



INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLICISM

Chapter 20

The Second Commandment

God's name is hallowed.

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*N*o one likes to be treated with disrespect. When someone talks down to us, we get angry. We feel insulted when someone acts as if we're not worth his time. People know instinctively that they have a certain dignity that means they should be treated with respect. When people treat us poorly, we feel that that our natural dignity is not being recognized.

God too has a dignity that should be respected, but his dignity is much greater than ours. For we are weak, fallen creatures who ignore what we know is right and do what we know is wrong. This is part of our nature. God, though, is perfect. His very nature is love itself. How much greater is the dignity of God, who is all goodness, than the dignity of human beings?

God should be treated with more respect and dignity than any of his creatures. Everything he does, everything about him should be held in the highest reverence – including his name. As Jesus tells us in the "Our Father," God's name is hallowed. We should remember to treat it this way.



THE SECOND COMMANDMENT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. (Ex 20:7)

The Second Commandment prohibits taking God's name in vain, forbidding its use for irreverent purposes—such as calling upon God to damn a person—while at the same time requiring us to speak with reverence of God, the saints, and holy things. Like the first commandment, the second belongs to the virtue of religion and governs our speech in matters of religion.

To understand why we should respect God's name, we need to understand what a name is. A person's name contains his very identity, and therefore, the meaning of his life. This means that if someone reveals his name to you he is partly revealing who he really is to you. Each person's name has been carefully chosen and is special.

You can see this is true by looking at other cultures. In some Native American tribes, for instance, a person had two names: one that family and close friends alone knew and used, and one for everyone else. It might be the same way with you today. If you have a nickname, does everyone know and use it, or just the people close to you? These examples show how a name is special to a person.

Not only does a name reveal something personal about someone, but if you know and use someone's name, that shows you have some power over that person. This may sound strange at first, but actually it makes sense. Think about it. There is a reason you call your teacher "Mr. Smith" or "Mrs. Jones." These titles show respect and acknowledge authority. If you called your teachers by their first names, the relationship would be changed. You would have the power that comes with familiarity over them, and you might fail to recognize their authority.

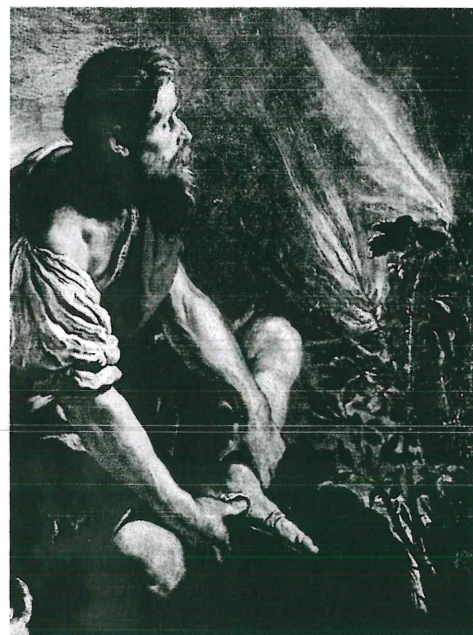
For the people of Moses' time, the use of a person's name indicated a certain power as well, and many believed they could have power over even a spirit, if they knew the spirit's name. This was a temptation for people because they were aware of the presence of active evil spirits, which many people believed could be controlled if their names were known. We are familiar with the story of the golden calf and know that the worship of false idols was a serious problem in the time of Moses.

God called on Moses to establish the worship of the one true God to overcome the idolatries practiced by the human race.

Among all the words of Revelation, there is one which is unique: the revealed name of God. God confides his name to those who believe in him; he reveals himself to them in his personal mystery. The gift of a name belongs to the order of trust and intimacy. "The Lord's name is holy." For this reason man must not abuse it. He must keep it in mind in silent, loving adoration. He will not introduce it into his own speech except to bless, praise, and glorify it.¹ (CCC 2143)

God gave Moses the right to call upon him. He chose to reveal himself to the Jewish people through Moses, to whom he said, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). The power to use God's name gave Moses the power to call upon God himself. In fact, in the Hebrew scriptures so much reverence was shown to the sacred name revealed to Moses, Yahweh, that it

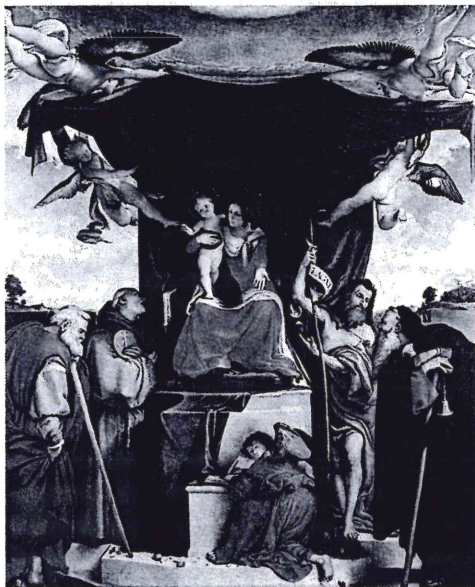
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was never pronounced in later Judaism. The term Adonai (Lord) was substituted.

If his name is such a powerful thing, then why did God reveal his name to us?

God told us his name because he loves us infinitely. We have seen how one's identity is bound up in one's name. In revealing his name to us, God shows us he desires that we should know him and draw close to him, and in return, he will be close to us. With the knowledge of the name of the Lord, God becomes not just a powerful being set completely apart, but a being with whom we can have a personal relationship. This is a very intimate revelation, and one that we would be highly insensitive to ignore, for the Lord desires personal communion with us. God revealed who he was to his people so that he and his people might love each other more fully.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old "you shall not swear falsely..." but I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool. (Mt 5: 33-35)

Jesus, as the one who fulfills the law, spoke of the practice of swearing, of calling upon higher things as witnesses to the truth of a statement. When Jesus spoke of not swearing at all, his intent was not to forbid the use of God's name in any circumstance. Rather, he meant to purify the practice of calling upon God.

Following the practice of St. Paul, God's "chosen instrument" (Acts 9: 15) of evangelization, the Church accepts that calling upon God is acceptable in serious situations. In his writings, Paul himself at least twice calls upon God to witness to the truth of his words. Jesus' declaration on swearing is an attempt to bring reverence to a practice that had become tainted, telling us to be more selective in the use of God's name.

Blasphemy is disrespect for the names of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. God's name is not the only name that the second commandment orders us to respect. Through the life and death of Jesus and the covenant he made, we also must show respect for the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. If we were to speak badly of the saints or Mary, we would be criticizing God's choices and actions, which is clearly sinful.

So far we have only discussed what the second commandment prohibits us from doing or saying. This commandment, however, requires more than just avoiding some things (negative precepts). It also requires us to do certain things (positive precepts).

The idea of respecting God is at the heart of the second commandment. We act with respect toward God when we:

- † Give due praise to God our Creator and Redeemer. Calling upon God in prayer is a just and righteous act. In doing this, we must use God's name as he expected we would when he revealed it to us. Drawing closer to God through our prayer, we love God more;

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- † Acknowledge him before others in word and conduct. When we confess our faith in God, we pay him the respect that lies at the center of the second commandment. When we act as he has told us to act, we demonstrate that respect;
- † Use his name with reverence. There are times when we *should* use God's name, when we should refer to the Lord (e.g., when discussing morality or religion with people);
- † Pray, learn, use, and study God's word.

There are other special situations that allow us to call upon God. These include oaths and vows.

OATHS

An oath is the act of calling upon God as a witness to the truth of a statement one is making. Both the Old and New Testaments permit the swearing of oaths, but there must be a serious reason for doing so.

The holiness of the divine name demands that we neither use it for trivial matters, nor take an oath which on the basis of the circumstances could be interpreted as an approval of an authority unjustly requiring it. When an oath is required by illegitimate civil authorities, it may be refused. It must be refused when it is required for purposes contrary to the dignity of persons or to ecclesial communion. (CCC 2155)

This commandment permits the taking of oaths when there is a legitimate reason to do so. An oath may not be taken except in truth, necessity, and justice, for a morally good reason—for example, when one is called upon to be a witness in court.

A valid oath requires:

- † Calling God as witness to the truth;
- † That it be spoken aloud;
- † Knowledge and intention to swear an oath.

People often make statements such as “honest to God” and “so help me God.” Usually, they are not intending to swear an oath or to offend God. However, the use of such language, since it is not intended as an oath, is improper and an offense to God's name. A serious effort must be made to break this habit.

Some examples of circumstances when oaths may be sworn are in court or when joining the armed services or police department. Swearing an oath to harm something or someone is wrong. Swearing a false oath is perjury, calling upon God to witness to a lie, which is gravely sinful.

Additional conditions regulate the swearing of oaths:

- † Oaths may not be taken to support a lie. You must be morally certain the statement you make is true. Swearing a false oath is a grave sin.
- † Oaths should be taken only out of necessity and with discretion. Normally, your word should be enough.
- † Oaths should be taken, as a matter of justice, only for morally good purposes.

An oath is the act of calling upon God as a witness to the truth of a statement one is making.



St. John the Evangelist

One of three apostles closest to Jesus, John was the only apostle at the Crucifixion. It was there that Jesus placed his mother, Mary, into John's care. He wrote the Fourth Gospel, three epistles and the Book of Revelation. John was the only apostle who was not martyred.

The eagle is John's emblem.

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Examples of private vows are commitments to say certain prayers, do almsgiving, go on a pilgrimage, or perform specific acts of fasting.



"How majestic is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps 8:1)

VOWS

"A vow is a deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good which must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion."² A vow is an act of *devotion* in which the Christian dedicates himself to God or promises him some good work. (CCC 2102)

Since a vow is a promise *made to God*, it is the most solemn promise that can be made, and because vows are voluntary, they are most pleasing to the Lord.

Vows are made which establish one's state in life. These vows include the promises made upon marriage as well as the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience taken by members of religious orders (called "religious"). In most cases, such vows bind the person for life, although certain people may be released from these vows under very specific circumstances. Married persons and religious who break their vows are guilty of grave sin.

Since a vow is such a serious commitment, certain requirements must be met for it to be legitimate. For a vow to be binding:

- † It must be a firm promise;
- † It must be done in public;
- † It must be deliberately done after serious thought, and freely done with no exterior pressure. No one can be forced to make a vow;
- † It must be made to God;
- † It must promise a good action;
- † It must be possible;
- † It must be better than the situation that would result if the vow were not fulfilled.

As an act of personal devotion to God, a person may make a private vow. Examples of private vows are commitments to say certain prayers, do almsgiving, go on a pilgrimage, or perform specific acts of fasting. A confessor must be consulted before making this type of commitment.

RESPECT FOR GOD'S HOLY NAME

On a very literal level, God's name must be respected and used only in certain circumstances. Unfortunately, many have acquired the habit of using his name without giving much thought to what they are saying, as is manifest in such common exclamations as "Oh God" or "Christ."

We can make up for the disrespect shown for God's name by saying some aspirations such as "My Jesus Mercy" or "Sweet Heart of Jesus" when we hear others use his name inappropriately.

Even worse than these absent-minded abuses is the sin of blasphemy. Blasphemy is uttering against God, internally or externally, words of hatred, reproach, or defiance, or speaking ill of God. Clearly, such an act of hatred towards the Lord is intrinsically evil and gravely sinful. This prohibition against speaking directly against the Lord extends to language against his Church, the saints, and sacred things.

Asking God to damn a person to hell is called cursing. It is gravely sinful when the speaker desires the eternal damnation of the person named. It is an act that goes against the love we owe each person because of his uniqueness as a person created and loved by God.

CONCLUSION

A person's name is very special to him. It is how he is knowable and, in a way, contains his identity.

God's name is no less special. The Lord revealed his name to man to show us his nature so that we may know him. This is an act of tremendous love, that an infinite being would reveal himself to us — a sign of the communion the Lord desires with us. We should recognize this gesture as truly profound, and respect the name of the Lord, saying with the psalmist, "How majestic is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps 8:1).

Often, people use the Lord's name in casual conversation. Although they do not intend to offend God, this shows a lack of respect for a very personal revelation made by the Lord.

There do exist times when it is acceptable to use the Lord's name, such as when we pray, take vows, or make oaths. Remember, though, that whenever we use God's name it must be done out of a true desire to demonstrate and increase our love for the Lord.

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Chapter 20 Study Guide

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

St. Polycarp was born sometime in the first century A.D. Although not many details are known about him, it is believed that he was converted to Christianity by St. John the Apostle when John was the bishop of Smyrna. In about A.D. 80, John was exiled to Patmos, the island where he saw the vision recorded in the Book of Revelation. Before John's exile, he consecrated Polycarp, who was only in his late teens or early twenties, as bishop of Smyrna.

For decades, Polycarp loyally served as bishop during a very demanding time for Christianity. In this era, the Church was suffering great persecutions, her members being fed to wild animals or burned alive for their faith. As bishop, it was Polycarp's duty to care for the faith of his flock throughout these persecutions, as well as to root out heresies that were springing up in the young religion. He was renowned for his piety.

When Polycarp was eighty-six, the persecution of Christians in his region became even more severe. Eventually Polycarp himself was singled out. Taken prisoner and brought in front of a vengeful crowd, Polycarp was told to renounce Christ or suffer greatly. He then gave the response that would lead to his martyrdom: "I have served him these eighty-six years, and he never did me any harm, but much good, and how can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?... Hear my free confession—I am a Christian."

Because he was unwilling to blaspheme Christ, Polycarp was killed and his body burned down to the bones. His example, though, lives on even now. Centuries later he is still providing an example of respect and love for God.



St. Polycarp
(died c. 155)
Feast on February 23

VOCABULARY

BLASPHEMY

Speech, thought, or action involving contempt for God or the Church, or persons or things dedicated to God.

DIGNITY

The quality of being worthy, or honorable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.

DISCRETION

Power to decide. See true conscience (Chapter 17).

NAME

Not only the title by which a person is called, but the term by which the person is identified.

OATH

Invocation of God's name to bear witness to the truth.

PERJURY

Giving one's word under oath falsely, or making a promise under oath without intending to keep it.

PRAISE

The form of prayer which focuses on giving recognition to God for his own sake, giving glory to him for who he is.

REVERENCE

Deep respect felt or shown towards a person on account of his or her position or relationship.

VOW

A deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good which must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is a name special to a person?
2. Why did God reveal his name to us?
3. Besides God, whom does the second commandment require us to respect? Why?
4. What is at the heart of the second commandment?
5. Why is abusing God's name a sin?
6. What are some things we can do to show respect for God?
7. Why should you not take an oath over a small matter?
8. What are the conditions for an oath to be valid?
9. How is disrespect for God's name seen in everyday life?
10. Why would someone make a vow to God?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. In the following cases, to what degree do the oaths or vows taken oblige, and why?

a. Laura and her sister Theresa have not spoken to each other for seven years as a result of a fight over some antiques that their grandmother left behind when she died. Because he was angry with Laura at the time of her argument with Theresa, Laura's father supported Theresa and gave all the property to her, an action he later deeply regretted. Although he apologized to Laura and asked Theresa to share the property with her sister, she refused to do so, resulting in the rift between the sisters. Laura's father recently decided to rewrite his will, and Laura demanded that he swear to name her as his sole heir, leaving her sister out of his will. Because he still feels guilty about what occurred before, her father has done so, but his conscience is bothering him. Must he do what he swore to do?

b. Peter promised to give his friend Sara a ring that he won in a contest and that she liked very much. Although he believed the ring to be of little value, he later discovered that it is actually worth quite a lot of money. Now he doesn't want to give Sara the ring. Must he?

c. Because he had been only an average student for the first three years of high school, David found it difficult to be accepted to the extremely competitive premedical program at the college he had chosen at the beginning of his senior year. His family was poor and could not afford to send him to the school, and it wasn't very likely that he was going to get a scholarship because of his past academic performance.

But David thought and prayed a lot about it, and he wanted to be a doctor. He worked hard during his senior year and succeeded in earning straight A's both semesters. In addition, he went to a local community college for one year, where he also earned straight A's. All the time he worked on his lately-developed dream of attending medical school, he prayed to God to help him and to grant him the favor of becoming a doctor. At one point, after careful consideration, he even vowed that if God would help him gain admittance to medical school, he would devote his first two years as a doctor to serving as a missionary doctor with a lay volunteer program in a poor country in Asia or Africa. Now that he has graduated at the top of his class from medical school, David has been offered a position at one of the most prestigious research hospitals in the U.S. He remembers the vow that he made, but this is a chance that he may not get again for a long time. What should he do?

2. It is easy to think of popular words, phrases, and expressions that are blasphemous or sacrilegious in nature. List instead common expressions, popular, and solemn practices that indicate respect for God and his name.

3. Read the following Scripture passages about the punishment that befalls blasphemers: 1 Kings 21: 13-16; 2 Kings 19: 4-7. Why do you think that God punished so severely those who blasphemed his name among the people of Israel?

FROM THE CATECHISM

2160 “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” (Ps 8:1)

2161 The second commandment enjoins respect for the Lord’s name. The name of the Lord is holy.

2162 The second commandment forbids every improper use of God’s name. Blasphemy is the use of the name of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Virgin Mary, and of the saints in an offensive way.

2163 False oaths call on God to be witness to a lie. Perjury is a grave offense against the Lord, who is always faithful to his promises.

2164 “Do not swear whether by the Creator, or any creature, except truthfully, of necessity, and with reverence” (St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 38).

2165 In Baptism, the Christian receives his name in the Church. Parents, godparents, and the pastor are to see that he be given a Christian name. The patron saint provides a model of charity and the assurance of his prayer.

2166 The Christian begins his prayers and activities with the sign of the cross: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

2167 God calls each one by name (cf. Is 43:1).



Endnotes

1. Cf. Zec 2: 13; Ps 29: 2; 96: 2; 113: 1-2.
2. CIC, can. 1191 § 1.

