

LESSON 7

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT AND THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

BACKGROUND READING



Jesus summarized the entire law of the Old Testament with the two Great Commandments, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40). We have already examined the First Great Commandment, which shows us what is required for us to have a relationship with our loving God in the first three commandments. The Second Great Commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” helps us to know how we are to treat one another, and what is forbidden in our dealings with other persons. The last seven commandments outline for us how we are to live out the command to love others as ourselves. We will now be examining the Fourth Commandment.

The Fourth Commandment

The traditional wording for the Fourth Commandment is: “Honor your father and

your mother.” In the book of Exodus the command is written this way: “Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

This commandment explicitly requires children to honor their mother and father, as this is the most basic and universal of all relationships. But the boundaries of the Fourth Commandment go far beyond these basic family relationships. The Fourth Commandment requires our “honor, affection, and gratitude toward elders and ancestors” (CCC 2199). It also outlines for us our duty to honor and respect all those who have authority over us: “We are obliged to honor and respect all those whom God, for our good, has vested with his authority” (CCC 2197).

The Fourth Commandment safeguards God’s beautiful plan for the family, and helps us to understand the relationship that God intended between the family and society. It is in the light of understanding God’s plan for the family, that this commandment outlines the duties of both children and of parents in

the human family, and the duties of all persons in the society in which we live.

The first and obvious requirement of the Fourth Commandment is the duty of children to love and honor their father and mother. The placement of this command, directly following our duties to God, reveals to us its great importance in how we are to prioritize our love. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “God has willed that, after him, we should honor our parents to whom we owe life and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God” (CCC 2197).

The Fourth Commandment is the first commandment to carry with it a promise of blessing in its second part: “that you may have a long life in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” If we obey its command then we shall enjoy the spiritual and temporal fruits that are promised with it. On the other hand, if we fail to obey God’s command to honor our parents, then “great harm to communities and to individuals” occur (CCC 2200).

The Human Family in The Plan of God

In the beginning, when God created man and woman, He instituted the human family and commanded that the first man and woman go forth and multiply (cf. Genesis 1:28). The human family, therefore, is a divine institution, and must be recognized by all public authorities as such. The *Catechism* defines a family as “a man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children” (CCC 2202). This understanding of family “should be considered the normal reference point by which the different forms of family relationship are to be evaluated” (CCC 2202). The purpose of the family is for the good of the

spouses, and the procreation and education of the children. In the creation of the human family God also gifted it with fundamental rights, responsibilities, and duties for its common good and the good of all of society.

Children will form their first understanding of what love is – and therefore who God is – through the love of their parents. Through constant, faithful, unconditional love and a warm and caring environment, they will know, even instinctively, that God loves and cares for them. Parents also have the responsibility and the great privilege of evangelizing their children. From the earliest years parents should introduce their children to the great mysteries of their faith, and the life of the Church. Parents are the “first heralds” of the Good News for their family, and the *Catechism* points out that “a wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith and remain a support for it throughout one’s life” (CCC 2225).

As a community of persons united in faith, and reflecting the creative work of God Our Father, the Christian family rightly is called the “domestic church” (*Lumen Gentium* 11). Another way of expressing this truth is to call the family the church of the home. This title speaks of the great dignity with which Christ crowned the Christian family. This family is to be a domestic church where faith, hope, and love abide, and where each member is called to continue the work of Jesus by sharing the “Good News” of salvation with others. Sometimes this proclamation of the Gospel is with our words, but most often it is with the way in which our family lives out our life of faith. It is in the family where we first begin our journey of Life in Christ.