

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not steal.

At first glance this commandment seems pretty simple and straightforward: “Don’t take anything that doesn’t belong to you without permission.” True enough, the seventh commandment does call us to respect the rights of others in regard to their personal property. This understanding however, is incomplete.

The seventh commandment has very far reaching implications by calling upon everyone to act with justice in regards to the goods of this world. For example, take note of the following quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church and see how wide ranging the sins against the seventh Commandment are: *The seventh commandment forbids theft, that is, [unjustly taking or keeping] another's property against the reasonable will of the owner...deliberate retention of goods lent or of objects lost; business fraud; paying unjust wages; forcing up prices by taking advantage of the ignorance or hardship of another...appropriation and use for private purposes of the common goods of an enterprise; work poorly done; tax evasion; forgery of checks and invoices; excessive expenses and waste. Willfully damaging private or public property is also contrary to the moral law and requires reparation.* (Catechism 2408-2409)

Thus, while the seventh commandment clearly involves questions of the rights to personal property, it has extensive social justice implications as well since the unjust distribution of goods amounts to a form of theft. In order to understand the social justice implications of this commandment it is necessary to consider some principles regarding creation and our stewardship of it.

The universal destination of goods

The first principle is what the catechism calls the “universal

destination of goods.” This means that *the goods of creation are destined for the whole human race...In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all his family.* (Catechism 2402, 2404).

God who is the giver of every good gift, generously gives us the whole of creation. But we are the stewards, not the owners of creation. A steward is expected manage the properties under his care according to the true owner’s instructions and manifest wishes. In countless passages of the Old Testament as well as the New, God commands a generous stewardship of his creation. We are not to hoard things or be selfish. We are to share the goods we have received with others. This is particularly true for those who have strong influence in the economy or who have received special business-related skills: *Goods of production - material or immaterial - such as land, factories, practical or artistic skills, oblige their possessors to employ them in ways that will benefit the greatest number.* (Catechism 2405)

Thus the catechism while acknowledging the right to private property justly acquired, nevertheless emphasizes that such property rights must be understood in the light of the universality of God’s gifts to the whole of mankind: *The right to private property, acquired by work or received from others by inheritance or gift, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind.* (Catechism 2403).

The principle of moderation

A second principle in the possession

and use of goods is moderation. Greed is the insatiable desire for more and it leads some to hoard the goods of this earth or to squander them for selfish purposes. The catechism teaches that *those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor.* (Catechism 2405).

Greed not only leads to an unjust distribution of goods, it also frequently leads to harmful effects through pollution and to the dissipation of resources. In addition, moderation is not only a virtue for the present time, it also regards the future.

The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity.[cf Gen 1:28-31] Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. (Catechism 2415)

Injustice is a form of theft

It is evident that to willfully neglect either the principle of moderation or the principle of the “universal destination of goods” amounts to a form of theft. This is because it neglects the just distribution of goods which God gave for all.

Thus, the Catechism teaches that the seventh commandment is about more than protecting personal property rights. It also upholds the need for justice and charity in the care and use of earthly goods. Care and concern for the poor should be considered an

integral part of the justice and charity to which we are called.

The seventh commandment and the social doctrine of the Church

The seventh commandment also provides an important basis for the social doctrine of the Church. This is an important body of Church moral teaching regarding economic and social matters and how they relate to the fundamental rights of the human person. There is simply not enough room in this context to consider all these moral teachings in detail. The heart of these teachings however is always to emphasize the rights and the dignity of the human person. This dignity must never be undermined by considerations that are purely economic or where profit is the only norm and end of economic activity. In all her pronouncements the Church has steered a middle course which has found much to critique in both communism and capitalism as well as other ideologies and economic theories. *The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with "communism" or "socialism." She has likewise refused to accept, in the practice of "capitalism," individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor. Regulating the economy solely by centralized planning perverts the basis of social bonds; regulating it solely by the law of the marketplace fails social justice, for there are many human needs which cannot be satisfied by the market. Reasonable regulation of the marketplace and economic initiatives, in keeping with a just hierarchy of values and a view to the common good, is to be commended.* (Catechism 2425).

There are other matters relating to

the social doctrine of the church that flow from the seventh commandment. To intentionally neglect them amounts also to a form of theft: failing to pay a just wage, failing to perform a just day's work for a just day's wage, engaging in unfair or unjustly discriminatory hiring practices, and any form of subordinating basic human rights to production schedules or market forces.

The duty to work

The Catechism in its consideration of the seventh commandment also admonishes every Christian regarding the duty of work: *Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another.[cf Gen 1:28] Hence work is a duty: "If any one will not work, let him not eat."(2 Thess 3:10) Work honors the Creator's gifts and the talents received from him. It can also be redemptive.* (Catechism 2427) Clearly "work" here refers to more than a wage paying job. Work includes all the ways in which we are expected to contribute to household and community tasks. It must be recalled that God expects us to put our gifts which we have received from him at the service of one another. The refusal to work is a form of theft since it robs the human community of necessary human resources, deprives it of gifts God has given, and all the while still draws on the fruits of others' labors. This reflection clearly presupposes that one is able to work in some fashion and not prevented from contributing to the human family due to illness of some other serious reason.

Respect for the goods of others

Our work is not only a blessing for the community, it is also a blessing

for the individual and his or her family. For this reason, the seventh commandment also protects and honors the fruits of our labor. *Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community..The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. The appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge.* (Catechism 2402, 2428). Hence the personal or "private" property of individuals that is justly attained is to be respected by others. It is not to be used by others without the explicit permission of the one to whom it belongs. If it is damaged intentionally or by accident, reparation must be made. By respecting the property of others we honor their freedom and dignity. We also acknowledge respect the duties of others when we respect their property for it is out of the fruits of their labors that they must support their family and meet their obligations to the community. In this way respect for private property is also related to the common good.

The call to respect our neighbors' goods is ultimately a call to respect our neighbor. In this way the seventh commandment, like all the others, is a solemn reaffirmation of the dignity of the human person. By setting forth our responsibilities with regard to this world's goods God calls us to honor our neighbor, he also reminds us of the nobility of our call to be stewards of his creation.