

The First Commandment
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 22:34-40)

Jesus says the “first and greatest” commandment is to love God, and to love Him above all else, with all our heart, mind, soul, (and strength). The first three commandments of the Decalogue outline the obligations of this Great Commandment, beginning with the First Commandment: “*I am the Lord your God, you shall have not other gods before me*” (Ex 20:2-5; Dt 5:6-9). It is also proclaimed by Jesus when responding to the Devil in the third Temptation: “*You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve*” (Mt 4:10).

At the time of baptism we began a relationship with God—not just the relationship of a creature to the Creator, but of a son to a Father, and through Christ, of a bride to her husband. We entered a “**covenant**,” which means a relationship that is personal, mutual, and free. It is a relationship of *love*, with duties and obligations, the responsibilities of love.

In Baptism God gave us the capacity for this personal covenant relationship with Himself, since by human nature alone we do not possess the capacity to be anything other than a creature in relation to God. God did so by infusing into our soul at the time of Baptism the three “**Theological Virtues**” of Faith, Hope, and Charity (*Catechism* 2086-94). This is not the ordinary faith, hope and love we already possess through human nature, which are constantly at play in the regular course of human life and activity.¹ These are “**supernatural**” gifts of grace, enabling our human nature to act on a higher level, that of God Himself. They give us a relationship with the Holy Trinity, establishing us within the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By means of the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts, we are taken into the intimacy of God’s inner “personal” existence. The Theological Virtues, also known as “**Sanctifying Grace**,” make us holy, a temple of God, a place in which He dwells (*Catechism* 1999-2000).

Therefore, the first duties with regard to the great commandment to love God with all our being, is to guard this sacred relationship, increase it, and protect it from sins which could undermine or even destroy our Faith, Hope, and Charity.

Faith means knowledge of God: God Himself directly, and things about God. There can be no true relationship between persons without *knowledge* of each other. God reveals Himself to His people, that He might have a deep personal relationship with them. This **revelation** comes through Scripture and Tradition,

¹ When I go to the auto mechanic, I *believe* what he tells me about the car; I place my *hope* in his promise to fix it by tomorrow; and I *love* him for the good work he does. I acknowledge him with *gratitude* by paying in full, and develop a *loyalty* to his business, thus forming a strong and lasting *relationship*.

the great history of God's interaction with His Chosen People and His interventions in human life. God shows Himself above all in the Incarnation, in Jesus Christ. Faith is the recognition and acceptance of the Truth which is God, and everything He has revealed about Himself and His plan of salvation.

Though God blesses us with the gift of Faith in baptism, it is possible to lose it through pride, or dishonest skepticism. Among the sins against faith is **incredulity**, especially our modern tendency to "disbelieve" everything and anything that smacks of miracles or that which science can't explain. By embracing an atheistic outlook, we make it difficult or even impossible for God to reveal Himself, we commit a grave sin against faith.

If Faith is knowledge of God, then **Hope** is trust in God, that He will do what He says, and fulfill what He promises. There can be no true relationship between persons without *trust* in each other. This Hope consists especially in the promise of heaven, which is the consummation of our relationship with God in the Beatific Vision. Hope is necessary especially because of evils which challenge our human existence, most especially our own sinfulness, suffering, and death. The devil utilizes evil to undermine our trust in God, and doubt His goodness. He utilizes our sinfulness to bring about **despair**, a sin against Hope. We must neither *presume* our salvation by relying on our own efforts and merits, nor must we *despair* of God's mercy. Our relationship with God must be anchored in the sacred trust of Hope.

The third Theological Virtue of **Charity** is the greatest. It is the actual bond of union in the relationship, the virtue by which our mutual beings become a shared being. Each party seeks their own well-being in the good of the other. In the covenant with God, the initiative of love comes from God, and through the Holy Spirit the human response is elevated to a divine level: by Charity we are able to love in return, with the very love of God. This divine Charity in the human heart will cause the first commandment to become the second commandment: love of neighbor. We are commanded to show our love of God by loving our neighbor, with that very same love of God.

The Charity of our Baptism is undermined by the sin of **Indifference**, which means not caring. When the relationship with God becomes unimportant, or less important than other interests, Charity fails. As in human relationships, love means we give to the other our time and attention, the priority of *our self*. Just as the bond of human relationships can diminish or be lost through the way people drift apart, so we can endanger or lose our Baptismal bond with God through indifference.

Another demand of Charity is **Gratitude**. There can be no true relationship between persons without the recognition and acknowledgement of the good of the other through expressions of gratitude. With regard to our relationship with God, Scripture calls this gratitude “**Thanksgiving**” or “Eucharist.”

The love of God is therefore expressed in the obligations of **Religion**. This is the purpose of religion, to express the gratitude which our relationship with God demands. Each part of religion – Adoration, Prayer, Sacrifice, Promises and Vows – is a Thanksgiving which recognize and acknowledge the goodness of God, and our love for Him.

Religion and its devotional aspect therefore must be true and sincere, based on true Faith, Hope, and Love. **Superstition** would be a false “religion,” based on fear and manipulation instead, the way bad human relationships are based on mistrust and manipulation.

Baptism establishes us in a covenant with God, “sons” of the Father in the Sonship of Christ, and also “bride” of Christ. Like human marriage, the relationship with God is based on vows, involves total and mutual self-gift, and has the characteristics of permanence and exclusivity. The human marital relationship must be nourished by a jealous protectivity, so that there might be no danger of infidelity or adultery which would destroy the relationship. Likewise in the divine relationship, **idolatry** must be avoided: “*you shall not have other gods before me.*”

Charity requires loyalty, commitment. We may not give ourselves to another. Chief among the false gods whom we are tempted to worship and serve (and love) instead of God, is mammon. Through money, and in many other ways, the world seeks to allure the children of God, and ensnare them with false promises of pleasure and contentment, undermining their true love and commitment. In order to love God “with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength,” we must jealously guard our affections, entrusting our lives and well-being to God alone.

The relationship with God is the first and most important relationship. It is above all others, to the degree that all other (human) relationships will be subsumed and lived from the perspective of the divine relationship. Jesus immediately connects the first commandment with the second, which is the love of one’s fellow man. By connecting the second to the first, it elevates and transforms human relationships so that one’s fellow man is loved with the love of God, with the love of Christ.

This is what the Theological Virtues accomplish. Let us reexamine the first and most important “commandment” in our life, which is our relationship with God. Let us love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.