads to lying as a habit, a vice.

Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy. (CCC 2505)

It must be borne in mind, however, that we are not obliged to tell the truth to those who have no right to hear it. There are some people who are always trying to find out what's going on in other people's lives. If someone tries to gossip with you, simply refuse to answer.

There are also those who lie in their daily lives, sometimes just for fun. In doing this they ignore the damage that their words cause—when they lie they hurt the mutual trust upon which societies are built. It is easy to see the chaos that would be created by distorting numbers: if you build with a yardstick three inches short, you have a flawed building. However, if you lie, you can sometimes ignore the damage, the destruction of trust among men that you are inflicting on all people.

Jesus' words at the beginning of this section speak of continuing in Christ's word. This means that we should bear witness to the truth of the Gospels not only by our words, but also by our actions. Doing so is an act of love toward God and our neighbors, who will be spiritually uplifted by this witness to the truths given by God.

A disciple of Christ lives the truth, and his conduct clearly indicates this truth. Christians are called upon to witness to the Gospel first. Witnessing to the truth of the Gospel can sometimes place a person in difficult situations, even forcing the choice between saving one's life or denying one's faith. The person who gives his life for his beliefs is called a martyr. The word martyr, which the Romans applied to the first century Christians, in fact means "witness."

*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. (CCC 2473)

Though Christians in our society are rarely called to die for their faith, young Christians are called to be witnesses to Christ for those who disobey their parents, use drugs, cheat on tests, and become sexually active outside of marriage. Though you won't be killed by those with whom you disagree, you may have to suffer the martyrdom of being rejected by those whom you would call your friends.

## **SINS AGAINST THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT**

Every offense against justice and truth obliges the perpetrator in conscience to make reparation, whether the damage has been caused through lying or detraction. It is best to discuss proper reparation with your confessor to determine the best solution.

Of course we should always struggle to avoid sinning against the truth. These sins take many forms:

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- ◆ Detraction – disclosing the faults or sins of another to a person who does not need to know them;
- ◆ Calumny – telling lies that will harm another person’s reputation;
- ◆ Duplicity – the act or practice of exhibiting different or contrary conduct or sentiment at different times in relation to the same thing; using trickery with others;
- ◆ Dissimulation – using false pretense with others;
- ◆ Perjury – deliberately making a statement contrary to the truth or withholding the truth under oath;
- ◆ Rash judgment – assuming as true the fault of a neighbor, even tacitly, without foundation;
- ◆ Flattery – excessive, untrue, or insincere praise;
- ◆ Bragging – making an ostentatious display of one’s own conduct or attributes; claiming sole credit for accomplishments that would not be possible without gifts received from God;
- ◆ Mockery – maliciously characterizing a particular aspect of another’s behavior;
- ◆ Revealing secrets one is required to keep;
- ◆ Lying – telling a falsehood with the intention of deceiving someone.

Christ specifically says that lying is the work of the devil, for to lead someone into error deliberately by lying is a sin against justice and charity.

To determine whether a lie is a mortal sin, the following criteria must be determined:

- ◆ The intention of the person telling the lie;
- ◆ The nature of the truth it deforms;
- ◆ The circumstances surrounding the lie;
- ◆ The harm suffered by the victim or victims.

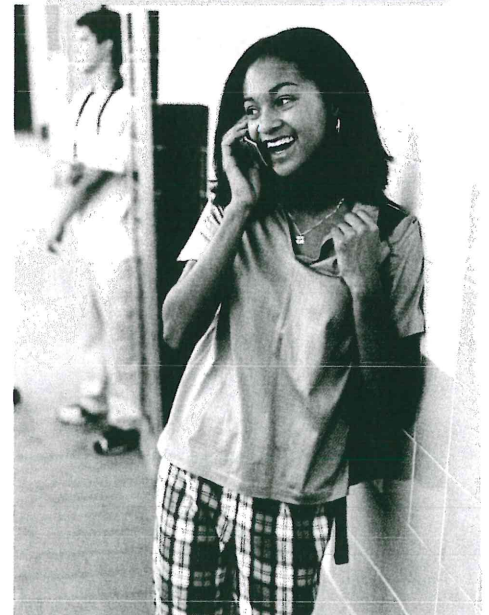
Lies are most serious when they hide the truth from someone who has a right to hear it. Parents, for example, have a right to know where their children are and with whom they are associating. They should not be misled. When parents inquire about a child’s friends and whereabouts, they should be told the truth. Very often, students complain, “My parents don’t trust me anymore.” This problem usually arises when children associate with those whom the parents believe are not good companions or when parents find out that their child has lied. Since parents have the responsibility of caring for their children, they also have the responsibility, and the right, to make decisions that they believe are best for their children.

### THE TRUTH IN PRACTICE

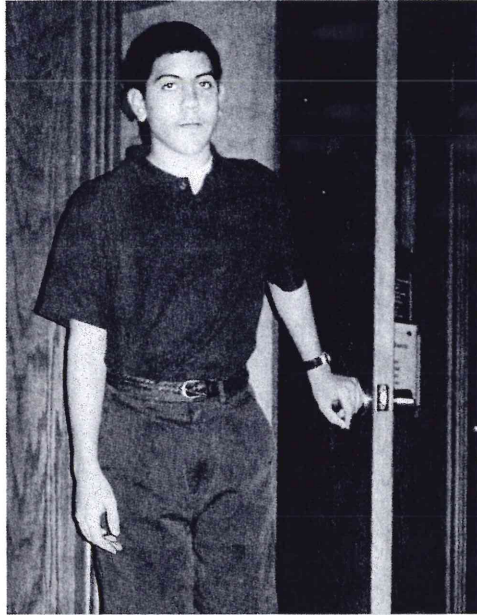
Truthfulness and trust are the basis for good relations in society, so we should act honestly whenever we deal with others. This does not mean, though, that people do have a right to communicate or to hear the truth in every circumstance. If they did, gossiping would become an obligation instead of a petty habit. People have a right to the truth only when they

*Lies are most serious when they hide the truth from someone who has a right to hear it.*

*Parents have a right to know where their children are and with whom they are associating.*



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*Honoring the secrecy of the confessional is one of the most sacred aspects of the priesthood.*

are involved in the situation in question. In other cases, we either do not have to or are even required not to reveal specific information.

Love of neighbor requires everyone to determine in concrete situations whether it is just to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it. The common good, respect for privacy, the possibility of scandal, and the safety of others must be considered before answering a question. There is no requirement to reveal the truth to someone who has no right to know it.

Professional secrets shared by physicians, office holders, lawyers, and servicemen or confidential information given under the seal of secrecy must not be revealed unless the secret is bound to cause great harm to the one who confided it, the one who heard it, or to a third party, and where grave harm can be avoided only by telling the truth.

We are obliged to keep a secret:

- † When our office requires it;
- † When the good name of another requires it;
- † When we have promised to do so.

We may reveal a secret:

- † When it is for the good of a guilty person;
- † When it will save ourselves or others from evil;
- † When it is contrary to justice or the general welfare to keep it;
- † When the person to whom we reveal it has a right to know.

In the public realm, people have a right to information based on truth, freedom, and justice; however, the media must not violate individual rights. Interference in the private lives of persons engaged in political or public activity is condemned whenever it infringes upon their privacy and freedom.

Reparation must be made for all sins committed against the eighth commandment.

### THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

Under no circumstances may a priest ever reveal the sins he has been told under the seal of Confession. If a priest were to do so deliberately, he would sin gravely, and he would be automatically excommunicated under canon law and suspended from his priestly office, unless the pope himself decided to revoke the sanction.

*The secret of the sacrament of reconciliation is sacred and cannot be violated under any pretext. "The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is a crime for any confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason."*<sup>4</sup> (CCC 2490)

Even in extreme cases, a priest is bound to the secrecy of the confessional. If a person were to confess a murder, the priest would not be able to tell the authorities. Honoring the secrecy of the confessional is one of the most sacred aspects of the priesthood. A confessor who violates the seal automatically incurs excommunication.

In addition, any lay person who overhears the sins of another during the Sacrament of Confession is bound by the seal of Confession. They may not reveal the sins of another overheard during Confession under just penalty not excluding excommunication.

## CONCLUSION

It should be obvious at this point that truth is sacred. Human relationships must be built upon trust, and where there is no truth, there is no trust. Christ, who is all truth, expects Christians to testify to him by the truthfulness of their lives, actions, and words.

The obligation to tell the truth is binding not only on a person-to-person basis but also at every level of society. Businesses, social organizations, and governments are required to have policies that make clear the obligation to tell the truth where the truth of necessity must be told.

Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, and justice, so the media have an obligation to make correct moral judgments prior to presenting news to the public.

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# The Eighth Commandment

## Chapter 26 Study Guide

### SUPPLEMENTARY READING

St. Catherine of Siena had a vivid imagination. Unfortunately, this led to many people not believing in her dazzling visions of Jesus and Mary. Catherine tried many different ways to bring silence into her life so that she could better hear the truths God was speaking to her. She even went so far as to run away to a small cave outside the city walls to be a hermit—of course, she returned the same day.

However, God asked her to grow in love of him, by loving her neighbor. So Catherine began to minister to prisoners on their way to execution. She even followed Niccolo di Toldo, an inmate condemned to death, all the way to the chopping block and prayed for him until she caught his severed head in her hands.

Catherine understood very few things, but she did understand the need for obedience to Jesus Christ. She understood it so well that one might find her yelling, cajoling, exhorting, crying all in the name of Jesus. Catherine knew that the Pope's place was in Rome, not in Avignon where he had lived in exile for the past 70-plus years. Not very literate herself, Catherine dictated hundreds of letters to the Pope as well as various cardinals and bishops in an effort to get the Holy Father back to his rightful place in Rome. While fearless, she was somewhat uncomfortable in this role as she is quoted as asking God, "How can I, a poor and miserable woman, be able to do any good in Your Church? How shall I instruct wise and learned men, or how will it be even seemly for me to live and converse with them?"



**St. Catherine of Siena**  
(1347-1380)  
Feast on April 29

Catherine always wrote and spoke very bluntly and always took her message to the person who could enact the needed reforms. Despite her lack of education and the fact that she was a woman during the Middle Ages, she fought for the truth. Eventually this led to her going to Avignon to plead with the Pope and several cardinals personally. After much prayer and struggle, the truth finally won out. Catherine's tireless proclamation of the truth concerning the successor of Peter had set the Pope free.



## VOCABULARY

### **CALUMNY**

A false statement that harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.

### **DETRACTION**

Disclosure of another's faults and sins, without an objectively valid reason, to persons who did not know about them, thus causing unjust injury to that person's reputation.

### **DISSIMULATION**

To act deceitfully.

### **DUPLICITY**

The quality of being "double" in action or conduct; the practice of acting two different ways at different times, openly or secretly; deceitfulness.

### **GOSSIP**

Spreading idle rumors of a personal or intimate nature; tale bearing.

### **LIBEL**

Wrongful, untrue defamation of a person in writing or printing.

### **PREJUDICE**

Preconceived opinion formulated without consideration of known facts and usually based on erroneous knowledge leading to wrong judgments and rendering a person blind to reason and closed to argument.

### **PRIVACY**

Right of a person to keep part of their life not open to the public.

### **SEAL OF CONFESSION**

The confessor's obligation to keep absolutely secret what a penitent has told to him in the Sacrament of Penance; also known as the sacramental seal.

### **SLANDER**

A false statement which harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them; same as calumny.

### **TRUTHFULNESS**

Uprightness, sincerity, or candor in human action and speech.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does the Eighth Commandment require?
2. What is the meaning of the statement, “Where there is no truth, there is no trust”?
3. How does “telling the truth give us true freedom”?
4. What is the seriousness of “white lies”?
5. Does everyone have a right to be told the truth? Explain.
6. To which truths are Christians called upon primarily to give witness?
7. How does one witness to the truth in the highest way?
8. List the sins against truth, and indicate why they are wrong.
9. Deliberate lies sin against what two virtues?
10. What four questions are used to determine if a lie is a mortal sin?
11. When are we obliged to keep a secret?
12. In what situations may we reveal a secret?
13. May a priest tell what he has heard in confession?

## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Anne is aware that her brother Jerry has been getting drunk on the weekend and is concerned about him. She promised Jerry that she wouldn't tell their parents. Is this promise binding?
2. Look up St. Thomas More in a book on saints. Write a paragraph explaining the oath King Henry VIII wanted him to take, why he would not take it, and what happened because of his refusal.
3. Ed arrived home after 3 a.m. Although he hadn't been drinking, he knows that his mother would disapprove of the hour at which he arrived home because he is only 16 years old. The next morning, his mother asked him what time he came in. Does he have to tell the truth?
4. Suppose a friend tells you about something gravely sinful that he did. He wants to go to confession, but he is afraid that his parents might find out from the priest. Write a paragraph explaining why your friend's fears are groundless.

## FROM THE CATECHISM

**2504** “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex 20:16). Christ’s disciples have “put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).

**2505** Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy.

**2506** The Christian is not to “be ashamed of testifying to our Lord” (2 Tm 1:8) in deed and word. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith.

**2507** Respect for the reputation and honor of persons forbids all detraction and calumny in word or attitude.

**2508** Lying consists in saying what is false with the intention of deceiving one’s neighbor.

**2509** An offense committed against the truth requires reparation.

**2510** The golden rule helps one discern, in concrete situations, whether or not it would be appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it.

**2511** “The sacramental seal is inviolable” (CIC, can. 983 § 1). Professional secrets must be kept. Confidences prejudicial to another are not to be divulged.

**2512** Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, and justice. One should practice moderation and discipline in the use of the social communications media.

**2513** The fine arts, but above all sacred art, “of their nature are directed toward expressing in some way the infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands. Their dedication to the increase of God’s praise and of his glory is more complete, the more exclusively they are devoted to turning men’s minds devoutly toward God” (SC, 122).

## Endnotes

1. Ps 119: 90; cf. Prv 8: 7; 2 Sm 7: 28; Ps 119: 142; Lk 1: 50.
2. Rom 3: 4; cf. Ps 119: 30.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 109, 3, *corp. art.*
4. CIC, can. 983 § 1.

