

God's Law

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! ~ Psalm 119:1

GOD IS THE AUTHOR of all law — the physical laws of the created world (see Jer 31:35), the moral law, and, indirectly, all human laws, to the extent that these laws do not contradict divine law. God is the source of all truth: *“Thy righteousness is righteous for ever, and thy law is true”* (Ps 119:142; see also 2 Sm 7:28). For this reason, we can trust that the moral law is designed for our good — that is, it is fitted to our human nature, of which God is the author.

God's Revealed Law is Help and Instruction

The moral law consists, first, of the natural law, which God wrote into our hearts (see handouts entitled *The Light of Conscience and Natural Law*). But God, in his great mercy, also directly revealed the moral law to us. We can best understand revealed law as a divine help to a humanity wounded by sin. By giving us revealed law, God provided help to our clouded reason and strengthened our will to respond to the promptings of our conscience. It is instruction from God our Father, and is therefore worthy of love, as the Psalmist makes clear in Psalm 119, by far the longest in Sacred Scripture, which is a hymn to the wonder, delight, and life-giving effects of learning and observing God's law: *“Thy word is a*

“The moral law is designed for our good.”

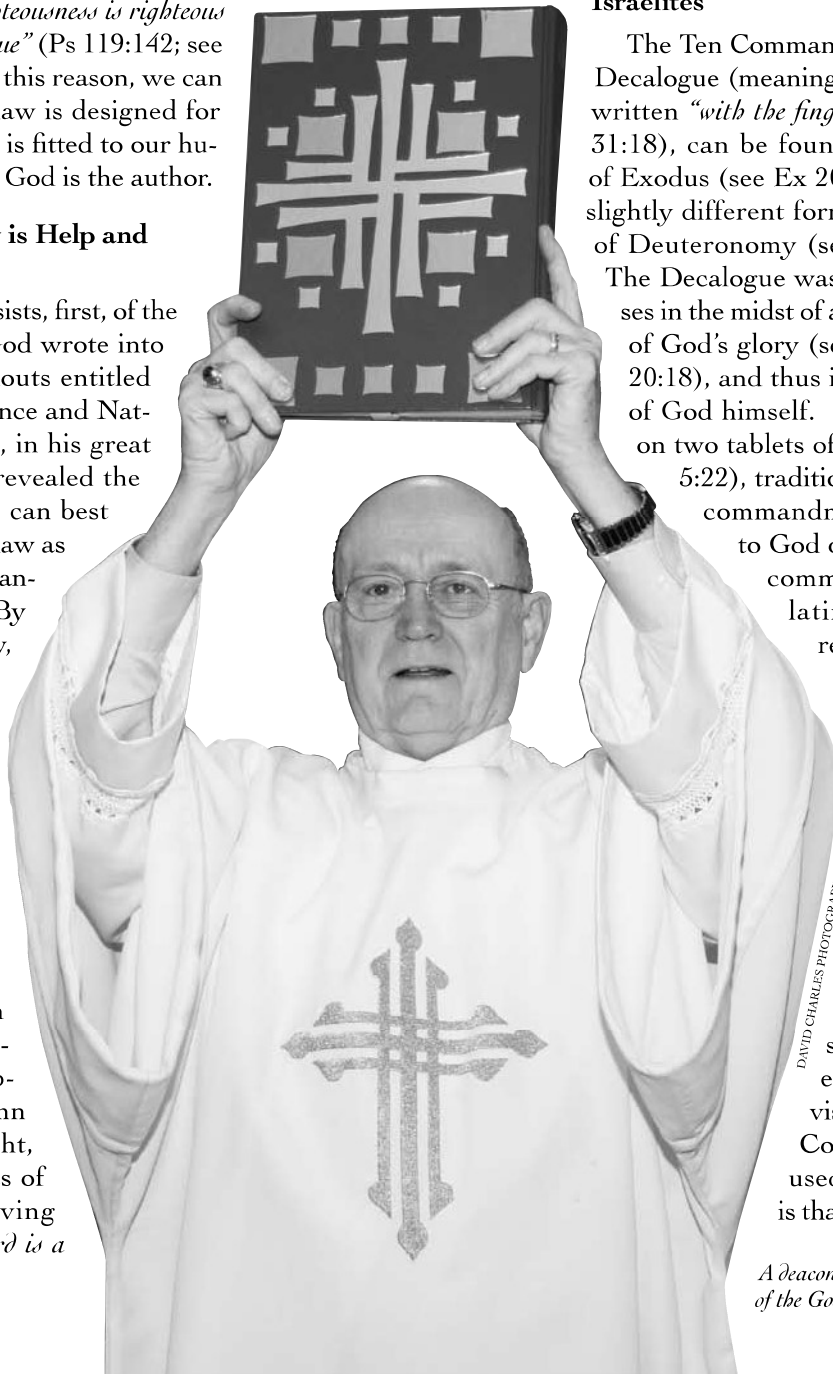
lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). Revealed law is, therefore, a “privileged expression” of the natural law (see CCC 2070).

The Revelation of the Law to the Israelites

The Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue (meaning “ten words”), written *“with the finger of God”* (Ex 31:18), can be found in the book of Exodus (see Ex 20:2-17) and, in slightly different form, in the book of Deuteronomy (see Dt 5:6-21).

The Decalogue was given to Moses in the midst of a manifestation of God's glory (see Ex 19:16 to 20:18), and thus is a Revelation of God himself. It was written on two tablets of stone (see Dt 5:22), traditionally with the commandments relating to God on one and the commandments relating to human relationships on the other. The Israelites kept these tablets in a specially-made container called the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 25:16). (It should be noted that the division of the Ten Commandments used by Catholics is that of St. August-

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A deacon holding the Book of the Gospels during Mass



Moses holding the Ten Commandments, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

tine. Three commandments relate to God and seven to our neighbor.)

The Revelation of the Law was Made within God's Covenant with the Israelites

God's Revelation of the moral law was delivered within the covenant he made with the Israelites at the mountain of Sinai, in the desert after he had liberated them from slavery in Egypt: *"Thou didst come down upon Mount Sinai, and speak with them from Heaven and give them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments"* (Neh 9:13). In God's eyes, the physical laws of the universe were themselves a sign of "the unshakable faithfulness of God's covenant"¹ (CCC 346): *"If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of*

Heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob" (Jer 33:25-26).

The First Commandment is to Acknowledge and Worship the One God

When God gave the Israelites "his law so they would recognize him and serve him as the one living and true God, the provident Father and just judge" (CCC 62), the first commandment was acknowledgment and worship of God alone, to the exclusion of idols, that is, false gods: *"For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be held in awe above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols; but the Lord made the Heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place"* (1 Chr 16:25-27). God, in turn, promised exaltation of the Israelites: *"[I]f you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, . . . you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"* (Ex 19:5-6). And yet, at the very foot of Sinai, they fell into idolatry, fashioning and worshiping a golden calf (see Ex 32:1-35). We read throughout the historical books of the Bible that the Israelites fell repeatedly into the worship of false gods and forgot to keep the law. Idol-worship was condemned over and over by the prophets (see, for example, 1 Kgs 18:17-40; Is 40:18-20; Jer 10:1-16; Bar 6:4-73). The Israelites' lamentable infidelity to their covenant with the one God continued until the return of a remnant of Israel from exile in Babylon in the 500s and 400s BC. The Church has always seen in this remnant a prefigurement of the Church itself.

The Law Teaches Us Our Obligations to God and to Our Neighbor

We learn from Revelation not only our obligations to God but also our essential duties to each other and, therefore, the "fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person" (CCC 2070). The Decalogue identifies the conditions of a life freed from slavery; freedom from slavery in Egypt became freedom from the slavery of sin. Thus, the Ten Commandments were the path to life: *"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it"* (Dt 30:16).

"The Ten Commandments bring man's religious and social life into unity."

¹ Cf. Hebrews 4:3-4; Jeremiah 31:35-37; Jeremiah 33:19-26

Love of God Cannot be Separated from Love of Neighbor

We must also understand the Decalogue as a whole. There is a widespread belief in our modern culture that we can love our neighbor even when we do not acknowledge and worship God. But we cannot truly honor others without blessing God, who created them; and we cannot rightly adore God without loving his creatures. We see the impact of this disconnect most clearly in moral issues involving the fundamental right to life itself. The Ten Commandments bring “man’s religious and social life into unity” (CCC 2069).

The Revealed Law Cannot by Itself Offer Salvation

Yet the Ten Commandments, supplemented by the prophets and the wisdom books of the Old Testament, were not in themselves sufficient for salvation. The Law was God’s instruction to his people with the ultimate purpose of leading them to their Savior, Jesus Christ: *“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people”* (Jer 31:31-33).

Jesus Reveals the Law of the Gospel, the New Law of Love

The Good News is the “source of all saving truth and

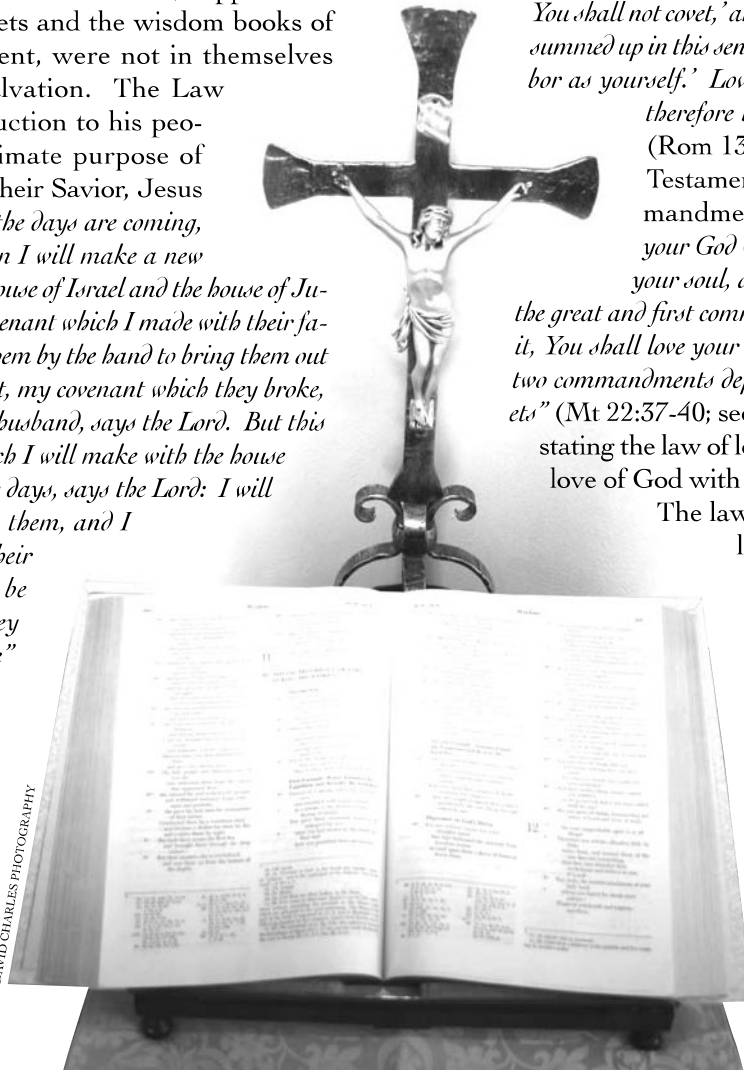
“The law of the Gospel is the law of love.”

moral discipline”² (CCC 75). Jesus came to write the law of this New Covenant on our hearts, not on stone. In the Gospels, Jesus reveals what had remained hidden in the Commandments, perfecting the revealed law. Jesus does this through his extended teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5-7), particularly in the Beatitudes (see Mt 5:3-10), which orient God’s gift of the Promised Land toward the much greater promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, especially for those who are poor, humble, afflicted, just, merciful, pure of heart, peacemakers, and persecuted for Christ. He emphasizes fidelity to the Law: *“If you would enter life, keep the commandments”* (Mt 19:17) but leads us beyond the Law by making it the interior law of charity, as St. Paul explains: *“The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”* (Rom 13:9-10).

Jesus cites the Old Testament in summing up the Commandments: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets”* (Mt 22:37-40; see Dt 6:5 and Lv 19:18), thus stating the law of love and unbreakably joining love of God with love of neighbor.

The law of the Gospel is the law of love. Our faith in Christ is expressed in charity. Jesus enunciates what we call the Golden Rule: *“So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them”* (Mt 7:12), but insists that his followers go beyond it: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another”* (Jn 13:34). Instead of merely obeying

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² *Dei Verbum* 7; cf. Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15

rules, Jesus calls us to *“be perfect, as [our] Heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt 5:48) through love of enemies, prayer for persecutors, repaying abuse with kindness, and forgiveness of wrongs (see Lk 6:27-30, 35-36). For those seeking perfection, as did the rich young man who told Jesus that he had observed all the Commandments and asked what he still lacked, Jesus replies with a call to radical poverty and care for the poor. Sadly, like so many of us, this young man allowed his great wealth to be more precious to him than the call to a fuller interior conversion of the heart (see Mt 19:20-22).

The Ten Commandments Are Unchangeable Obligations for All Christians

From the beginning of the Church, the importance of the Ten Commandments has been paramount. Jesus began dispensing with the multitude of ceremonial and ritualistic laws of Moses that supplemented the Ten Commandments (see, for example, his disputes with the Pharisees on how to reverence the sabbath in Mt 12:1-12; Lk 13:10-16; Lk 14:1-6; Jn 5:2-18; Jn 7:21-24; Jn 9:1-16, and on ritual purity and true purity of the heart in Mt 23:25-28 and Mk 7:14-23). This process of eliminating needless rituals was completed by the apostles. Yet they emphasized adherence to the Commandments, and elaborated on the implications of this in the life of the community (see, for example, Rom 12 through 14, 1 Cor 13, Eph 4 and 5, and Col 3). The Ten Commandments have always been a significant part of the Church’s teaching, and they remain unchangeable and grave obligations for all Christians, always and everywhere. No one can excuse us from them.

The Law is Freedom, Not Slavery, and Leads to Happiness

The fruit of the tree in Eden that had been forbidden to our first parents is a symbol of limits that we, as creatures, must acknowledge: “Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396). In one sense, revealed law makes us more, not less, aware of our bondage to sin, as St. Paul explains (see Rom 7:7-14). Yet by that very awareness, revealed law also prepares people for the freedom of genuine conversion, for it is sin, not law, that enslaves us. By sin, “man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, dis-

rupts neighborly fellowship, and rebels against divine truth” (CCC 1740). *“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but lawlessness takes away lives”* (Prv 11:30). Sin, therefore, is slavery, while the moral law is freedom, new life in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspires us to follow the commands of our Lord out of love, not of fear: *“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; but you have received the spirit of sonship”* (Rom 8:15). The law of the Gospel, then, is *“the law of liberty”* (Jas 2:12).

This freedom — to act in accordance with the way God designed us, to seek and do good, to love as God loves us — is the only path to authentic joy and happiness. The attraction of sin is the promise of a counterfeit happiness. It is glitter, not gold; glass, not flashing jewel; fleeting, not lasting. Jesus tells us: *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to*

*“The attraction of sin
is the promise of a
counterfeit happiness.”*

you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15:10-11). Our hearts seek happiness, and can find it only in God’s love, for we were created first and foremost out of love and to re-

turn to him in love. Even when we must endure suffering and sorrow, obeying God’s commandments yields a life of deep, abiding joy.

God Gives Us the Grace to Obey Him

Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can become the “living and interior” model for our life (see CCC 2074). We can obey the law of the Gospel, with its higher call to interior holiness and perfection, only through the graces received from God through the sacramental ministry of the Church. We obtain the strength to obey Jesus’ commands by means of faith in him, first bestowed by Baptism, and the ongoing graces of the sacraments. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and we can do nothing if we are separated from him (see Jn 15:5).

But we must choose whether we will obey God or not: *“choose this day whom you will serve, . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”* (Jos 24:15). The Ten Commandments express not only a covenantal relationship between God and his people, but also a relationship between each person and God: “Moral existence is a *response* to the Lord’s loving initiative” (CCC 2062; italics in original), acknowledging and giving homage to God, cooperating in his plan for salvation, and living joyfully in his love.

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments
(see Ex 20:2-17; Dt 5:6-21)

How to Keep the Commandment

Sins Pertaining to the Commandment

I *I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me.* This commandment calls us to have faith in God as he truly is, and not to have a diminished or warped view of him. With this true faith, we will live a life of gracious, loving response to God's never-ending love for us. In the sin of **idolatry**, we make someone (ourselves or others) or something (success, possessions, pleasure) the ultimate goal for our lives rather than God. (CCC 2083-2132)

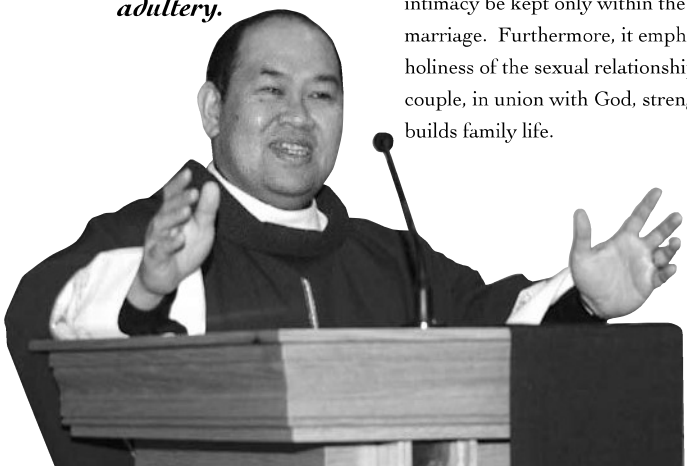
II *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.* This commandment requires us to honor God's name (God the Father; Jesus Christ, the Son; and the Holy Spirit) in our speech, which instills in us an attitude of reverence. The sin of **scorn of God's name** means uttering curses in God's name and speaking his name without faith. Slurs against God using his name or Jesus' name are equally sinful. (CCC 2142-2159)

III *Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.* God instructs us to rest and re-create ourselves on Sunday. Attending Mass and spending other time praying and celebrating with family and friends are activities that help remind us that there is more to life than the workday. The sin of **irreverence** includes neglecting to give God the worship owed him at least on Sunday each week as well as failing to acknowledge his primacy over the concerns of our lives. (CCC 2168-2188)

IV *Honor your father and your mother.* While this commandment calls children of all ages to respect their parents, it is also concerned with the necessity of teaching true family values. For adults, this commandment refers to the need to care for parents in their old age. Children of all ages sin against this commandment through **disrespect, disobedience, or neglect** of their parents as it applies to them. We are to imitate Jesus who "went down with [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51). (CCC 2196-2246)

V *You shall not kill.* Obeying this commandment means loving God, ourselves, and others in such a way that we acknowledge the sacredness of life from conception through its course to natural death. We are obliged by this commandment to save, protect, and make pleasant human life on earth. (1) **Murder**, the taking of an innocent human life, including **abortion**, and **euthanasia** as well as (2) **disrespect** for human life are sins against this commandment since they display a lack of love for God or others (see Gn 9:5-6). In addition, when Christians deliberately violate this commandment or seduce others to evil, the sin of **scandal** is involved. (CCC 2258-2317)

VI *You shall not commit adultery.* This commandment requires that sexual intimacy be kept only within the bond of holy marriage. Furthermore, it emphasizes the holiness of the sexual relationship in which the couple, in union with God, strengthens and builds family life. Every sexual act performed within or outside of marriage which does not respect the sacredness of the marital covenant and the moral value of the sexual act is a sin against this commandment. This includes **premarital relations, adultery, homosexual acts, masturbation, sodomy, contraception, pornography, complete oral sex, prostitution, rape, polygamy, and incest**. (CCC 2331-2391)



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The Ten Commandments
(see Ex 20:2-17; Dt 5:6-21)

How to Keep the Commandment

Sins Pertaining to the Commandment

VII *You shall not steal.*

Justice and respect underlie this commandment. It requires that we respect others' rights and goods.

The dignity of the human person is rooted in the fact that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, **every violation of a human person's rights** is a sin against this commandment. Sinful too is the failure to share our economic and natural resources with those who are in need. (CCC 2401-2449)

VIII *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

This commandment calls us to live with a great love for the truth. God desires us to lead lives of true character in which, by telling the truth, we are freed from the deceitful ways of the world. Honesty, integrity, and holy respect for others are virtues that spring from a truthful life.

Because we establish relationships with others based on our spoken or written word, deception using these same words by **lying** and speaking in ways which are destructive of human dignity (**slander, calumny, detraction, insults and divulging secrets**) are sins against this commandment. (CCC 2464-2503)

IX *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.*

Chastity is faithfulness to marriage vows, or sexual abstinence in the case of unmarried persons. It requires purity of heart that leads to a proper use of sexuality. All are called to live chaste lives in response to God's faithful love.

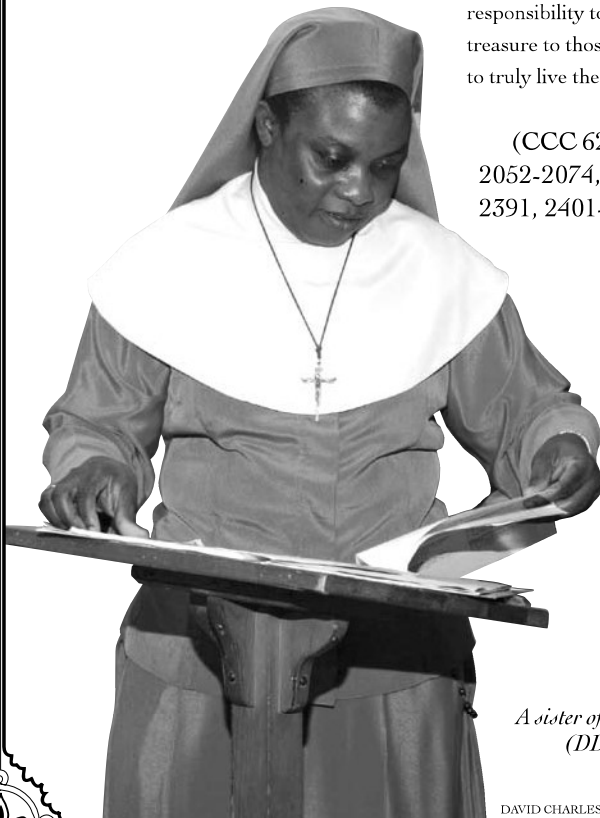
Sins against this commandment take the form of lustful thoughts, more than bodily behavior. Jesus referred to this type of sin when he warned against committing adultery in the heart by looking at a woman lustfully. (CCC 2514-2527)

X *You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.*

In a world where millions are starving while others accumulate extravagant wealth, this commandment provides the basis for the Church's social teachings. We have a responsibility to offer our time, talent, and treasure to those who are less fortunate in order to truly live the Christian life.

Greed (the desire to amass goods), avarice (a passion for riches and the power that comes from them), and envy (an immoderate desire to obtain another's goods) are the sins against this commandment. (CCC 2534-2550)

(CCC 62, 75, 346, 396, 459, 577-582, 708-710, 1740, 1949-1953, 1961-1972, 2052-2074, 2083-2132, 2142-2159, 2168-2188, 2196-2246, 2258-2317, 2331-2391, 2401-2449, 2464-2503, 2514-2527, 2534-2550)



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A sister of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love (DDL), founded in Nigeria, West Africa in 1969

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