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The Third Sunday of Lent (B)

Too often we set ourselves up in opposition to the One who created us, as if we were rivals, at odds with each other. We consider the Ten Commandments an infringement on our freedom, something perhaps arbitrary and unjust. But is this really the case?

If we sincerely examine the commands that the Lord gave to Moses with his own finger, we will find that they "are not a burden, but a sign-post showing the path leading to a successful life," and a successful life leads to life eternal (cf. Exodus 31:18 and Deuteronomy 5:22).¹

When that rich young man asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" the Lord answered, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17). This is why, as the Psalmist sings, "The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul" (Psalm 19:8). The commandments are an invitation to return to life with God in Paradise and, as such, they are "more precious than gold" (Psalm 19:11).

There are many people today who try to convince us that the Commandments are no longer relevant for modern man, that they are better relegated to the rubbish heap of history. But if we

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Visit to the Synagogue of Cologne, 19 August 2005.

consider what we know to be true in the depths of our hearts we see that it is a false and dangerous claim, for these commandments come from him who is the Creator of all things. Not only are the Ten Commandments relevant for us here and now, they are absolutely necessary for in them is the path to life and apart from them is death.

Simply consider the beginning of the commandments: "I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:1). The Lord, who in love delivered us from slavery in Egypt and from sin and death, addresses each of us, both individually and collectively. He speaks directly to us so that he might give wisdom and rejoicing to the simple (cf. Psalm 19:8-9).

When we rebelled against God in our pride, we were cast out "from the paradise of freedom to the slavery of this world."² The commandments of the Lord are given us that we might be slaves no longer but free, free to live in God's own life and love, free to be fully and truly human.

Whenever we view God as a rival, whenever we fail to obey and keep the commandments, we do so thinking that we will find freedom. We bow down not before God, but before ourselves, before our own selfish desires and ambitions (cf. Exodus 20:5). In the end, we find that we have become slaves to ourselves;

² Origen, *Homily on Exodus* 8.1, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2061.

this is not freedom, but the foolishness of man that enslaves him to himself.

The Commandments address, first and foremost, the love of God that has saved us and has established his Covenant with us, first sealed with the blood of animals, now sealed once and for all with the blood of Christ (cf. Hebrews 9:12).

Secondly, the Ten Commandments state the authentic response of man to God who first loved us (cf. I John 4:10). The only authentic response to such love is that of a moral life, a life lived in accord with him who is Truth (cf. John 14:6). We see, then, that through giving us the Ten Commandments, "God prepared man to become his friend and to live in harmony with his neighbor."³

Because of this, we cannot pick and choose which of the Commandments we will obey; whoever wishes to have life must obey each of them, in all ways and in every place. "To transgress one commandment is to infringe all the others. One cannot honor another person without blessing God his Creator. One cannot adore God without loving all men, his creatures."⁴ In this way, the Ten Commandments unite our religious and social life together as one.

³ Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.16.3, in *ibid.*, 2063.

⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2069.

When we keep the commandments we build up the temple of the Holy Spirit within us (cf. I Corinthians 6:19). It is this temple for which the Lord is jealous, and he desires his temple to be a place of life, not of death (cf. Exodus 20:5).

This is why the Lord Jesus was so enraged when he found the moneychangers inside the Temple. They had turned his house of prayer into a place of greed and iniquity (cf. John 14). Standing within the Temple itself, they turned away from the Lord their God and bowed down before mammon, before money and avarice. And so, knowing that "no one can serve two masters," the Lord took up a whip drove them out of his house (Matthew 6:24; cf. John 2:15).

Jesus made it clear that the Temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of himself, saying, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Saint John makes the connection impossible for us to miss: "But he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:21). At the same time, we know that the Church is the Body of Christ, with Christ himself as her Head (cf. I Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 5:23).

We see then that Christ Jesus has come not only to cleanse the Temple in Jerusalem, but to cleanse also the temples that we are as members of his Body, the Church. If we listen to him in these days of Lent, he will enlighten the eye of our heart and

fill us also with zeal for the things of God (cf. Psalm 19:9; John 2:17).

Even now the Lord desires to cleanse his house of all evil and wickedness, and so he waits patiently for us in the Sacrament of Penance because he wishes to bestow mercy on those who love him (cf. Exodus 20:6).

My brothers and sisters, we must allow ourselves to be built up into his temple and be cleansed; we must allow ourselves to be governed by him who is Love (cf. I John 4:8).

It is only in having "Christ the power and wisdom of God" as the cornerstone of our lives - in such a way that without him our lives make no sense and fall apart - that we will find the joy and peace we seek, the eternal life that is pledged to those who keep his covenant (cf. I Corinthians 1:24).

Let us briefly consider the meaning of the word "commandment." It comes from the Latin word *mandare* meaning, "to entrust." Life itself, eternal life, is entrusted to us in the Commandments. If we keep the commandments we will live; if we disregard the commandments we will die.

We know that "Anyone who turns from God not only departs from the Covenant but from the sphere of life; they ruin their own life and, in doing so, enter into the realm of death."⁵

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2002), 168.

Let each of us then turn not away from God but toward him. Let us look to the commandments to mark out for us the path to life. Let us strive to keep them faithfully and if and when we fail, let us hasten to meet the Lord where his mercy abounds in the confession of sins.

Our beloved patron, Saint Anthony of Padua, teach us to love this great gift from the Lord. He says:

Truly, truly it is the gate of heaven! Truly it is the gate of paradise! Through it, as through a gate, the penitent is led in to kiss the feet of divine mercy; to be raised up and kiss the hands of heavenly grace.⁶

Let each of us then run to this gate, that we might "have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Amen!

⁶ Saint Anthony of Padua, Homily for the First Sunday of Lent, 2.19.