

## Sunday Lent 3:B

Holy Rosary Cathedral

4 March 2018

Dear brother priests, and brothers and sisters in Christ:

### *Introduction*

Last Sunday's Gospel took us to Mount Tabor, where Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples. Today's First Reading takes us back some 1200 years before that to another mountain: to Mount Sinai where God entered in a special way into the life of the Jewish people, and through them, the life of all humanity. He did this by giving them the "Ten Words" or "Ten Commandments that express his will and which are a kind of "ethical code" to build a just society. When Jesus came, he summarized these Commandments in a double commandment of love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (cf. Mt 22:37-40). He himself says that he came not to abolish but to fulfil the Law (cf. Mt 5:17). His message is certainly new – as is he as the Messenger and Redeemer! – but it does not destroy the revelation made to Moses on Sinai. Rather, it leads what went before to its fullest potential.<sup>1</sup>

### *Contemporary Objections to "Commandments"*

But we have to ask ourselves: what meaning do these Ten

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, Homily, Mount of the Beatitudes, Korazim, Israel (24 March 2000), 2.

Commandments have for us today, when people resist the very notion of being “commanded” and claim that they can make up their own morality? Perhaps without even saying so, they reject the idea that God can tell them what is good and evil, what they should and shouldn’t do.

### ***Objections of Negativity and Restriction on Our Freedom***

For them, the Commandments of Sinai seem only negative: “You will have no false gods before me; . . . do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness.” (Ex 20:3, 13-16).

To all those who think that Christianity is simply a collection of commandments and prohibitions, we must say loudly and clearly, “you are wrong; you’ve missed the point.” We need to free ourselves – and perhaps those around us – from the mistaken view that Christianity, with its commandments, whether from the Decalogue as in today’s Reading or from the Sermon on the Mount, sets too many obstacles on the path to a happy life.

“We must not see the Ten Commandments as limitations of freedom – no, that is not what they are – but rather as signposts to freedom. They are not restrictions but indicators of freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the Commandments are supremely positive. Moving

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Video-Message to Participants in the Initiative Entitled “Ten Squares for Ten Commandments” (8 June 2013).

beyond the evil they name, they point the way to live the law of love which is the first and greatest of the commandments. God gave us the Commandments to teach us genuine love, so that we can be truly happy. By putting them into practice we can walk the path of true freedom. In contrast, if we ignore the Commandments, not only do we alienate from God but we also distance ourselves from lasting happiness.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Objection of Being Arbitrary***

Another reason why many are tempted to disregard or simply pick and choose among the Commandments is that they confuse them with the laws and regulations that govern so many aspects of our life. They confuse the Commandments, for example, with traffic lights: their being red or green is totally arbitrary. And so they think that God's laws could be otherwise, as if God could have decided that adultery, theft or taking human life were "ok."

But the Ten Commandments are not arbitrary dictates of the divine will. On the contrary, they express who God is: a love of life, of honesty, of justice and so on. The Commandments express the "natural moral law"; that is, the commands accessible in the conscience of every person

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Video Message for the Initiative "10 Squares for the 10 Commandments" (8 September 2012).

created in the “image and likeness” of God. They reinforce those laws “written in our hearts.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Primacy of Christ as Saviour***

The Commandments, then, come from a God who loves us and always wants – can only want – what is best for us.

When we look at the relevance of the Commandments in our own lives, we should make sure that we put them in the right context of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Right at the outset, it is necessary to recall that Jesus is primarily our Redeemer and Saviour, and only secondarily is he our moral teacher. The Christian life is *not* primarily the following of a moral code, even one as splendid as that code revealed on Mount Sinai, but living as “adopted sons and daughters” (Gal 4:6-7) of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

As Pope Benedict once reminded us on this score: “Christianity is not a type of moralism, simply a system of ethics.”<sup>5</sup> Or again, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv Haer*, 4.5.1: “From the beginning, God rooted the principles of the natural law in the human heart. It was enough for him to recall them. This he did in the Decalogue.”

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass of the Lord’s Supper (20 March 2008).

decisive direction.”<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the Commandments are important. They tell us – at least in outline – how we are to live out who we have become by Baptism: “children of God.” Recall what Jesus once told the rich young man: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17).

### *Law as a Gift of God’s Love*

If there is one thing I hope you remember from this homily it is that the Ten Commandments are God’s gift. They come from a God who created us for love, from a God who made a Covenant with humankind, a God who only wants our good. They point out the right path for us to follow. As we prayed in the Responsorial Psalm: “The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19: 8).

The Ten Commandments are a law of love. Moses climbed the mountain to receive the tablets of the Law from God. Jesus journeys in the opposite direction: the Son of God humbles himself, he comes down into our humanity to show us the profound meaning of these Commandments. Here’s something Pope Francis has said about understanding them as expressions of God’s love:

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

Here lies the heart of the Ten Commandments: the Love that comes from God and gives life meaning, love that makes us live, not as slaves but as true sons and daughters. . . . The Ten Commandments are not a hymn to the “no,” they are to the “yes.” A “yes” to God, a “yes” to Love, and since I say “yes” to Love, I say “no” to non-Love, but the “no” is a consequence of that “yes” which comes from God and makes us love. . . . Let us say “yes” to these “ten paths of love”, perfected by Christ, in order to defend human beings and direct them to true freedom!<sup>7</sup>

The Commandments are “the rules of love; they indicate the way of love; and “they explain how really to love and how to find the right route.”<sup>8</sup>

Observance of the Commandments is essential to our spiritual well-being if we are to live in love, to distinguish clearly between good and evil, and to build a life that is honest and fulfilling. When we put the commandments into practice, we find the way to freedom and authentic love. The commandments do not place limits on happiness, but rather

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<sup>7</sup> Francis, Video-Message to Participants in the Initiative Entitled “Ten Squares for Ten Commandments” (8 June 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Youth of Rome and Lazio (25 March 2010).

show us how to find it.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The Ten Commandments and the Church's moral teaching which follows from them and fills out their meaning in light of Christ's teaching are liberating gifts. Though admittedly they are sometimes difficult to fulfill, with the assistance of the grace of God's Word and of the Sacraments, they direct us on the path of what is truly best for us, of what will authentically fulfill us. They guide us to share in the "fullness of life" that Jesus brought us (cf. Jn 10:10) through his Death and Resurrection, which we now celebrate in this Liturgy of the Eucharist.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Message on the Occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> World Youth Day (28 March 2010), 6.