

SEVENTH AND TENTH COMMANDMENTS

A FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE

(C 2401-2463, 2534-2557, USC Ch 31 & 34)

In this lesson we will look at:

- Common good and private property
- Seven principles of Catholic social teaching
- Forms of stealing
- Greed and envy

Seventh Commandment (C 2401-2463, USC Ch 31)

“You shall not steal.”

The *Catechism* deals with the seventh commandment as it pertains to the issue of stealing as well as the broader issue of the Church’s social teaching. We will first look at some of the broader issues and then examine how we can violate this commandment.

Common Good and Private Property

The *Catechism* seeks to strike a balance between our call to be concerned about the common good of all God’s people and our right to own and enjoy private property (C 2402-2406).

The *Catechism* reminds us that in the beginning, God created the earth and its resources for the enjoyment of all people. *“The goods of the earth are destined [intended] for the whole human race”*(C 2402). At the same time, people have a natural right to own property to help them take care of their own basic needs and the needs of those placed in their care.

But the right to private property is not an absolute one. Private property owners have a responsibility to keep the needs of the common good in mind as they develop, manage and use their goods. In reality none of us own anything. God is the sole owner. We who are blessed with private property are merely stewards or caretakers of God’s blessings (C 2402). It will always be a gross irresponsibility and serious sin for owners of private property to live in utter luxury while millions of our brothers and sisters are starving to death or lack the most basic of human needs. In an ideal world, the common good fosters private property, and private property fosters the common good.

Pause: In today’s society, many wealthy people who own several homes and live lavish lifestyles have a total disregard for the common good. How and why does this happen? Can you give examples of people who have a deep concern for the common good?

Catholic Social Teaching

Modern Catholic social teaching is generally thought to have begun with the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Conditions of Workers) by Pope Leo XIII. In that letter, the Pope addressed squarely the horrendous conditions of workers in what had become industrialized and urbanized Europe. Many workers, including children, worked *long hours* in sometimes *horrific conditions* for *paltry wages*. In addition, their *housing* and *living conditions* in the large industrial cities of Europe were appalling.

What was new about Leo’s letter was that he not only advocated *works of mercy* but also *justice*. He demanded a change in the social structures and institutions of the day that were the causes of poverty. He called for just and decent wages, for safe working conditions, and for laws that would protect adults and children from abuse in the workplace. Leo insisted that the God-given dignity of all workers throughout the world must be respected.

Since Leo’s letter, his successors have addressed other issues like hunger, poverty, prejudice, discrimination, war and peace. Over the past one hundred years, the Church has developed an impressive body of social teaching, sometimes called the Church’s best kept secret.

In 1995, sub-committees of the Catholic Conference of U.S. Bishops came together to summarize our Church’s body of social teaching. After much work, the committees distilled the main points of this teaching into *seven themes* (listed below). These key themes or principles of Catholic social teaching give us much food for thought.

1. Life and dignity of the human person. All humans (born and unborn) are sacred, created in the image and likeness of God. People do not lose their dignity because of disability, poverty, age, lack of success, or race. This principle places persons above things—being above having. It calls us, individually and as a community, to protect human life at all stages and to advocate on behalf of all whose dignity is mistreated.

2. Call to family, community, and participation. We are reminded that we are not only sacred but also social persons. How we organize our society—in economics, politics, in law and policy—directly impacts the dignity of the human person and his/her

capacity to grow in community. St. Paul tells us: “We are one body, when one suffers, we all suffer.” The family, being the heart of society, must especially be protected and strengthened, and not undermined.

3. Rights and responsibilities. Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can only be protected and a healthy community achieved if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Key human rights are the right to life, food, shelter, healthcare, education, and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. All must work for the common good.

4. Option for the poor and vulnerable. The moral test of any society is how it treats its vulnerable members. While Jesus loved all people, he had a special love and concern for the poor, the oppressed and the sick. So must we his disciples. The poor have the most urgent call on the conscience of a nation. As a nation and individually, we are called upon to look at public policy decisions and our own personal decisions in terms of how they affect the poor.

5. The dignity of work and the rights of workers. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is also a way to participate in God’s ongoing creation of the world. Every person has a right to decent and productive work, fair wage and good working conditions, not to mention private property and economic initiative.

6. Solidarity. We are all brothers and sisters in God’s family. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they live. We are one family, whatever our nationality, racial, ethnic, economic or ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means understanding that “loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

7. Care for creation. The earth and all that is in it belong to God. As stewards and trustees of God’s creation, we are called to protect people and planet. We are not just consumers and users of the earth and its resources; we are called to live our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.

(If interested in exploring more fully the above Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching, read *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching* by Marvin Krier Mich.)

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings on the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching? Which one attracts you and challenges you the most?

Simply put, Catholic social teaching helps us to understand and put into practice the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the ministry of Jesus teach us that our neighbor is everyone in need. Catholic social teaching makes it clear that our love of neighbor can express itself through *works of mercy* (e.g. donating to food pantries) and through *works of justice* (e.g., advocating for legislation that will help the poor). Catholic social teaching is about applying the Gospel message to the social issues of our time.

Capitalism and socialism. The *Catechism* refuses to give an unqualified endorsement to either “hard” capitalism or “hard” socialism (C 2425).

While socialist governments are not necessarily evil, there is a danger in a socialist form of government. The *Catechism* (2423) states: “A system that subordinates the basic rights of individuals and of groups to collective organization of production is contrary to human dignity.”

While the Church does not reject capitalism, “she has refused to accept, in the practice of ‘capitalism,’ individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor” (C 2425). The *Catechism* points out that the danger in capitalism is that it “makes profit the exclusive norm and ultimate end of economic activity” (ibid.), which is morally unacceptable.

International economics. The *Catechism* (2439) states: “*Rich nations* have a grave moral responsibility towards those which are unable to ensure the means of their development by themselves or have been prevented from doing so by tragic historical events. It is a duty in solidarity and charity; it is also an obligation in justice if the prosperity of the rich nations has come from resources that have not been paid for fairly.” In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great said: “When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy; we are paying a debt of justice” (C 2446).

In his book *What Your Money Means*, entrepreneur Frank Hanna writes: “We need to find out what it means that you and I have money, and others do not.

Can it be that God or Providence or Chance merely intends to bestow on me the means to have greater ease and pleasure? Have I been singled out by the universe to take it easy? If so, why? What have I done to deserve to be pampered while others, not far from here, fall asleep hungry, or die destitute in the streets of Bangladesh? Can that be the meaning of my money: that I have a good time while others suffer?" (p. 112)

When we look at the strong emphasis the Church in our time places on social justice, we may wonder why. The answer is simple: we know more today because we live in a global world. We also know more about the structural causes of social injustices, the dynamics of society that often give the rich and the powerful unfair advantage over the hard working poor.

Pause: "When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt in justice." Comment.

Forms of Stealing

The *Catechism* has a long list of the various ways that we can steal and thereby sin against the seventh commandment, e.g., business fraud, unjust wages, overpricing, tax evasion, poorly done work, forgery of checks and invoices, excessive expenses and waste, damaging private or public property (C 2409). Other forms of stealing are scams, embezzlement, money-laundering, white-collar crime, wasting taxpayer's money. True repentance includes making restitution for stolen goods.

Gambling. Like so many issues in this commandment, the *Catechism* has a two-sided approach. On the one hand, "games of chance...or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice." On the other hand, excessive gambling is morally unacceptable (C 2413).

Animals. The *Catechism* (2416) states: "Animals are God's creatures...by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus people owe them kindness." "On the other hand, it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing...and for medical and scientific experimentation if it remains within reasonable limits...and if it contributes to caring for or saving human lives" (C 2417). The *Catechism* further states that "it is wrong to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly." On the other hand, "it is also wrong to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery" (C 2418).

Tenth Commandment (C 2534-2550)

"*You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.*"

"*Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be*" (Mt 6:21). While the seventh commandment concerns the external acts of stealing, the tenth commandment pertains to the inner attitudes, that of greed and envy, that lead us to steal and act unjustly.

We humans are born with lots of appetites and desires. For example, we eat when we are hungry and drink when we are thirsty. In and of themselves, appetites are good but they can lead to excess and a desire to have what is not ours.

The tenth commandment deals with two appetites, namely, *greed* and *envy* (also called covetousness) which can get us into trouble and keep us from truly enjoying the material things of life that God has blessed us with.

Greed. In the New Testament, Jesus frequently warns his audience about the danger of material riches. In Lk 12:15, Jesus says: "*Watch and be on your guard against avarice of any kind, for a man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs.*" Then Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the greedy man who decides to pull down his barns to build bigger ones to store his grain. The rich man thinks he will have years to eat, drink and be merry. Then comes the story punchline when Jesus says: "*Fool, this night your life will be demanded of you... Thus it will be for one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God*" (Lk 12:16-21).

We might say that Jesus called the rich man a "fool" not because he was rich, but because of his failure to share his wealth. There is an enormous difference between the "greedy rich" and the "generous rich." The latter know that they are merely stewards or managers of their material riches. In sharing their wealth with the poor and for good causes, they store up treasures in heaven for themselves.

Envy. The *Catechism* (2537) states: "Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbor it is a mortal sin."

"St. Augustine saw envy as 'the diabolical sin.' From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity" (C 2539).

Pause: What causes us to be greedy and envious? What helps you to deal with greedy tendencies?

Suggestions for dealing with greed and envy

Generosity. The best way to curb greedy and covetous tendencies is by developing a generous and giving spirit. Today, many Christians have adopted the biblical practice of tithing 10% or more of their income to their Church family and the poor (see Mal 3:7-10). While not all are able to give the full 10%, all should be *intentional givers*. In other words, the Church and the poor should not just receive our loose change and leftovers. Ideally, giving to one’s Church and to the poor is a line item in every disciple’s budget.

Simple lifestyle. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once said: “Live simply so that others may simply live.” One of the blessings of an economic recession is that it forces almost everyone to take a good look at how they are spending their money. In a booming economy, it is very easy to misuse our financial blessings and to lose sight of the millions of people who live daily in dire poverty.

In short, the tenth commandment condemns greed and envy, and calls us to be responsible stewards of God’s material blessings.

Pause: What are your thoughts on the biblical concept of stewardship—that God owns everything and that our duty is to be faithful and responsible stewards of his blessings?

Suggested Actions

Spend some time reflecting on the biblical concept of stewardship and on your attitude towards money and material possessions. If you are presently not tithing, consider setting aside a percentage of your monthly income to support the Church and poor.

Meditation

We are all really God’s children. We have been dreamt by God to spend time here on earth, to awaken to the kingdom that is before us and within us, and to love. We are all here to love, to care for, to feed, to teach, and to protect each other.

Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, has said that all of our work is a “work of mercy.” That is, mother, father, bus driver, mechanic, secretary, teacher, sister, priest, nurse, doctor, gardener; by the

grace of God, we care for each other and hold each other together in many ways. We are called to give of the gifts we have been given. The only thing we take with us from this life is what we have given away...

Many Americans just do not know how much power they have to respond to the tremendous needs of so many people who suffer so much in so many ways. The problem is that many don’t even know the name of anyone who is desperately poor. They don’t know the name of anyone dying of starvation, working at the garbage dump, or in need of medical care so their child will not die. They have never talked with the lonely in a nursing home or prison. They don’t know the name of a bright child with no access to education. And so they do not have the will or the know-how to connect. Americans do respond generously when they know who suffers and how they suffer. The problem is we do not know...

A good first step is to look for opportunities to meet people who suffer injustice. If we stay in our small communities and never get to meet the oppressed person, we will probably never awaken to the tremendous injustices around us. However, if we have the courage to reach out to the oppressed, we will find that there is tremendous power in the encounter. It can cause a transformation within, leading to compassionate action. It can change the face of the earth...

Most who have journeyed into poor communities are wonderfully surprised to find that they are almost always welcomed with open arms. Missionaries invariably relate that they were not only welcomed with great hospitality, but found that they had much to learn from the people they went to serve. They often say they found great faith, hope, generosity, and humility among the poor. There is a wonderful, powerful conversion and transformation that frequently takes place in the encounter.

(The True Cost of Low Prices – The Violence of Globalization, p. 133-134)

Pause: What spoke to you most in the above meditation?

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