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The Church in Central and Southern Indiana

Leadership Briefing

By Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

Ten Commandments are meant to help us love God and love our neighbor

During his weekly audience on August 18, Pope Francis continued his series of reflections on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians. His particular emphasis was the relationship between Mosaic Law and the teaching of Jesus exemplified in the Beatitudes. The Holy Father's message (see below) can be illustrated by the following story:

A fourth-grade teacher in one of our Catholic schools was once asked, "Why are you teaching the Ten Commandments? They're so harsh and negative—all that talk about stealing and adultery and covetousness. Why not teach the beatitudes instead? They're much more positive."

The teacher replied, "Oh, we teach the beatitudes too. They teach us about heaven, and, as you say, they're very positive. But our children need to know the negatives as well. They need to be warned about the dangers that they will face as they journey to heaven."

The teacher in this story is wise and experienced, and the answer given here is exactly right. Parents and teachers know how important it is to warn children about things that can cause them grave harm: crossing a busy street without a parent or guardian, accepting gifts from strangers or avoiding inappropriate behavior by those they know, or staying out late at night alone. Unless we warn our children, we place them in harm's way. Yes, our warnings can



seem harsh or negative, but they are issued with a positive end in mind: the well-being and safety of our children.

The Decalogue (literally God's "ten words"), which we find in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, are the warning signs God has given us on life's journey. They are intended to keep us from making serious mistakes, from getting lost or from turning down pathways that lead to death rather than to life. As Christians, we believe that the ultimate meaning of these words of warning, the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, is revealed in the teaching and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don't hesitate to teach the negative warning signs at the same time that we point out the positive experiences (the beatitudes or blessings) of life in Christ. Both are essential to a safe and successful journey!

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the beatitudes confront us "with decisive moral choices." They invite us "to purify our hearts of bad instincts and to seek the love of God above all else." These positive words of Jesus teach us that "true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement—however beneficial it may be—such as science, technology or art, or indeed in any creature but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love" (#1723).

The Decalogue was given to the Jewish people, and to us, to warn us against the temptations ("bad instincts") that influence us to turn away from God and seek our happiness in people and things that can never satisfy the profound desire for him that God has placed in every human heart. Each of the Ten Commandments, whether formulated as a negative proscription ("You shall not") or a positive precept ("Honor your father and mother") serves to keep us on the right path—the way to heaven. Far from being mean or judgmental, each commandment affirms something profoundly positive about God and about His creation.

The negative warning signs on the journey to life are meant to help us love God and love our neighbor. As the catechism teaches, the Ten Commandments and the beatitudes both "describe for us the paths that lead to the Kingdom of heaven. Sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we tread them, step by step, by everyday acts. By the working of the Word of Christ, we slowly bear fruit in the Church to the glory of God" (#1724).

Isn't it wonderful that children in our Catholic schools and religious education programs are free to learn about God's warning signs—and about the happiness that can be ours as we travel life's journey? The Ten Commandments are a gift from God, and we should all be deeply grateful to those parents, teachers, catechists and pastors who insist on making these profound words of warning such an important part of education in the Christian faith.

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Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Second Edition*

PART THREE: LIFE IN CHRIST

SECTION TWO: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

"Teacher, what must I do . . .?"

2052 "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" To the young man who asked this question, Jesus answers first by invoking the necessity to recognize God as the "One there is who is good," as the supreme Good and the source of all good. Then Jesus tells him: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." And he cites for his questioner the precepts that concern love of neighbor: "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother." Finally Jesus sums up these commandments positively: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

2053 To this first reply Jesus adds a second: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." This reply does not do away with the first: following Jesus Christ involves keeping the Commandments. The Law has not been abolished, but rather man is invited to rediscover it in the person of his Master who is its perfect fulfillment. In the three synoptic Gospels, Jesus' call to the rich young man to follow him, in the obedience of a disciple and in the observance of the Commandments, is joined to the call to poverty and chastity. The evangelical counsels are inseparable from the Commandments.

2054 Jesus acknowledged the Ten Commandments, but he also showed the power of the Spirit at work in their letter. He preached a "righteousness [which] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" as well as that of the Gentiles. He unfolded all the demands of the Commandments. "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill.' . . . But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment."

2055 When someone asks him, "Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" Jesus replies: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets." The Decalogue must be interpreted in light of this twofold yet single commandment of love, the fullness of the Law:

The commandments: "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope

Brothers and sisters,
good morning!

Saint Paul, who loved Jesus and had clearly understood what salvation was, taught us that the “children of the promise” (Gal 4:28) — that is all of us, justified by Jesus Christ — are not bound by the



Law, but are called to the demanding lifestyle of the freedom of the Gospel. The Law however exists. But it exists in another way: the same Law, the Ten Commandments, but in another way, because it could no longer be justified by itself once the Lord Jesus had come. And therefore, in today’s catechesis I would like to explain this. And we ask: what, according to the Letter to the Galatians, is the role of the Law? In the passage we heard, Paul says that the Law was like a pedagogue... a beautiful image that deserves to be understood in its correct meaning...

Referring to the Law in these terms enables Saint Paul to clarify the role it played in the history of Israel. The Torah, that is, the Law, was an act of magnanimity by God towards his people. After the election of Abraham, the other great act was the Law: laying down the path to follow. It certainly had restrictive functions, but at the same time it had protected the people, it had educated them, disciplined them and supported them in their weakness, especially by protecting them from paganism; there were many pagan attitudes in those times.

The Torah says: “There is only one God and He has set us on our way”. An act of goodness by the Lord. And certainly, as I said, it had restrictive functions, but at the same time it had protected the people, had educated them, had disciplined them and it had supported them in their weakness.

[St. Paul’s] conviction is that the Law certainly possesses a positive function — as a pedagogue moving forward — but it is a function that is limited in time. Its duration cannot be extended too far because it is linked to the maturation of individuals and their choice of

freedom. Once one has come to faith, the Law exhausts its instructional value and must give way to another authority. What does this mean? That after the Law we can say, “We believe in Jesus Christ and do what we want”? No! The Commandments exist, but they do not justify us. What justifies is Jesus Christ. The Commandments must be observed, but they do not give us justice; there is the gratuitousness of Jesus Christ, the encounter with Jesus Christ that freely justifies us. The merit of faith is receiving Jesus. The only merit: opening the heart. So, what do we do with the Commandments? We must observe them, but as an aid to the encounter with Jesus Christ.

This teaching on the value of the law is very important and deserves to be considered carefully so as not to fall into misunderstandings and take false steps. It will do us good to ask ourselves whether we still live in the period in which we need the Law, or if instead we are fully aware of having received the grace of becoming children of God so as to live in love. How do I live? In the fear that if I do not do this, I will go to hell? Or do I live with that hope too, with that joy of the gratuitousness of salvation in Jesus Christ? It is a good question. And also a second one: do I scorn the Commandments? No. I observe them, but not as absolutes, because I know that it is Jesus Christ who justifies me.

(A Selection from Pope Francis’s, Catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians: 5. The propaedeutic value of the Law, General Audience, August 18, 2021).

My Prayer for You

Almighty and merciful Father, you gave the 10 Commandments to us to protect us from the slavery of sin. Help us to remain faithful to your Law of Love and to recognize that with the coming of Christ and his redeeming grace, the Law finds its fulfillment in the Gospel message of new life and freedom in the Spirit. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

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