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The First Commandment: Faith, Not Idolatry

The first three Commandments all have a common theme: loving and honoring God. Jesus, who is himself God, summed them up with the first of his Great Commandments: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29–30).

The First Commandment, "I am the Lord, your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me," is the starting point of our moral life. It calls us to put our faith in God alone. There is no other god, no other creature, no other thing that is worthy of our complete faith and adoration. There is no one and nothing else that can save us from sin and death. The opposite of placing our faith in God is idolatry, which is placing our faith, hope, and love in something that is not God.

We face a great many temptations to sin against the First Commandment, more than you might think. Our culture is filled with messages that promise certain things will bring us true happiness and fulfillment. Experiences and substances provide temporary highs. It is tempting to chase after these things, to make them the center of our lives. We may not worship idols made in the image of Baal and Asherah, but idolatry is alive and well in our time.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 15: Living the First Commandment (page 77)
- Article 16: Idolatry, Ancient and Modern (page 82)
- Article 17: Other Sins against the First Commandment (page 86)

Article

15 Living the First Commandment

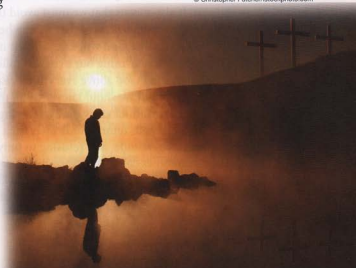
A politician who was Christian gave an interview on the challenges he faced in integrating his faith and his political positions. He supported legislation that provided help for immigrants and people in poverty, legislation that protected the environment, and legislation providing health care for all people. He also opposed capital punishment, legalized abortion, and legalized euthanasia. He maintained these positions despite the criticism he received from people within his own political party. When asked why he did this, he answered simply, "My first and primary commitment is to God and his Law."

This politician was being faithful to the First Commandment, "I am the Lord, your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me." The First Commandment is first because it is the primary foundation for our life and happiness. All the other Commandments depend on the First Commandment. For example, why would you keep holy the Sabbath if you really didn't believe in God? Why would you always speak the truth if you didn't believe it was part of God's Eternal Law? Why would you not have as much sex as you want with whomever you want if you didn't believe that God established sacramental Marriage as the only proper place for sexual intimacy?

The First Commandment is a summons—a call for us to have faith in God, to put our hope in him, and to love him completely, without holding back anything. Obeying the First Commandment is not for the indecisive and weak-hearted; it is an exciting journey that requires a complete commitment of heart, soul, and mind. You cannot say you believe in God and then trust a horoscope to guide your future. You cannot say you put your complete hope and trust in God and then live as

What responsibility do we have for fighting social sin? How can we fight social sins such as racism, poverty, and abortion?

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theological virtues

The name for the God-given virtues of faith, hope, and love. These virtues enable us to know God as God and lead us to union with him in mind and heart.

heresy

The conscious and deliberate rejection of a dogma of the Church.

though the only thing that matters in life is being the best athlete or having the highest grade point no matter what the cost. You cannot say you love God absolutely and not follow the guidance of the Church he established as his Body on earth.

Sins against Faith, Hope, and Love

Living the First Commandment is a natural expression of the **theological virtues** of faith, hope, and love. If God is the unchanging source of all life and goodness, faithful in all his promises, how can we not put our faith in him? After Jesus Christ has shown us the depth of his Father's forgiveness and humility, how can we not place our hope in him? Knowing God's unconditional, saving love for us revealed in the Paschal Mystery, how can we not love him in return? These virtues are indeed gifts from God, gifts that we are called to embrace and live out. Failure to do so leads to various sins against the First Commandment.

Putting our faith in God calls us to accept all the truths of faith revealed by him through Scripture and Tradition and taught by the Church's Magisterium. Failure to do so can lead to the sin of doubt, which is to either disregard the truths of faith or to question them without seeking to further understand them. This can lead even further to **heresy**, which is to deny an essential truth of our faith or even apostasy, which is complete rejection of the Christian faith.

Placing our hope in God means to confidently expect his blessing in this life and the reward of Heaven in the next. We must avoid the sin of despair, which is to stop believing that God cares for us and that he will fulfill his promises to us. It also means that we must avoid the sin of presumption, which means believing that we can be saved by our own efforts or that God will save us even if we are not fully committed to reforming our lives and following his will.

Loving God above everything else might seem quite obvious. But we should never think that love is easy or happens without struggle, even loving God. We can fail in many ways to return God's love, such as through indifference, ingratitude, and refusing to fully commit to loving him (sometimes called lukewarmness, see Revelation 3:15–16). The sin most contrary to the love of God is hatred of God, a sin of pride that involves the denial of God's goodness. This

sin presumes that we are somehow knowledgeable enough to judge God and find him deserving of our hatred.

Undoubtedly you desire to put your faith, hope, and love in God and make him the most important thing in your life. The Church identifies these sins as warnings to not let down your guard and take the First Commandment for granted. We must regularly and intentionally nurture our relationship with God. This is an important key to living a moral life and why the gift of the Church is essential to our moral life.

Religious Freedom

Some people might ask, "If true religion is so important to our life with God, wouldn't the Church want to require the Catholic faith as the religion for all people?" The answer is absolutely not. The Catholic Church is strongly against any state-mandated religion. We follow the example of God, who honors each person's free decision to accept God's gift of faith. If God does not force people into accepting faith, then certainly it would be wrong for us to do so.

This means several things for believers. First, we must continually work to guard and promote religious freedom in all nations and states. All people, no matter where they live, must be free to choose how to live out their relationship with God. Second, we have a responsibility to share and promote the truths of the Catholic faith with the world. Although we respect other religions and the truth they may share with us, only the Catholic Church has the fullness of truth, which has been revealed by God. How can people of other faiths know this and choose it if we do not share it with them as clearly and confidently and humbly as possible?

Nurturing Your Relationship with God

God does not want us to develop our relationship with him in isolation. Participating in the Sacraments and in the life of the Church is the best way to nurture and enrich our relationship with God. The virtues of faith, hope, and love help us to live our faith in the following ways as members of the Body of Christ.

Adoration To adore God is to acknowledge him as our Creator, as our Savior, as never ending Love, as the gift giver who provides everything we need for salvation. When we

The First Commandment requires that we nurture our relationship with God. What are some of your practices for growing in your relationship with God?



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tithe

A commitment to donate a tenth or some other percentage of our income to the Church and other charitable causes.

evangelical counsels

The call to go beyond the minimum rules of life required by God (such as the Ten Commandments and the Precepts of the Church) and strive for spiritual perfection through a life marked by a commitment to chastity, poverty, and obedience.

adore God, we acknowledge that all life, all holiness comes from him alone, and that we are humble creatures who wholly depend on his love and mercy. We offer adoration to God in all the Church's liturgies, especially in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Prayer Prayer is the primary means through which we strengthen our relationship with God. It must be a constant in our lives; Saint Paul directs us to "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Adoration is only the beginning of prayer; it focuses our attention on God. Prayer must also include praise and thanksgiving, intercession and petition, meditation and contemplation. We experience all these forms of prayer in the liturgy of the Church.

Sacrifice Following Christ's example, we are called to lives of sacrificial love. We make sacrifices in many ways—by following the Church's guidelines for abstinence and fasting, by spending time with family and friends even when it is inconvenient, by accepting sickness and suffering with dignity and courage. In the Eucharist we unite our sacrifice with Christ's perfect sacrifice and grow closer to him.

Promises and Vows Just as God keeps his promises to us, we must keep our promises to him. For example, in

the Sacraments we make promises to God, such as promising to believe in him and to reject Satan, and promising to love, cherish, and be faithful to our spouse until death. We can also make personal promises to God, such as a promise to pray daily or to **tithe**. Deacons, priests, and bishops promise to obey their superiors and serve the People of God. God also calls some people to take vows to live the **evangelical counsels** and live as consecrated religious. Our faith community supports us in keeping the promises and commitments we make to God. ✚

Live It!

Teens Reflect on Modern Idols

If you were asked, "What things do people idolize and put at the center of their lives instead of God?" how would you answer? When we asked some teens this question, their most common answers were money, video games, sports, celebrities, and television. Other things were mentioned too, but each of these five was named by 20 percent or more of the teens in the group we surveyed. Overall they seemed to agree that in our society we are tempted to idolize things that should not be nearly as important as our love for God.

The majority of the teens believed that money is the most common thing people idolize. Many say the reason for this is simple practicality. "You can't live without money," said one teen, "and people find more comfort in something tangible than they find in God, who is intangible." Another important reason mentioned was societal values. A teen put it like this: "Our society is very materialistic. The media consistently portray that having money and things brings happiness. God is almost never mentioned as the source of happiness."

Video gaming was the next most frequently mentioned potential idolatry. The teens felt that societal values are also a big factor in people's obsession with video games, but they also identified forgetting about life's problems and adding excitement to life as reasons for idolizing video games. "People play video games because they are a way to forget about the bad things that are happening in your life," observed one student. Another student said, "All the action in video games is very exciting and makes you feel like you are doing something more interesting than normal life."

For some people money can be an idol and a distraction from God; for others it might be video gaming. These are just two of many things that can keep us from focusing on what truly matters in our lives: our relationship with God. What distractions keep you from growing in your relationship with God?

Article

16 Idolatry, Ancient and Modern



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Is there a connection between pop culture “idols” and the sin of idolatry? If so, how would you describe it?

One of the most popular television shows in the last decade is *American Idol*. Over several months, talented (and some not-so-talented) people pursue their dreams of being voted the top amateur performer of the year. Many people find the show fun to watch and, at times, even inspirational as people overcome various challenges to advance in the competition.

But have you ever wondered about the title? Why are the final contestants American “idols”? The label “idol” signifies a person who is greatly admired or loved, even to excess. But an idol can also signify a person or object worshipped as a god, which is the biblical meaning of the word. Are the two definitions connected?

Original Meaning of the First Commandment

The full text of the First Commandment from the Book of Exodus reads like this: “I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them” (20:2–5). In its original context, the First Commandment focused on the sin of **idolatry**, which is the literal worship of gods and goddesses other than Yahweh. For the ancient Israelites, idolatry was a real and concrete thing. They had just come from slavery in Egypt, a kingdom that worshipped many different gods and goddesses. They were settling in a land where the native people, the Canaanites, worshipped many different gods and goddesses too. It would only be natural for them to also believe in a **pantheon** of divine beings.

The record of the Old Testament reveals how difficult it was for Israelites to worship Yahweh alone. Yes, they offered sacrifice to Yahweh in the Temple, but they often fell into

old practices of worshipping gods like **Baal** and **Asherah** (also called Ashtaroth). Here's one example from Judges:

The Israelites again offended the LORD, serving the Baals and Ashtaroths, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Since they had abandoned the LORD and would not serve him, the LORD became angry with Israel and allowed them to fall into the power of (the Philistines and) the Ammonites. (10:6–7)

It seems that throughout their history the Israelites struggled with **monotheism**. Yahweh might be their God, but the gods and goddesses of the people around must have seemed just as real. So to protect themselves from the possibility that following Yahweh was the wrong choice, they also worshipped Baal, Asherah, and other gods and goddesses. Some of these gods and goddesses were worshipped in sacred places in which people prayed and offered sacrifice. Carved statues of these gods and goddesses would be placed on home altars for prayer and protection—thus the prohibition against carved images in the Commandment.

Some worship practices were particularly offensive, but they must have occurred because they are mentioned in Scripture. The worship of Asherah included having sex with temple prostitutes to ensure good harvests (see 1 Kings 15:11–12). The worship of Molech seemed to involve child sacrifice (see Leviticus 18:21).

God had to remind the Israelites again and again, with painful consequences, that he is all-powerful and the only God. Eventually they learned their lesson. After the Exile and certainly by the time of Jesus, Jews had come to the conclusion that there is only one God and that the gods and goddesses of other peoples were only myths. But is that the end of idolatry?

In the Old Testament, idolatry was literally the worship of gods or goddesses other than Yahweh. The Old Testament's books record that the Israelites frequently fell into this sin.



idolatry

The worship of other beings, creatures, or material goods in a way that is fitting for God alone. It is a violation of the First Commandment.

pantheon

A group of gods and goddesses worshipped by a particular people or religion.

Baal

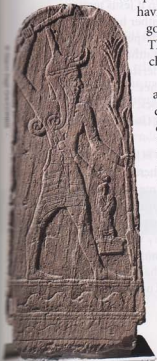
The Canaanite god of rain and vegetation, often represented by a bull and worshipped in the "high places." He was considered a false god by the Israelites but worshipped by them when they fell away from the one true God.

Asherah (also called Astarte or Ashtoreth)

The Canaanite goddess of love and fertility, often represented by a serpent and worshipped in sacred groves. She was considered a false god by the Israelites but also worshipped by them when they fell away from the one true God.

monotheism

The belief in and worship of only one God.



Do Catholics Worship Graven Images?

Although the First Commandment forbids us to worship images, like the golden calf, it is permissible, and indeed good, to use images like crucifixes, statues, pictures, or icons to symbolically represent the sacred and holy. If you have been in other Christian churches, particularly Protestant churches, you may have noticed that they are different from Catholic churches. Most have no statues, no vigil lights, no stations of the cross. Catholics have sometimes been criticized for the images in our churches because of the mistaken understanding that we worship these things. But we do not worship or adore these objects. We **venerate**, or give respect and honor to, saints, sacred objects, and images. Veneration is different from worship and adoration, which is for God alone. It is based on the mystery of the Incarnation and does not violate the First Commandment.

Idolatry in Today's World

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are all monotheistic faiths. Today no devout Christian, Jew, or Muslim would have a statue of Baal in their room or secretly worship Asherah. So is the sin of idolatry a thing of the past? Not according to Jesus. Recall the Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus teaches: "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). In this teaching Jesus is broadening our understanding of idolatry. *Mammon* means wealth and riches. Idolatry is not just worshipping pagan gods and goddesses, it is letting something like money take the place that God should have in our lives.

Jesus focuses on money because that is the thing that people of his time thought would bring them security and happiness. That is certainly true in our time too. But money isn't the only thing we idolize. No doubt you have heard this said or have thought of it before. For example, the pursuit of success and fame can be a form of idolatry whether through sports, academics, or the arts. A good example would be a person who takes illegal performance enhancing drugs or sabotages a competitor in order to win. That person has

crossed the line from healthy competition and made winning and fame a god in his or her life.

Entertainment can also be a form of idolatry. Think of people who spend so much time in role-playing games or watching television or on social networking sites that they neglect their family and friends, their grades, and even their health. Have those people made entertainment a god in their lives? Another form of idolatry is the pursuit of “things.” Have you ever known someone who was obsessed with getting the latest phone, or a particular car, certain clothes, or any other material thing?

Idolatry has a strong connection to the complex issue of addictions and obsessive behaviors. Our society has all kinds of recognized addictions—to alcohol, to narcotics, to sex, to gambling, to food, even to shopping. People with addictions have learned to turn to their addictive behavior when bored or stressed or hurting rather than to turn to God. This is the common thread in all these examples of modern idolatries: we turn to something that is not God to try and find the happiness and fulfillment that can only come from God.

So what are the signs that you have crossed the line from having a normal and healthy interest in something to making it an idol in your life? Here are some questions to consider:

- Has your focus on the thing in question (for example, sports, academics, game playing, popularity, alcohol) affected your relationship with God? Has it caused you to spend less time in prayer, to miss Mass, to feel uncomfortable around members of your faith community?
- Has the thing in question affected your relationships with family and friends in unhealthy ways? Are you spending less quality time with them? Is it causing you to keep secrets?



venerate

An action that shows deep reverence for something sacred. For example, on Good Friday, individuals in the assembly venerate the cross by bowing before it or kissing it.

Catholic Wisdom

Saint Augustine on Idolatry

“Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshipped.” (Saint Augustine)



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Many people believe that our culture's preoccupation with possessing material things is a form of idolatry. What would be the arguments for such a viewpoint?

- Is the thing in question taking over God's role in your life? Are you relying on it for your happiness more than you are relying on God for your happiness? Are you making your life choices based on its influence rather than making your life choices based on God's calling?

If your answers to some of these questions make you uncomfortable, it may be a sign that you need to assess your spiritual priorities and make some changes in your life. You can start by talking to a spiritual adviser such as a priest or other minister in your church and by making a renewed commitment to put God first in your life. ✝

Article

17 Other Sins against the First Commandment

The previous two articles discussed some of the most common sins against the First Commandment. Other sins against the First Commandment are less likely to be committed by the Christian faithful, but have been widely practiced throughout human history. They fall generally into two categories: (1) sinful excesses of religion, which can be thought of as irrational and irresponsible religion, and (2) irreligion, which can be thought of as the absence or rejection of the virtue of religion.

Sinful Excesses of Religion

Superstition is the practice of assigning magical power to certain practices or objects, such as charms or omens. When items like crystals or good-luck charms become more than

just decorations and are seen as having the power to bring about a particular outcome, there is the danger of superstition. Even the worship of the one true God can become a form of superstition. This happens when religious symbols or rituals are used in superstitious ways, with the belief that they can influence God. Although expressing your desires to God through prayer is good, believing he will fix the outcome of a game because you made the Sign of the Cross or prayed three Our Fathers is wrong. In all ages we find people who have turned worship of the true God into a superstition.

Hobbies and games that lead individuals to believe in **magic** or the occult can be sinful. They too are not compatible with true Christian belief and worship of God. Believing in creatures, devices, or objects as if they had divine power is a serious sin. Satanism, astrology, palm reading, and attempts to call up the dead or see the future are all forms of the sin of **divination**. They are wrong because “they contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2116).



Why are palm reading and other forms of divination sins against the First Commandment?

Sins of Irreligion

One of the sins that falls under the category of irreligion is **sacrilege**, or the abuse of the Sacraments, persons, things, or places that are consecrated to God. Some movies, TV shows, and celebrities poke fun at objects or actions that are specifically Catholic. There is nothing funny about belittling the symbols and rituals of the faith.



superstition

Attributing to someone or something else a power that belongs to God alone and relying on such powers rather than trusting in God; a sin against the First Commandment.

magic

The belief in supernatural power that comes from a source other than God; a sin against the First Commandment.

divination

The practice of seeking power or knowledge through supernatural means apart from the one true God; a sin against the First Commandment.

sacrilege

An offense against God. It is the abuse of a person, place, or thing dedicated to God and the worship of him.

simony

Buying or selling something spiritual, such as a grace, a Sacrament, or a relic. It violates the honor of God.

atheist; atheism

One who denies the existence of God; the denial of the existence of God.

Simony is another sin of irreligion. Simony describes the practice of buying and selling spiritual things and favors, and is another sin against the First Commandment. A modern example of simony would be a television preacher's promising people miraculous cures if they only send in a certain amount of money. Although it is permissible to expect a contribution for goods and services so that the ministers of God can earn a living, someone who tries to buy or sell spiritual power, or con unsuspecting people with promises of God's favor, is guilty of sin.

Atheism is a serious and common problem of our time. Atheism is the denial of God's existence and is the ultimate violation of the First Commandment, which assures us of God's loving and ongoing presence in our lives. Atheism

Pray It!

Praying for Those Who Do Not Believe in God

In recent years a number of books have been published that promote atheism and claim that the Church has done more harm than good. These claims do not hold up to any close scrutiny. It is easy to be angry at these vocal atheists for their denial of God and criticism of the Church, but God calls us to be compassionate toward all. Often people who deny God have been hurt in some way. They cannot believe in a God that would allow their pain. During the Good Friday Liturgy, we pray for those people specifically, but they should be regularly in our prayers.

Let us pray also for those who do not acknowledge God,
that, following what is right in sincerity of heart,
they may find the way to God himself.

Almighty ever-living God,
who created all people
to seek you always by desiring you
and, by finding you, come to rest,
grant, we pray,
that, despite every harmful obstacle,
all may recognize the signs of your fatherly love
and the witness of the good works
done by those who believe in you,
and so in gladness confess you,
the one true God and father of our human race.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Roman Missal)

can have many faces, including the belief that humans aren't dependent on God. Atheistic political systems, like Communism, deny the existence of God and blame religion for the economic and social oppression of people. Agnosticism is a cousin to atheism. Instead of declaring that there is no God, agnostics claim that it is impossible to prove God's existence. Thus agnostics believe that one cannot know anything about God or his nature. ☹



© David Howells/Corbis

Atheists deny the existence of God, a serious sin against the First Commandment.

Review

1. What is the heart of the First Commandment? How do we keep it?
2. What are two ways that we sin against the call to place our hope in God?
3. What is the original meaning of the First Commandment?
4. List some modern examples of the sin of idolatry.
5. Describe three ways that people practice sinful excesses of religion.
6. What is atheism?