

# THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

## You Shall not Kill

The fourth Chapter of the Book of Genesis recounts the tragic story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The story is an astonishing account of how evil spreads with amazing speed. The revolt of Man against God in paradise is now followed by the deadly combat of man against man. Cain was hateful and envious of his brother because God seemed more pleased with Abel's sacrifice than his own. God tries to reassure Cain but also warns him not to yield to hateful thoughts: *Sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.* (Gn 4:7). Yet Cain yields to sin and to the evil one just as his parents, Adam and Eve had yielded. Cain murdered his own brother. At the root of every act of violence there is a concession to the thinking of the evil one who *was a murderer from the beginning* (Jn. 8:44). God says to Cain, *What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground* (Gn 4:10). God calls Cain to reflect on the enormity of what he has done. God also reveals the regard he has for the lives of the innocent. The crime of Cain, or of any murderer, cannot go unpunished. Cain must be exiled from his land forever.

Yet even here, God underscores the sacredness of Cain's life. Cain worries that his own life will be taken in vengeance. But God declares, *If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.* *And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him* (Gn 4:15). Thus, not even a murderer loses his personal dignity. Though suitable punishment surely results, God upholds the dignity of Cain's life and calls for an end to the cycle of violence.

## Human life is Sacred

The fifth commandment is not merely the forbiddance of murder it is also an affirmation of the sacred character of every human life and of God's sole sovereignty over human life. Therefore as we examine the Fifth Commandment we should appreciate not only what is forbidden but also what is affirmed: the greatness and goodness of the gift of human life.

The Scriptures spell out the first and most obvious implication of the fifth commandment: *Do not slay the innocent and righteous* (Ex 23:7). It is perhaps an understatement to say that the deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to their dignity and to God's Law. The forbidding such murder is universally valid. It obliges everyone, always and everywhere.

And yet this clear wording prompts some questions. Although murder of the innocent is always wrong, are there never cases where killing is just or necessary? What about self defense? Police are sometimes required to use lethal force against criminals threatening public safety, is this wrong? Can criminals be executed? Isn't it sometimes necessary for nations to go to war for just and reasonable causes?

## Legitimate Self-defense?

There is clearly such a thing as legitimate defense. In fact *the legitimate defense of persons and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing.* This is because *love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality. Therefore it is legitimate to insist on respect for one's own right to life. Someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow* (Catechism 2263-2264). Therefore, legitimate self defense should not be seen as an exception to the fifth commandment but as a fulfillment of it. *Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another's life, the common good of the family or of the state* (Catechism 2265). Thus parents, and significant leaders either of governments or other groups often have special obligations to preserve their lives. Clearly the use of lethal force to repel an attacker should be a last recourse. If non-lethal means of self-defense are available than one is obliged to use them first.

What is true for individuals is also true for the preservation of society. Criminals and aggressors must be rendered incapable of doing harm. There is a well-founded *right and duty of legitimate*

*public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.* (Catechism 2266).

## The Death Penalty

Regarding the death penalty we enter into a topic about which we must be very careful. Note that the Church teaches that the death penalty may be used only in cases of "extreme gravity." The catechism was recently amended to clarify the limits of recourse to the death penalty: *If however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means...Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime [and] rendering one who has committed and offense incapable of doing harm...the cases in which the execution of an offender is an absolute necessity are very rare if not practically non-existent.* (Catechism 2267). Hence the current resurgence in America of recourse to the death penalty is quite problematic from the standpoint of Catholic teaching. In this context we should remember the story of Cain cited above. Despite his murder of Abel, God forbade others from taking Cain's life to avenge Abel's death. Non-lethal but permanent exile, (a type of imprisonment) was the punishment God assigned.

## "Just" War

Sometimes Nations face unjust aggression from other nations or groups. *Those holding authority have the right to repel by armed force aggressors against the community in their charge.* (Catechism 2266). Here as well, recourse to military action and the use of lethal force to repel unjust aggressors must be an absolutely last recourse. Likewise, the threat posed must be of a very serious (grave) nature. If a military response is made it must be one that is carefully measured. The use of excessive force cannot be justified. Likewise, the death of non-combatants can never be directly intended. Once the threat is repelled the use of lethal force must stop. Clearly, the use of lethal force merely for retribution is entirely to be excluded. (cf Catechism # 2307-2317).

### **Extended implications**

The fifth commandment, while encompassing the right to self defense of individuals and society, clearly prohibits the direct and intentional killing we call murder. *The fifth commandment [also] forbids doing anything with the intention of indirectly bringing about a person's death. The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger* (Catechism 2269). Acting in a reckless, violent or dangerous fashion also violates this commandment insofar as it endangers the lives of others. Further, those who indulge greed or support and profit from injustices that lead to the hunger and death of others indirectly commit homicide for which they will be accountable to God. (*cf* Amos 8:4-10).

### **Abortion**

*Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception* (Catechism 2270). The Scriptures clearly teach that life in the womb is in God's hands and is His own handiwork: *For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb* (Ps 139:13). No human life is an accident, it is always directly intended by God and is a sovereign act of his love: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you* (Jer. 1:5). For these reasons the life of the child in the womb is absolutely sacred. The child's right to life is inalienable and must never be violated. No amount of legal, political, medical or philosophical argumentation can usurp the child's rights

or God's sole sovereignty. The issue of abortion is a very painful one for our modern age. It is also an issue which tests our character. The fifth commandment obliges all members of society to uphold the gift of life by assisting and supporting pregnant women, especially those with difficult pregnancies.

### **Euthanasia**

*Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable* (Catechism 2277). In recent years a false compassion has developed among some who hold that suffering is incompatible with human dignity. Clearly this is at odds with the Christian faith which sees in suffering a redemptive and transformative dimension. St. Paul learned an important truth about his own suffering: *Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Cor 12:8-10). It is not that Christians must relish suffering. Where possible we should seek to alleviate suffering. Yet we may never do this in ways which violate the sovereignty of God over life or which refuse the cross in an absolute sense, *Whoever does not take up his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.* (Lk 14:27). True compassion then, will move us to assist others in carrying the

cross. It leads to sharing in another's pain; it does not kill the person who's suffering we cannot bear. Finally, some claim that individuals have the right to end their life and claim, "I can do as I want with my own body." But this is not what Scripture teaches, *You are not your own; you were purchased and at a price! So glorify God in your body.* (1 Cor 6:20). *Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator.*(Catechism 2277)

### **Trust God**

Human life is sacred. God is the author and originator of every human life and it is He who sustains every one of us. Whatever challenges it brings, life is always God's yes, and the fruit of his love. We should marvel at the awesome and mysterious gift of our own life and the life of every one we encounter. The fifth commandment then is a celebration of the gift of life. We are called not only to respect the marvelous gift of life but also to grow in trust of God and to rest in the assurance that our lives are in His hands. As usual, a song says it best: *You don't have to worry; and don't you be afraid. Joy comes in the morning; troubles they don't last always. For there's a friend named Jesus; who will wipe your tears away. So if your heart is broken; just lift your hands and pray: Oh I know that I can make it; I know that I can stand. No matter what may come my way; my life is in your hands.*