

# 1<sup>ST</sup> COMMANDMENT

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*I am the Lord your God; you shall not have strange gods before me.*

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## Synopsis

The first three commandments of the Decalogue focus on the love of humans for God. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37). By obeying the first three commandments, we are able to demonstrate our total commitment to loving God.

The First Commandment specifically prohibits worship of false gods. In ancient times, pagan gods were various deities to whom tribes and nations paid homage. In contemporary times, things like money, sex, addictive substances, power, work, and even leisure activities can command as much attention as pagan gods once did. The First Commandment cautions against directing adoration toward anyone or anything other than the one, holy God. This commandment also reminds us to take seriously our duty to worship God and to bow down before his awesome holiness. Sins against the First Commandment include *idolatry* (worship of false gods), *atheism* (denial of God’s existence), and *agnosticism* (the belief that no one knows for sure if God exists).

In observing the First Commandment, people manifest the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The reference to pagan gods in the First Commandment may lead people to think that this

commandment is not relevant today, and the idea that abiding by the First Commandment requires the practice of faith, hope, and charity may lead to the dismissive notion that there is not much required. Thinking like this would be wrong, as we can see from a recent tragic event that forced people to reexamine their faith and values.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States on four fronts. More than three thousand people were killed, and sorrow spread throughout the world. As the shock wore off and people struggled to move on, there was a lot of soul-searching in order to gain understanding about fundamental issues of good and evil. What does this tragic time have to do with the First Commandment? The United States Catholic Bishops answered that question in a pastoral letter titled *Living with Faith and Hope after September 11*. The bishops said that “our faith teaches us about good and evil, free will and responsibility,” and they noted how, in the aftermath of the attacks, people turned to God in prayer. They went on to say that “hope assures us that, with God’s grace, we will see our way through what now seems such a daunting challenge. For believers, hope is not a matter of optimism, but a source for strength and action in demanding times.” Counseling Catholics to practice acts of charity and solidarity, the bishops indicated that faith, hope, and charity provide the foundation for recovery from the nightmare of September 11.

By practicing faith, hope, and charity, people fulfill the positive requirements of the First Commandment. And by rejecting despair, they open themselves to adopting a positive attitude that will allow them to cooperate in the task of building God’s Kingdom on earth. With the virtue of faith one acknowledges that people have a duty to believe in God’s goodness and to share their belief with others. We live in a secular society, and it is not easy to sustain our faith in God while living in a world where God’s role and the requirements to follow him are seldom mentioned. Nevertheless, the First Commandment requires that we seek the support of family, friends, and the Church in strengthening our faith and rejecting anything that would undermine it.

The theological virtue of hope is manifest in “the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God; it is also the

fear of offending God's love and of incurring punishment" (CCC, 2090). When people experience setbacks in life there is a tendency for them to lose hope, to become depressed, and to think in bleak terms about life. People commit the sin of despair when they cease to hope for personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it, or for the forgiveness of sins. An encouraging message contained in the First Commandment is that God's grace is with us, and the temptation to despair of God's grace is unfounded.

Just as there is no reason to despair, so there is no rational justification for being presumptuous. There are two kinds of presumption. Either people presume upon their own capacities, hoping to be able to save themselves without God's grace, or presume upon God's power or mercy and hope to obtain forgiveness without conversion and Heaven without merit.

The theological virtue of charity prompts us to acknowledge that God loves each of us and that we should love God above everything and love all creatures because he created them and because he loves them. It is possible to sin against the virtue of charity in several ways:

- by *indifference* we could live our lives as though we need never consider God's love and its power to transform our world;
- by *ingratitude* we could refuse to thank God for God's love and not direct our own love and gratitude to God;
- by *lukewarmness* we could be hesitant and negligent in responding to God's love;
- by *acedia*, that is, spiritual laziness or sloth, we could refuse to accept the joy that comes from God and even act as though we are repelled by divine goodness; and
- by the sin of *hatred* of God, which comes from pride, we could act contrary to love of God, whose goodness it denies. (CCC, 2094)

Someone who hates God lacks an understanding of the way life works: God sets limits with the commandments; God forbids sins; and God punishes unrepentant sinners. It makes no sense to hate God for

being God. On the contrary, it is completely reasonable to acknowledge and respect his dominion over us.

## **FAQs about the First Commandment**

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### **1. What does the First Commandment require that people do?**

This commandment requires that God come first in one's heart and mind; that his will and directions for human living be taken seriously and not forgotten or brushed aside. God is God, holy, supreme, and almighty. He requires the love and loyalty of all of his children. It would be a grave mistake not to be totally humble before God.

### **2. Can a person be loyal to parents, siblings, friends, and classmates? Does God want to replace our affection to all of these others?**

The issue is one of priorities and bringing oneself to the understanding that God is our Creator and loving Father and that he ought to have first place in our lives. God wants each of us to live a full and happy life and to have good relationships with all the people with whom we interact. In addition, God wants to have first place in an individual's affections and loyalty.

### **3. How can people be expected to love and trust an unseen God? We have no proof that God exists.**

Creation, the awesome universe that we learn about in science and whose wonders we witness on a daily basis, could not have come into being without a First Cause. That First Cause is God, who is a divine Spirit. Even though God is a pure Spirit who is not encountered in ways similar to how we encounter our parents or friends, God is intimately connected with each and every person because all of us are God's children. It makes a great deal of sense to love,

respect, and trust God who called each of us into being and who sustains all life on earth.

**4. Does obedience to the First Commandment mean a person has to practice religion?**

The *Catechism* tells us that “adoring God, praying to him, offering him the worship that belongs to him, and fulfilling the promises and vows made to him are acts of the virtue of religion which fall under obedience to the First Commandment” (CCC, 2135). God is our Father, and he wants his children to live their lives in relationship with him. This is a requirement, not an option, and is fulfilled through our participation in the Church.

**5. How can seeking out money and sex for pleasure be considered “false gods”?**

The First Commandment tells us to love God with all our hearts and not set our hearts on acquiring money or satisfying our appetites for sex and other pleasures. This is a different message from the popular media, including music lyrics, movie plots, television programming, and Internet blogs and social sites. The goal of life is not *hedonism*, that is, the satisfying of our desires for pleasure. Likewise, *narcissism*, the philosophy according to which everything revolves around the individual and life’s main focus is what the individual desires, is a woefully inadequate basis for establishing the direction for your life. After we acknowledge that we should follow God’s will and that we should offer him our deepest affection and loyalty, then we will be able to appreciate the fact that God wants us to have enough money to live comfortably and help others who have less. We will realize that God gave us our sexual appetites to enjoy within the context of marriage and that our sexuality has the dual purpose of uniting us with our husband or wife for life as well as bringing about the great blessing of children. Thus, money and sex are not goals in themselves but exist to enable us to live according to God’s plan.

**6. I have a friend who says he worships and prays to Satan. How can I help him to understand that this practice is wrong?**

Satan is a fallen angel, a spirit who set itself up in opposition to God. Satan is not God; Satan is an enemy of God. To worship Satan would be a grave error because of two reasons: first, one would be worshipping an evil spirit and, second, one would be failing to acknowledge the true deity. Satan is only a creature. You may also wonder why God allows Satan to have any power, however fleeting, while we live on earth. The *Catechism*, quoting Romans 8:28, teaches that “it is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity,” but “we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him” (CCC, 395).

**7. Is it wrong to carry good luck charms and to believe that having these items in one’s possession will keep one safe and secure?**

Wearing or carrying charms is against the spirit of the First Commandment because such a practice implies that the charm has the power to protect us from harm or bring us some advantage. More seriously, practices of magic by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one’s service or manage them so the occult powers do not harm us, are contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons.

**8. What is *divination*, and why does it violate the First Commandment?**

*Divination* is the act of foretelling future events or revealing occult knowledge by means of an alleged supernatural power. Practices such as “consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens . . . clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums” (CCC, 2116), such as those who claim to foretell the future or get in touch with the departed, are acts of divination. These practices are forbidden by the First Commandment because they express a human desire

to have control over time, history, or other people. Since God is the all-knowing author of life, it would be sinful to try to access power that rightfully belongs to God.

### **9. What is *sacrilege*, and why is it forbidden by the First Commandment?**

*Sacrilege* consists in disrespecting the sacraments and other liturgical actions, as well as persons, things, or places consecrated to God. Sacrilege is a grave sin especially when committed against the Eucharist, for in this sacrament the Body of Christ is made substantially present for us. It is very important for people to learn that books, objects, persons, and places considered sacred by Catholics, other Christians, and non-Christians should all be treated with respect.

### **10. What is *simony*, and why is it against the First Commandment?**

*Simony* is defined as the buying or selling of spiritual things. The term comes from the name of Simon the Magician who attempted to buy spiritual powers from St. Peter (see Acts 8:9–25). The Catholic Church teaches that it is impossible to purchase or sell spiritual goods and behave toward them as their owner or master, for they have their source in God. One can receive these graces only from God. They are a gift from God; they do not require payment. Therefore, it would be wrong for an individual to approach a priest or a bishop and offer money to obtain the “grace of God.” Likewise, it would be morally wrong for a religious authority to accept money from people and suggest or promise that the money will buy favor from God. Our loving Father loves each of us and wants to give blessings and graces to us. What God requires is that we be open to receiving his blessings and that we love and respect him. God’s graces are not for sale.

### **11. Who are atheists and agnostics?**

Atheism is a sin against the First Commandment. The word *atheism* comes from the Greek prefix *a* combined with the Greek word *theos*, and it literally means “there is no god.” To assert that there is no god is the most fundamental error a person can make, and the

consequence of thinking in this way is gravely deficient because humans would then consider themselves the highest level of beings and would be subject to no power greater than themselves. The eternal law of God would not be acknowledged or respected, and both individuals and society would suffer greatly as a result. It is also wrong to be an agnostic. An agnostic claims that a human person cannot know for certain that God exists because there is no tangible proof for God. Agnosticism is “a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience,” and “agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism” (CCC, 2128). Therefore, agnosticism is likewise a sin against the First Commandment.

## 12. Is it wrong to pray to statues and holy pictures?

It is wrong to pray to statues and holy pictures as if they were gods. However, the *veneration* of sacred images is not contrary to the First Commandment. Jesus took on human flesh at his Incarnation and redeemed humans and all creation by his Death and Resurrection. By so doing, Jesus ennobled the human condition and concrete, material things that exist in our world share in the new order of creation. A statue, a crucifix, a religious picture, or a fresco in a cathedral, is a material object that has been crafted to remind people of God’s role in our lives and our religious history. Holy images include statues and pictures depicting Mary, the Mother of God, angels, saints, and holy people of the Bible. These statues and images are not God, and they do not have magic powers; they are in place to remind us of God and his role in our lives. As the *Catechism* explains, “Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is” (CCC, 2132 [In this paragraph the *Catechism* relies on the medieval writing of St. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 81, 3 *ad* 3]).



## CASE STUDY: Chain Letter

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Caroline is a high school junior who is busy with school and extra-curricular activities, including cheerleading and working on the yearbook. She attends Mass regularly and takes her faith seriously in all ways. Lately, Caroline has been feeling very stressed because her paternal grandmother had a stroke and is in the hospital. She is partially paralyzed and has trouble speaking. The doctors cannot say how much functioning she might recover, and Caroline and her family are worried. Caroline wishes there were something she could do to help her grandmother get better.

When Caroline logs on to her laptop on a Saturday morning, she sees an e-mail message from an unfamiliar sender and, out of curiosity, she opens it. The message is a chain letter that instructs Caroline to make a wish and then to say a prayer nine times a day for nine days; to forward the e-mail to nine friends, asking them to do likewise; and to expect great joy on the tenth day.

The words of the prayer are attributed to a saint and the words are: “Holy God, merciful and true, behold your servant in her hour of need and grant her humble request in Jesus’ name. Amen.” Caroline has no way of finding out whether or not the saint actually formulated the prayer, or whether it was made up by the unknown sender.

The e-mail assures Caroline that many people have already received blessings as a result of following the directions. However, the letter also contains a warning that if the recipient deletes the e-mail and does not follow the directions, her wishes will not come true, and bad things will happen.

Caroline is troubled because she wants to believe that by doing what the letter outlines, saying the stipulated prayer and encouraging her friends to do so, too, she can get God to make her grandmother better. However, she has learned in her religion class that God cannot be manipulated into doing things that people want and that superstitious practices are against the First Commandment. Feeling torn and

confused, Caroline prints the e-mail and takes it to her dad. She is going to ask his help before making a decision.

### **EVALUATION**

1. Have you ever received a chain letter? What have you done with it?
2. What do you think Caroline's father is going to tell her to do about the letter?
3. What can Caroline do to help her grandmother at this difficult time?
4. The First Commandment suggests that God is supreme and that humans should subordinate themselves to God's dominion or rule. In this case, how does God's rule apply?

## CASE STUDY: Modern Day Idolatry

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**J**onathan is beginning his freshman year at a community college. The downturn in the economy has had a bad effect on his family, and the money his parents expected to have for his tuition, room, and board at a four-year school disappeared several months ago when their investments lost value. Jonathan is very unhappy that he is not able to live at and attend his “dream school.” His unhappiness is affecting him in many ways.

Before things became difficult for his family, Jonathan loved English literature, and his goal had been to teach that subject in either high school or college. Now Jonathan finds himself obsessed by the idea of pursuing courses that will lead to a higher-paying job. He wants to make and save a lot of money so that he will have cash to buy anything he wants. Jonathan assumes that someday he will marry and have children, and he wants to have money in the bank and in sound investments so that his children never have to readjust their dreams because of financial hardship.

Jonathan’s parents observe that he is changing; he is sullen and impatient, not optimistic like he used to be. Jonathan talks a lot about taking courses that will open career doors, and he pays much more attention to internship options in business fields than they ever thought he would. When they ask why he has changed his mind about studying English literature, Jonathan becomes surly and says that he doesn’t want to talk about it.

Jonathan also stops going to Mass and does not join the family in grace before meals. When his parents ask him why he is neglecting religious practices, he comments that God does not care about the predicament he is in, so why should he waste his time on God. “Money,” Jonathan says, “that’s what is important. You can see and taste and experience what it will buy. Who knows if the God you pray to even exists. And, if God does exist, then why doesn’t God take care of us?”

**EVALUATION**

1. What kinds of spiritual and emotional problems does Jonathan manifest?
2. Jonathan thinks that money is most important, and he decides to concentrate on trying to get as much as he can. How important is money, and how much effort is appropriate for someone to acquire it?
3. Based on what you know of the First Commandment, what suggestions would you make to Jonathan about his current state of mind?
4. Jonathan's parents are troubled by the changes in their son. What might they do to help him at this difficult time?

## CASE STUDY: Practice of Religion

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Samantha and Kevin are planning to tell their parents that they are engaged and that they plan to marry within a year or two. They are in their mid-twenties, have started careers, have a lot in common, and believe that they are in love. They think that their parents will be pleased by their decision to marry, especially since they plan to marry in a Catholic church.

Both Samantha and Kevin were raised in the Catholic faith, but neither has practiced the religion since high school. Samantha longs to return to Mass and has begun to pray again. Kevin says that he does not miss anything about religion and that he is not even convinced that God exists. He thinks that religions are all pretty much the same and, even though he was brought up in the Catholic faith, he feels no attraction to it. At the same time, he does not want to upset either set of parents, and he is willing to go to church with Samantha because religion is an aspect of life that she feels is important.

Kevin tells Samantha that he will just be going through the motions; she tells him that she thinks that if he starts to go to church with her and tries to pray, he may begin to reconnect with God and the Catholic faith. Samantha also knows that by attending Mass regularly, they will have a better chance of being able to have their wedding in a Catholic church with a priest as witness.

Before breaking their news to their parents, Kevin thinks it important that they rehearse what they are going to say about religion. He tells Samantha that the best course is just to say, "We've started going to church, and we plan to marry in church." Let their parents assume that Samantha and he are on the same page. There's no reason to explain the situation further, and there is good reason to hope that parental approval will lead to no other questions.

**EVALUATION**

1. Do you think it would be wrong for Kevin to attend Mass with Samantha even though he professes no faith? Why or why not?
2. Samantha cares about religion and wants to start going to Mass regularly. She also plans to marry Kevin. Does it matter that he does not share her religious convictions? How could Kevin's lack of faith cause problems for their marriage?
3. How likely is Kevin to "get religion" by sitting next to Samantha at Mass?
4. Comment on what you think prompts Samantha's and Kevin's parents to want their children to marry in church as well as the way Kevin proposes to tell them about their plans.