

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

The Eighth Commandment proclaims the splendor and the beauty of the truth. It is not often that we hear of the truth described in this way but consider how precious and essential a foundation the truth is for our lives. Without the truth there can be no trust and without trust there can be no relationships with others. Without the truth there is cynicism, fear and an atmosphere of exclusion and secrecy. Without the truth lives are ruined or lost by error and falsehood. Without the truth countless men, women and children are misled by deceitful and destructive philosophies that sow confusion and error. Jesus declared just how important and essential the truth is by describing it as the fundamental purpose of his saving mission: *For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.* (John 18:37). Jesus also taught, *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* (Jn 8:31)

Dedication to the truth

The first implication of the eighth commandment flows from the importance and essential nature of the truth: Christians must be dedicated to the truth and live according to it. *The Old Testament attests that God is the source of all truth. His Word is truth. His Law is truth. His "faithfulness endures to all generations."*[Ps 119:90; Prov 8:7; 2 Sam 7:28; Ps 119:142] *Since God is "true," the members of his people are called to live in the truth.* (Catechism 2465) *To follow Jesus is to live in "the Spirit of truth," whom the Father sends in his name and who leads "into all the truth."*[Jn 16:13] *To his disciples Jesus teaches the unconditional love of truth: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes or No.'"*[Mt 5:37] (Catechism 2466).

Witness to the truth

Not only are to be dedicated to the truth and to love it, we are to witness to it by word and deed. This is particularly the case with the truth of our faith, the truth which has set us free. *This witness is a transmission of the faith in words and deeds. Witness is an act of justice that establishes the truth or makes it known.*

All Christians by the example of their lives and the witness of their word, wherever they live, have an obligation to manifest the new man which they have put on in Baptism and to reveal the power of the Holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at Confirmation. (Catechism 2472) *Scripture bids us, Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.* (Eph 4:22-25) Since the eighth commandment upholds the goodness and beauty of the truth we must avoid all sins against the truth. There are numerous ways that the truth is undermined. It will be fruitful for us to consider them each in turn.

False Witness

Scripture says, *A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.* (Proverbs 25:18) Nothing can be so injurious to individuals as to harm their good name or reputation. Without a good reputation it becomes difficult for an individual to successfully relate to and interact with others whether it be for business or merely at a personal level. Clearly, to bear false witness against someone is to harm their reputation and we are forbidden to do so. In the technical sense, false witness is something which takes place in a court of law and since it is under oath it is also called perjury. But it is also often the case that false witness is given in daily matters through lies, half truths, exaggeration, and the like. Clearly our call to love the truth and to respect the reputation of others forbids us engaging in such activities.

Respect for the reputation of others also forbids us from: *rash judgement* (assuming without sufficient foundation the moral fault of a neighbor), *detraction* (disclosing another's faults and failings without a valid reason to others who did not know them) and *calumny* (imputing false defects to another with the knowledge that they are false).

Yet it is also possible to offend the truth by inappropriately praising others or by refusing to correct them when it is proper to do so. Flattery distorts the truth when it falsely attributes certain good qualities or talents to another. This is usually done to ingratiate oneself to individuals or for some other ulterior motive(s). Such behavior becomes particularly sinful when it confirms another in malicious acts or sinful conduct.

Lying

A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving...Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error someone who has the right to know the truth. By injuring man's relation to truth and to his neighbor, a lie offends against the fundamental relation of man and of his word to the Lord...The Lord denounces lying as the work of the devil: "You are of your father the devil, . . . there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." [Jn 8:44]...By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity...A lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision...Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust...and tears apart the fabric of social relationships. (Catechism 2482-2485)

Acts of lying are sins from which we must repent. Lying is also a sin that demands reparation. That is to say, since lying causes actual harm and real damage. These damages must be repaired. The actual truth must be made known to those who deserve to know it. The reputations of others which have been harmed by the lie must also be restored.

Is lying always so evil?

The gravity of a lie is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims. (Catechism 2484). Thus there are

big lies and smaller ones. Nevertheless, it is always wrong to intentionally lie. This includes so called “polite lies.” For example suppose a phone call comes in for someone in the household who has indicated a preference not to be disturbed just now. It is a lie to say, “She is not here.” Yet you could say, “She is not available now.” Other social situations are less simple! For example, if Mrs. Smith asks you, “Do you like my new hairstyle?” Suppose you do not. It is in fact wrong to say, “Yes, I like it.” Granted, we all feel a bit stuck in such situations! Perhaps we could answer truthfully but discreetly and say, “You look alright.” (Presuming that we do think so). But wouldn’t it be nice if we actually felt secure enough either to indicate charitably our true feelings or to indicate our preference not to answer the question? Wouldn’t it be even nicer if our relationships with others were so based in sincerity and truth that people both gave and expected honest answers? It is to this blessed state that the Lord points when he says, *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'* (Mt 5:37).

What about secrets?

This reflection has thus far emphasized the goodness and the splendor of the truth as well as the importance of communicating that truth to others who need it. However, *the right to the communication of the truth is not unconditional. fraternal love...requires us*

in concrete situations to judge whether or not it is appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it. The good and safety of others, respect for privacy, and the common good are sufficient reasons for being silent about what ought not be known or for making use of a discreet language. The duty to avoid scandal often commands strict discretion. No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it...Everyone should observe an appropriate reserve concerning persons' private lives. Those in charge of communications should maintain a fair balance between the requirements of the common good and respect for individual rights. Interference by the media in the private lives of persons engaged in political or public activity is to be condemned to the extent that it infringes upon their privacy and freedom. (Catechism 2488, 2489, 2492) However, the fact that we are permitted, even obliged, to keep certain secrets and maintain discretion, does not mean that we are free to lie. For example we cannot say, “I don’t know anything about that.” Neither can we make up false answers to requested information. When we must decline to give information that is properly to be kept secret we must still remain truthful. We might say instead, “I am not free to discuss this matter with you now.” Or, “It would be inappropriate for me to comment on that.” Or, “Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Occasionally we

may need to be more direct and say, “This is a private matter and not for you to know.”

Thus secrecy and discretion are often proper. Here too however, absolutes must be avoided. Sometimes we are asked to keep secrets that we should not keep. For example, suppose someone confides in you that they intend to commit a serious crime, or bring harm to another? It would be wrong to keep such a secret. Other things being equal secrets ought to be kept, *save in exceptional cases where keeping the secret is bound to cause very grave harm to the one who confided it, to the one who received it or to a third party, and where the very grave harm can be avoided only by divulging the truth.* (Catechism 2491). An exception to this is the seal of confession which may never be violated for any reason whatsoever: *The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason.* (Catechism 2490).

Jesus has taught us that the truth will set us free (Jn 8:32). If this be the case then anything which distorts the truth leads to bondage. Thus the eighth commandment calls upon us to love the truth and to love one another by proclaiming the truth and witnessing to it in sincerity with mutual respect and love.