

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

You Shall not Commit Adultery

Human sexuality is one of God's first and greatest gifts to the human person. It is also sacred because God himself created it and linked it with his greatest gift, the gift of life. We see its origins in the very act of our creation by God and we learn of its purpose and its glory. *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:27-28).* Note what this brief passage teaches us.

In the first place, man and woman are both created in God's image. *Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way.* (Catechism 2335) Thus, men and women are clearly different but these sexual differences are willed by God as unique ways of reflecting his glory. These differences, far from being in opposition, complement one another and become a source of blessing for both man and woman.

Secondly, if it is true that man and woman individually reflect God's glory it is even more the case that, united together in marriage, they are an image of God: *The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fruitfulness.* (Catechism 2335). In the Genesis account above God immediately links the distinction of the sexes to the generation of new human life: *Be fruitful and multiply.* (Gn. 1:28). God is a community of persons and his love bears fruit in creation and new life. So also a man and a woman united in marriage as a community of persons literally see their love bear fruit in the generation of new life.

Sexuality is Sacred

The human person is therefore sacred and sexuality is an essential part of our holiness for through it we image God who is love and whose love is both communal and fruitful. Human sexuality is also sacred because it is from the sexual union of man and woman that every human person by God's grace is conceived and born.

The Sixth Commandment is a solemn affirmation of the dignity and holiness of human sexuality. Marital love and sexuality are upheld and honored especially by the wording of this commandment. However, the sixth commandment is not merely a commandment that prohibits the breaking of marriage vows. Otherwise it would apply only to the married. Jesus makes this point quite clear in the Sermon on the Mount: *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* (Mt 5:27-28) Jesus teaches that the sixth commandment concerns purity of heart and binds "every one." It prohibits lust in all its forms. And although Jesus gives the example of a man looking lustfully at a woman, he surely intends the teaching for women as well. Thus, *the tradition of the Church has understood the sixth commandment as encompassing the whole of human sexuality.* (Catechism 2336). So everyone is commanded by God to live chastely. That is to say, each one of us is called to sexual purity, not only of the body but also of the mind and heart. For those who are married, this means that they are called to live in absolute fidelity to one another. For those who are unmarried sexual purity means that they must abstain from all genital sexual contact without exception. There are more specific implications regarding the sixth commandment which will be explained. But first we must understand what is meant by lust.

What is Lust?

The teaching of Jesus can seem quite severe. Most all of us have the experience of noticing that others are attractive. A man, for example, may experience an attraction to a beautiful woman even though she is not his spouse. Is this a sin? No, not in itself. In fact it is a healthy, even holy response to rejoice in the beauty of which God himself is the author. Where the sin of lust begins to enter the picture is if the man begins intentionally to fantasize sexually about a woman who is not his spouse. This involves more than non-voluntary or passing sexual thoughts that are quickly dismissed.

Lust involves sexual fantasies that are willfully entertained. Lust reduces sexuality to a pleasure in itself, apart from the relationship of communion with the whole person. *Sexuality...is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and woman commit themselves totally to one another until death* (Catechism 2361). Lust reduces persons to sexual objects and does not respect their totality. The teaching of the Sixth Commandment and our Lord Jesus is that the whole person must be loved and respected. Before sexual relations take place every one must be able to say, "I will not seek to enter into this deepest of personal communions with you without first giving you the gift of my entire life until death do us part. You are worth this much and more." Anything less cheapens sexuality and the human person.

Particular Sins against the 6th Commandment

All sins against the sixth commandment fail in some respect to reverence human person and human sexuality. **Masturbation** is the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure. By its very nature it involves the sexual fantasizing forbidden by our Lord (*cf* Mt. 5:28). It also, because it involves fantasy, tends to lead to unrealistic or selfish notions of sexuality. Further, masturbation can seriously damage the self-control so necessary in regard to sexuality by indulging the notion that sexual desires must always be satisfied. For all these same reasons, the use of **pornography** must be entirely excluded.

Fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. Such activity is frequently and strongly condemned in the scriptures: *Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.* (Eph 5:5-7). (See also: Gal 5:16-21; Rev 21:5-8; Rev. 22:14-16; Mt. 15:19-20; 1 Cor 6:9-20; Col 3:5-6; 1 Thess 4:1-8; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Heb 13:4).

Those who struggle with such sins should not despair of God's loving mercy. Surely God's wrath is a strong medicine intended primarily for the unrepentant that they may return to their senses. It is in fact a tragic feature of the modern age that many have simply declared fornication to be acceptable behavior. Such a position is unbiblical. The plain biblical teaching is that fornication is a sin and if it is committed it must be confessed and repented of. Enormous pain results from the rejection of God's law. Consider the sorrows resulting from fornication: venereal diseases, AIDS, teenage pregnancy, abortion, unwed mothers left to raise their children alone, absent and/or irresponsible fathers, children unjustly deprived of a complete family. It is reported that the leading cause of poverty in this nation is single motherhood. And then there difficult to measure pain caused by broken hearts: those who have been used as sexual objects then discarded, those who have been betrayed, those who have paid a heavy price for their own transgressions. Finally, as fornication has spread, marriage itself has suffered a heavy toll. Divorce rates have skyrocketed in the modern age. There are numerous factors at work in this but it is clear that the climate of sexual promiscuity has strongly contributed to the breakdown of marriage and the family. All of these reflections help us to understand that God's forbiddance of fornication makes sense and we are reminded again that his Law was not given to take away our fun but to protect us from the evil one.

Rape which is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of an individual is gravely wrong. It violates the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. Graver still is the sexual abuse of children by

adults whom the children should be able to trust and respect. Not only does this harm and violate the physical and moral integrity of the children, it also does serious psychological and emotional damage.

Prostitution also involves a serious degradation of the human person and of the gift of sexuality for those who engage in it and those who pay for it. Likewise the pornographic industry from printed materials to live shows and films is gravely sinful and does serious harm to the dignity of the human person and human sexuality. To receive or purchase any of these "services" is never permitted for a Christian. While it is always gravely sinful to engage in any of these practices the blameworthiness of the offense can be lessened if the person is forced to this humiliation by destitution.

For the married, any instance of **adultery** is obviously prohibited by the sixth commandment. This involves the mind and heart as well as the body.

Another teaching of the Church which is certain even if it is unpopular with some is that artificial **contraception** is not permitted. Recall that when God gave the gift of human sexuality He linked it directly to the mandate to be fruitful and multiply (*cf* Gen 1:27-28). For this reason the Church teaches that it is wrong to engage in the marriage act while intentionally excluding an openness to the possibility of new human life.

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex...Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity,(cf Gen

19:1-29; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:10; 1 Tim 1:10) [the Church] has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. (Catechism 2357). It must be said however that most men and women of homosexual orientation did not choose their homosexual orientation. For most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided (Catechism 2358). Scriptures do not permit a different law of chastity for those of homosexual orientation. Like every human person, they are called to chastity and since they are unmarried they must live celibately just as is the case for heterosexual singles. This may seem challenging but it is also a teaching of our faith that God never requires of anyone what he does not first give the grace to accept and live.

God's grace is perhaps the best point on which to conclude all these teachings. There is little doubt that many of these teachings on sexuality are challenging. But the Church presents them to us in the confidence of God's grace. God has called us to freedom and the truth about our passions is that either we will rule our passions or they shall rule us. God offers us the graces necessary to overcome all temptation and to develop self-mastery. Self-mastery is a long and exacting work. On the way to receiving this gift fully from God there will often be setbacks and falls. Yet God is rich in mercy and continues to call us home. If we make this journey with humility and repentance we need never doubt his patience and mercy. The Sixth Commandment is God's yes to our freedom and to the dignity and beauty of his gift to us, the gift of our sexuality.