

# THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

**Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.** (Ex 20:12)

The fourth commandment opens what is called the “second table of the Ten Commandments.” The first table of the Law consists in how we must honor, love and obey God. The remaining seven commandments all deal with the love and respect due to our neighbor. Since Charity begins at home, the fourth commandment places essential emphasis on family love. God has willed that, after him, we should honor our parents to whom we owe our life and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God.

## **The wide scope of this Commandment**

While it is true that charity begins at home it is also true that it does not end there. So also the fourth commandment is about more than honoring our parents. *The fourth commandment is addressed expressly to children in their relationship to their father and mother, because this relationship is the most universal. [But] It likewise concerns the ties of kinship between members of the extended family. It requires honor, affection, and gratitude toward elders and ancestors. Finally, it extends to the duties of pupils to teachers, employees to employers, subordinates to leaders, citizens to their country, and to those who administer or govern it.* (Catechism # 2199) In examining this Commandment it will be beneficial for us to look first at the family and then to enlarge our scope to the wider societal implications.

## **An important clarification.**

Before examining the duties of children there is an important premise underlying this commandment and which must not be overlooked: parents and all those in authority have obligations and duties that flow from their status. To overlook or ignore these obligations places significant burdens upon children, subordinates, and others. This in turn can lead to bewilderment and contributes to an undermining of the respect and honor which ought ordinarily be paid parents,

elders and those in authority. Thus, while parents and lawful authorities ought to be respected it is also true to say that they must conduct themselves in a manner that is respectable and observe their duties with care. What are some of these duties? The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives a fine summary of them and the text is largely reproduced here.

## **The duties of parents.**

*Parents must regard their children as children of God and respect them as human persons. Showing themselves obedient to the will of the Father in heaven, they educate their children to fulfill God's law...They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service...self-denial, sound judgment, and self-mastery are learned...Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children. By knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them...Parents should teach children to avoid the compromising and degrading influences which threaten human societies...parents receive the responsibility and privilege of evangelizing their children. Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the "first heralds" for their children. They should associate them from their tenderest years with the life of the Church...Parents' respect and affection are expressed by the care and attention they devote to bringing up their young children and providing for their physical and spiritual needs. As the children grow up, the same respect and devotion lead parents to educate them in the right use of their reason and freedom. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators.* (Catechism 2221-2231).

It is in the context of the fulfillment of these duties that honor and respect for parents finds its fullest meaning. Honor for one's parents ought not be experienced as a burden but as a joy and the fruit of thankfulness and mutual affection.

## **The duties of Children**

What then are the duties of children? Here too the Catechism provides a rich summary of the meaning and implications of this commandment.

*Respect for parents derives from gratitude toward those who, by the gift of life, their love, and their work, have brought their children into the world and enabled them to grow in stature, wisdom, and grace. "With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that through your parents you were born; what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?" (Sirach 7:27-28)*

## **Obedience**

*Respect is shown by true docility and obedience. "My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 6:20)... As long as a child lives at home with his parents, the child should obey his parents in all that they ask of him when it is for his good or that of the family. "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."(Col. 3:20) Children should also obey the reasonable directions of their teachers and all to whom their parents have entrusted them. But if a child is convinced in conscience that it would be morally wrong to obey a particular order, he must not do so. As they grow up, children should continue to respect their parents. They should anticipate their wishes, willingly seek their advice, and accept their just admonitions. Obedience toward parents ceases with the emancipation of the children; not so respect, which is always owed to them.*

## **Honor and care in old age**

*The fourth commandment also reminds grown children of their responsibilities toward their parents. As much as they can, they must give them material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress. "Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure. Whoever honors his father will be gladdened by his own*

children, and when he prays he will be heard. Whoever glorifies his father will have long life, and whoever obeys the Lord will refresh his mother."(Sir. 3:2-6).

### **Wider family implications**

*The fourth commandment also promotes harmony in all of family life; it thus concerns relationships between brothers and sisters. Finally, a special gratitude is due to those from whom they have received the gift of faith, the grace of Baptism, and life in the Church. These may include parents, grandparents, other members of the family, pastors, catechists, and other teachers or friends.* (Catechism 2214-2220).

### **At the heart of civilization**

It cannot be underestimated how important the family is for the very existence of society and civilization. The widespread breakdown of the family in our own time already shows the grave results that flow from such a breakdown. Can our civilization be thought secure if such a breakdown is allowed to continue? *The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility for society to support and strengthen marriage and the family. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make good use of freedom. Civil authority should consider it a grave duty to acknowledge the true nature of*

*marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality, and promote domestic prosperity.* (Catechism 2207, 2210)

### **Honor all lawful authority**

The fourth commandment *also enjoins us to honor all who for our good have received authority in society from God. It clarifies the duties of those who exercise authority as well as those who benefit from it.* (Catechism 2234)

Those who exercise authority at any level must remember they do so as God's servants and in service of God's people God. They must never command what is contrary to God's law or to the dignity of persons. They must facilitate the exercise of freedom and responsibility by all. Authorities must command equitably, avoid favoritism, dispense justice humanely, and seek the common good as well as preserve individual rights. In all cases they must remember that they have authority only to serve (*cf* Mt. 10:37)

Citizens and those subject to authority have a duty to respect and obey lawful authority. They should see lawful authorities as, in a sense, representatives of God from whom all authority ultimately comes. They have a duty to cooperate with authorities for the building up of the common good, the securing of justice, the practice of well ordered charity, and the paying of just and reasonable taxes. The loyal collaboration to which citizens are called does not exclude the duty to voice their just

criticisms and helpful advice. We are also exhorted by scripture to *offer prayers and thanksgiving for kings and all who exercise authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectable in every way* (1 Tim 2:2). Finally, each citizen, each person under lawful authority, is obliged to follow and obey just and lawful directions and laws. However, they must not follow directives that are contrary to God's law, moral order, or fundamental human rights. *Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community.* "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."(Mt 22:21) "We must obey God rather than men":(Acts 5:29) (Catechism 2242)

Here then is a good place to conclude. God is the author and origin of all authority, whether it is the authority of a parent, the authority of a work supervisor, or the authority of a governor. In honoring lawful authority we honor God who gave the authority. Jesus saw fit to remind Pontius Pilate, *You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above* (Jn 19:11). This is a good reminder to those under authority that God stands behind duly constituted authority. But it also serves as a solemn reminder to all those in positions of authority, ultimately they are accountable to the God who is the author of their authority.