

## EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

### WITNESSES TO THE TRUTH

(C 2464-2513, USC Ch. 32)

**Eighth Commandment** (C 2513-2664, USC Ch 32)  
*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”*

*Jesus said, “If you remain in my Word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (Jn 8:31-32)*

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In this lesson, we will look at:

- What the eighth commandment calls us to
- God is Truth
- Called to be witnesses to the truth
- Three obstacles to living in the truth
- Sins against the eighth commandment
- The media and truth
- Truth, beauty and sacred art

### What the Eighth Commandment Calls Us To

The *Catechism* (2505) states: “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.”

In his book on Catholic Christianity, Peter Kreeft writes: “This commandment is one of the most neglected and most disobeyed of all the commandments. For like the first commandment, it is disobeyed whenever any commandment is disobeyed. Just as all sin is some kind of idolatry (choosing some false god), so all sin is some kind of falsehood, some kind of choice of darkness over light” (p.269).

The eighth commandment calls us to live in the truth that God has revealed to us in Jesus and to communicate truthfully with others. Truthfulness is the virtue or good habit that makes one a person of integrity, one who can be trusted. Trust is the key to strong and healthy relationships and to the common good. The eighth commandment forbids all forms of lying and misrepresentations of the truth.

### God is Truth

Just as God is love, we can also say God is truth. In him there is no darkness or falsehood (C 2464). Jesus came to reveal to us the true nature of God which is love and truth. “Truth and love coincide in Christ...in him truth and love are blended. Love without truth would be blind. Truth without love would be like a clanging cymbal” (Pope Benedict XVI). Jesus not only taught God’s truth; he personified it. He said: “I am the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*” (Jn 14:6). He also said: “To have seen me is to have seen the Father” (ibid, v.9). Towards the end of his time on earth, Jesus promised to send his disciples the *Spirit of truth* who would lead his followers into the truth that he had revealed to them (Jn 16:12-13). Despite the weaknesses and sinfulness of her members, the Holy Spirit has empowered the Church to be a protector and teacher of God’s truth in every generation.

***Born with an innate desire for the truth.*** The *Catechism* (2467) states: “Man tends by nature towards the truth.” We instinctively hunger to know the truth. We want others to say what they mean and to mean what they say. We want our Church leaders and political leaders to speak the truth. We want truth in all areas of life.

**Pause:** What is the biggest challenge(s) we face today as we seek to be truthful people?

### Called to be Witnesses to the Truth

Just as Jesus was a witness by word and deed to God and his truth, so are we called by baptism to be witnesses to Jesus and his Gospel (Acts 1:8, C 2472). In the now famous words of St. Francis of Assisi, all of us are called to “preach the Gospel always and if necessary to use words.” Timothy tells us: “Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord” (2Tm 1:8). We can testify to the truths of our faith in our daily lives especially when we come into contact with those who do not believe in God or Jesus, or in the fullness of faith taught by the Catholic Church. St. Peter exhorts us to be “always ready to give an

explanation of your faith to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do so with gentleness and reverence” (1Pt 3:15-16). To be authentic and credible witnesses to Christ requires that we know him and actually believe the truth he teaches. It also requires that our actions be coherent with the truths we believe. To bear effective witness to the truth, we must be truthful people whose lives are centered on seeking first the kingdom of God.

“*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death” (C 2473). Peter Kreeft writes: “Martyrdom is a sign of the spiritual warfare between Christ and antichrist, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, which is scripture’s persistent theme from Genesis to Revelation, because it is the central drama of human history and of each individual life.”

### Obstacles to Knowing and Living the Truth

As followers of Christ, we have a serious obligation to seek the truth and to live our lives according to the truth we know. This is not easy because we are always doing battle with the *secular world*, the *flesh* and the *devil*.

The *world* we live in has a low regard for truth-telling and does not believe in *objective* truth. Just before he was elected Pope, Joseph Ratzinger gave a homily about “the “dictatorship of relativism” that does not recognize anything as definitive, and trusts solely one’s own ego and desires. Relativism is the belief that there is no objective truth, only opinions, and that “my truth” is as good as “your truth.” In a culture where relativism reigns, it becomes more and more challenging to hold on to religious truth. Even Christian doctrine is downplayed as someone else’s opinion.

Relativists who claim that there is no objective truth have an untenable position, as shown by the following piece by Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy.

“All forms of skepticism of objective truth refute themselves.”  
“There is no truth.” Is *that* true? “Truth is not objective.” Is that truth objective?  
“Truth is not universal.” Except *that* truth?

“No one can know truth.” Except you, I suppose?  
“Truth is uncertain.” Is *that* uncertain?  
“All generalizations are false.” Including that one?  
“You can’t be dogmatic.” You say that very dogmatically.  
“Don’t impose your truth on me!” But you just imposed your truth on me!  
“There are no absolutes.” Absolutely?  
“Truth is only opinion.” So...that’s only your opinion?”

(Fr. Al McBride’s College Catechism, p.251)

The *flesh* is that part of us that has not yet submitted to Christ nor to the truth of his Gospel. Because of original sin, our minds are clouded and our wills are weakened (see Article 4). Because of our own sinful tendencies, there is a part of us that does not want to know the truth; or when we do know it, we resist acting on it.

The *devil* which Jesus calls the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44), is the one that deceives and sows chaos. In Gen 3:4-5, Satan bears false witness against God, accusing him of having deceitful motives. In his first letter, Peter reminds us that “our opponent, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (5:8). In his letter to the Ephesians (6:10-17), Paul reminds us that our struggle is not just against the darkness of the world or the sinful tendencies of the flesh, but also against evil spiritual powers. The devil’s job is to confuse us and lie to us about what is and isn’t true.

Despite these three enemies of the truth, we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit and the Church, discern what is truthful and act on it.

**Pause:** Relativism is the belief that there are no objective truths, only opinions, and that “my truth” is as good as “your truth.” How widespread is this relativism today? How does one go about refuting it?

### Sins Against the Eighth Commandment (C 2475-2487, USC p. 431)

The *Catechism* (2483) states that “lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.”

“The *gravity of a lie* is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims” (C 2484). Lying is a mortal sin if it causes grave harm to another’s reputation.

**Reparation.** When our lies have hurt the good name of another, we must do everything in our power to undo the harm we have done (C 2487).

**False witness and perjury.** False witness in court and perjury (lying under oath) violate justice. They are seriously wrong because they cause innocent people to suffer or to be unfairly punished.

**Rash judgment, detraction and calumny.** *Rash judgment* is snap judgment of someone’s blameworthiness without sufficient information. *Detraction* is revealing the faults of another with no good reason. *Calumny* is spreading rumors or lies about another.

A life dedicated to the truth and lived in service of love of God and neighbor frees us from human motivations that tempt us to engage in slander, gossip, rash judgment, perpetuation of false stereotypes, spreading of rumors, and dissemination of misinformation.

**Is it legitimate to sometimes withhold the truth?** The *Catechism* (2489) states: “The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not to be known or for making use of a discreet language. The duty to avoid scandal often commands strict discretion. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it.”

**The seal of confession.** A priest can never, under penalty of excommunication, reveal what he hears in confession. The seal of confession is so sacred that it binds a layperson who acts as an interpreter during confession (C 2490).

**Professional secrets.** Professional secrets shared by physicians, politicians, lawyers, and psychologists should not be revealed unless the secret is bound to cause great harm to the one who confided it, the one who heard it, a third party, or

where serious harm can only be avoided by telling the truth (C 2491).

In general, we must honor everyone’s right to privacy and must balance that right with the public’s right to information without harming the dignity of the person/s concerned. This includes those who work in the media who may be tempted for profit to reveal to the public details about someone else’s life.

**Pause:** What are some of the big lies that many people embrace today in this country?

### **The Media and Truth** (C 2493-2499, USC p. 434)

Within modern society, the media plays a major role in our lives and in the shaping of public opinion. From an evangelization point of view, the media, including the internet, gives the Church enormous opportunities for presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.

The *Catechism* (2494) states: “The information provided by the media is at the service of the common good. Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, justice, and solidarity.”

We are blessed in the West to have freedom of the press, freedom to express ideas that may contradict the government and even the Church. But such freedom must always be balanced with responsibility to seek the truth and to avoid half truths, lies and misinformation.

As *users* and *consumers* of the mass media, we also have a responsibility to be discerning about what we hear and not to passively accept all that is reported. Parents have a responsibility to protect their children from the unhealthy and immoral aspects of the media which can so easily damage young, developing minds.

In his chapter on the eighth commandment, Fr. Al McBride, O Praem, writes: *Truth works better than lies for the good of the family and society. Journalists and entertainers should get beyond the superficial need to shock, scandalize, and degrade by appealing to sex and violence. Just tell the truth and use imagination to build up the virtues that make for wholesome families and a healthy society. Politicians will lose the trust of people if*

they persist in half truths, evasiveness, and manipulation of people. Business leaders who want a loyal workforce will succeed more by being honest with employees than by bulldozing them with misinformation. Spouses will have better marriages when they insist on being truthful with each other (p.150).

### **Truth, Beauty, and Sacred Art (C 2500-2503)**

The *Catechism* has a final section on the eighth commandment that deals with the connection between truth and beauty. Fr. McBride writes: *Real art is truthful. True art invites us to contemplate the beauty of God and the divine reflection in creation and human beings. Art expresses beauty in a language that is beyond words. In its best expression, art touches the depths of the human heart, exalts the soul, and opens the person to the mystery of God* (ibid pp 250-251).

**Pause:** Is there a piece of art that speaks to you in a special way? If so, explain.

### **Suggested actions**

This week, pay special attention to your conversation with others. To what extent are you truthful in what you say? Be attentive to opportunities you may get to share the truth of the Gospel with others.

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## **Meditation I**

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*Lying is linked to the tragedy of sin and its perverse consequences, which have had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the lives of individuals and nations. We need but think of the events of the past century, when aberrant ideological and political systems willfully twisted the truth and brought about the exploitation and murder of an appalling number of men and women, wiping out entire families and communities. After experiences like these, how can we fail to be seriously concerned about lies in our own times, lies which are the framework for menacing scenarios of death in many parts of the world. Any authentic search for peace must begin with the realization that the problem of truth and untruth is the concern of every man and woman; it is decisive for the peaceful future of our planet.*

(Message for World Day of Peace,  
Pope Benedict XVI, Jan. 1, 2006)

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## **Meditation II**

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*The words “image,” “appearance,” and “outwardly” are crucial to understanding the morality of the evil. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their “goodness” is all on a level of pretense. It is... a lie. This is why they are the “people of the lie.”*

*Actually the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves. They cannot or will not bear the pain of self-reproach.... Yet the self-deceit would be unnecessary to tolerate that sense. At one and the same time, [evil people] are aware of their evil and desperately trying to avoid the awareness.... [They sweep] the evidence of their evil under the rug of their consciousness.... We become evil by attempting to hide from ourselves...*

(People of the Lie, Scott Peck)

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