

I Am The Lord Thy God

A Reflection on the First Commandment

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I.

THE COMMANDMENTS.

THE commandments are God's Law. The observance of God's Law means man's happiness here and hereafter. Most people think of the commandments in terms of hereafter. The fact is they are the only means of happiness here. God made man to be happy and showed him how to be happy by giving him the commandments. When the world was made up of only two people, it was a happy world. But they spoiled it. They broke God's rule of happiness, His commandments. It has been an unhappy world ever since. For men have followed the folly of the first man and woman and have tried to make a happy world by ignoring God's Law. The result has been failure. God's Law is a plan for human living, a way for human happiness. So God's Law is worth knowing and worth keeping.

The commandments were first given to Moses for the Jewish People. In their centuries-old history, they were happy when they kept them, unhappy when they violated them. When our blessed Lord came to Earth He proclaimed the commandments and made their meaning clear. His Church, which is His Living Voice and His Living Self, continues to proclaim them and explain them. There are ten commandments. Their message is love of God and love of fellow man. Love means action. If you love Me, keep My commandments. (John 14:15) Love means life, true life, a share in God's Life. If any man love Me, My Father will love him, and we will come to him, and dwell with him. (John 14:23) We only really live when God lives in us. St. Paul expressed it: "I no longer live alone; God lives in me." (See Galatians 2:20) Our Savior made it clear that we cannot live alone. Life without love is death. And there is no true love without the love of God as beginning, middle and end.

When a man says:

"I love my fellow man. I do not have to love God," he is fooling himself.

For he only loves himself and serves himself in whatever he does for his fellow man. Christ did not say, "in as much as you love your fellow man because he is your fellow man, you love Me." But the first thing He declared was: Keep My commandments. (John 14:15) And the first of all is: Love God. This is the first and greatest commandment. (Mark 12: 30.)

The commandments come to us from God. God gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai and said to him: Give these to My people. (See Exodus chapter 20.) They were placed in the ark which was called the Ark of the Covenant. Covenant means agreement. It was just as if God said: "Agree to keep My Law and I will agree to keep you." In the long years of the history of the Jewish people from the time of Moses to the days of Christ, they failed God many times. The story of their failure

is in that part of the Bible called the Old Testament. It is the history of the people of God up to the time of the coming of our Lord. The great points of the Old Testament are summed up in man's failure and God's forgiveness. These two facts run through it like a cloud of darkness and a burst of sunlight.

God's Law for Everyone.

The commandments were given to the Jewish people to be observed and preserved. Their vocation was to keep the light of God's Law burning in the darkness of a pagan world. They were chosen by God to do this. Here is what happened. God first chose one nation to be the guardians of His Law. From that one nation, His Divine Son was to be born of a virgin. This was promised by God in a prophecy uttered long before the first Christmas. When He came, there is one thing that He made clear. The commandments were for all men. And, what He made clear, His Church has proclaimed through the centuries; God's Law is for everyone.

But suppose a man never heard of God's Law, or of Moses, or our Savior, or His infallible Church. Could he know the commandments? Yes, he could. Not as clearly as we know them but clearly enough to save his soul which is the main job in life for every man to do. The first thing he can know is that THERE IS A GOD. How? This is how. By using his head. By doing a little thinking. Any man who thinks enough to ask himself a few questions can reach the conclusion that

THERE IS A GOD. What are these questions? They are briefly these — who am I, what am I, why am I? What is life given me for? Where am I going? All these questions bob up in everyone's head at some time in the course of life and very often during life. What is it all about? This popular expression really knocks at the door of every human heart. And a man who tries sincerely to answer it will find God. He will not find everything about God that God has told about Himself in Revelation but he will find God the Beginner of all things. For the man using his head will say: "I had a beginning. The man before me had a beginning, too. That means there must have been a first man. How did he begin? He had no parents for he was the first man. Everything I see about me had to have a beginning."

If there are millions and millions of blades of grass, there must have been a first blade. If there are millions and millions of towering trees, there must have been a first tree. There must have been a first of everything. As that is so then there must be Someone, all-powerful, all-complete, self-existing, independent, from whom all things come. That is common sense. That Someone is God. He not only is. He must be.

Conan Doyle puts it this way: "Show me a picture without an artist, show me a statue without a sculptor, show me music without a musician, then you may begin to talk to me about a universe without a universe Maker, call Him by what name you will."

And Chesterton expressed the same truth in saying: "I felt it in my bones, first, that this world does not explain itself. It may be a miracle with a supernatural explanation. It may be a conjuring trick with a natural explanation. But the explanation of the conjuring trick, if it is to satisfy me, will have to be better than the natural explanation I have heard. The thing is magic true or false. Second — I came to feel that magic must have a meaning and meaning must have Someone to mean it. There was something personal in the world as in a work of art. Whatever it meant it meant violently. Third — I thought the purpose beautiful in its old design in spite of its defects. All this I felt and the age gave me no encouragement to feel it, and all this time I had not given thought to Christian teaching."

II.

GOD SPOKE TO MOSES.

"THERE is a God" is a conclusion of common sense. But God in His mercy did not leave it to common sense. He declared Himself. He revealed Himself. In all reverence, it may be truly said He broadcast Himself. After creating the universe, He created man. And after creating man, He spoke to man: And they heard the voice of the Lord God as they walked in Paradise in the afternoon air (Genesis 3:8). Not only did He speak to Adam and Eve but He spoke to other men who were in the world of the first centuries until the time of Moses. Shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses brought the sheep into the desert and came to the mountain of God. It was called Mount Horeb. Its other name is Mount Sinai. This is what happened there: "And the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. And he saw that the bush was on fire and was not burnt. And Moses said: 'I will go and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.' And when the Lord saw that he went forward to see, He called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said: Moses, Moses. And he answered: 'Here I am.' And He said: Come not nigh hither, put off the shoes from your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground. And He said: I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face for he dared not look at God" (Exodus, Chapter 3).

Then the day came when God spoke to Moses and made known His Law by the Ten Commandments. "In the third month of the departure of Israel out of the land of Egypt, on this day they came into the wilderness of Sinai... And Moses went up to God... And the Lord said to him: Lo now will I come to you in the darkness of a cloud that the people may hear Me speaking to you and may believe you forever... Sanctify them today and tomorrow and let them wash their garments. And let them be ready against the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon Mount Sinai...

"And now the third day was come and the morning appeared; and behold thunders began to be heard and lightning to flash, and a very thick cloud to cover the mount, and the noise of the trumpet sounded exceeding loud, and the people that were in the camp feared... And all Mount Sinai was filled with smoke because the Lord was come down upon it in fire, and the smoke arose from it as from a furnace; and all the Mount was terrible... And the Lord spoke these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall not have strange gods before Me." (Exodus, Chapters 19 and 20).

So then in order the Ten Commandments were given. And not only the commandments but other laws of life and conduct were prescribed by God and given to Moses for his people. Time passed and a day came when God gave the commandments written in stone. "And the Lord when He had ended these words on Mount Sinai gave to Moses two stone tables of testimony written with the finger of God... And Moses returned from the Mount carrying the two tables of the testimony in his hand, written on both sides. And made by the work of God; the writing also of God was graven in the tables" (Exodus, Chapters 31 and 32).

Then what happened? "The people seeing that Moses delayed to come down from the Mount, gathering together against Aaron said: Arise, make us gods that may go before us, for as to this Moses the man that brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has befallen him... And Aaron said to them: Take the golden earrings from the ears of your wives, and your sons and daughters and bring them to me" (Exodus, Chapter 32).

“When Moses came in sight of the camp he saw the golden calf and the Israelites adoring it. In anger he threw the tables out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the golden calf and burnt it and beat it to powder. He put the powder in water and gave to the children of Israel to drink” (Exodus, Chapter 32).

In time, the people repented of their idolatry and God forgave them. Once again the commandments were given. And the Lord said to Moses: “Write you these words by which I have made a covenant both with you and with Israel”. “And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water; and he wrote upon the tables the ten words of the covenant. And when Moses came down from the Mount all aglow from his conversation with the Lord... And he said to the people: ‘These are the things the Lord commanded to be done’.” (Exodus, Chapters 34 and 35).

This is the story of the commandments. The first is: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall not have strange gods before Me. You shall not adore them nor serve them. (Exodus 20.)

III.

GOD ONLY IS ADORED.

WHAT does the First Commandment mean? It means that we must show our love for God by worship (adoration). Worship means honoring God in the highest possible way. We give honor to men and women whom we consider worthy of honor. As Americans, for example, we consider George Washington, the Father of our country, worthy of the highest honor. So, we name our national capital, Washington. We raise statues to him everywhere. We observe his birthday as a national holiday. We treasure all his writings and his speeches. Yet we do not worship him. For he is a man and no one but God deserves worship in the real meaning of the word. As Catholics, we honor the saints and Mary the Queen of saints. But we do not worship them. We give to Mary a very special honor, higher than any given to any saint or all the saints. For she is God’s Mother. As He honored her in the highest way, we do the same. She is the masterpiece of the Great Artist. She is unique. She is immaculate from the first moment of her conception. She is then, the most perfect of God’s creatures. She holds a place apart in the honor roll of God and men. But, we do not ‘worship’ Mary. Nor do we ‘worship’ the saints.

God the Supreme Being.

There is only One worthy of worship in the strict sense. That One is God. For when we worship we acknowledge God as The Supreme Being. This worship is adoration. Only God is adored. That is what the First Commandment means. All we are and all we have are His. For He is Creator. He gave life and being to every tiny blade of grass and every living thing and person.

Once there was no life but God’s Life. Infinitely and eternally happy, God alone was in the splendor of heaven. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was made nothing that was made. In Him was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shone in darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.” This is the way St. John tells us that God is the Supreme Being, the Beginning of beginnings, the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega. (See John, chapter 1.) So we worship God, we adore God and Him alone. This is the “why” of the First Commandment.

We express our honor to God by worship. As soon as we use that word, we think about prayers and devotions and other acts of piety. Or maybe we think of a solemn procession at Forty Hours' Devotion, or the sacred functions of a Eucharistic Congress. All this truly is worship or the expression of our honor to God. But all this means action. And before we have action, we must have thought. We must think before we do, if we are to do right. God expects this of us, for He expects us to know what we are doing, and why we are doing it. So before I express my worship and so honor God, I must believe in Him. That is Faith. And without Faith, no one can please God, according to St. Paul.

Faith.

Faith means accepting the word of another. If I am sick and consult a doctor and he tells me, after an examination, to follow a definite plan of living, I do so if I have any sense. And why do I? Because I take his word as someone who knows the laws of health. He may explain a great deal to me or he may say nothing. The fact is when I consult him I really say by my action:

"I believe in you. In your knowledge and ability. I will do as you say for you know and I do not know."

We are all taking each other's words constantly. Human life functions on human faith. If we stopped to prove for ourselves everything in human life, we would stop human life. Every time I pay a bill or send a bill, I make an act of human faith. Every time I get into a train or a bus or an automobile I make an act of human faith in the men who built these machines or the men who run them. It is safe to say that all my actions from morning until evening with few exceptions are acts of human faith. I am taking the word of someone all the time.

IV.

FAITH THAT IS DIVINE.

FAITH that is divine or supernatural then is taking the Word of God. And when I take the Word and live up to it I worship God as He commands me to worship Him. St. Paul calls Faith — 'the evidence of things unseen'. (See Hebrews 11.) For as soon as I think of God I know I enter an unseen world. And He, knowing that, came out of that world and gave His message, which we call Revelation. We know He did this right at the beginning of life when there were only two people in the world. We know He did this to the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Law. He talked to men. He gave them His Law and His Truth. Until a day came when "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." (John, chapter 1.) God became man to show man His Real Word. And He who was, and is The Word of God, became the Son of Mary to reveal All Truth. God did not want man to honor Him with any haphazard kind of worship. He came to tell man what to do. He gave His Word and told man to take it. In scene after scene of His human life, we find our Lord stressing the meaning of Faith and the need of Faith.

First things first. Faith is THE FIRST THING.

I believe what God has revealed because He is God revealing. I take His Word on His authority. I take it all and not part of it. I take it in its mysteries as well as in its clearest statements. Our Lord said: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15) That is a clear statement. Our Lord also said: "The Father and I are One." (John 10:30) That is a mystery. My Faith tells me both are true because God spoke them. The fact that He spoke them is all I have to know. It is enough, it is everything.

This is not easy because it is not natural. It is easy and natural to say: "I believe everything I understand." It is supernatural to say: "I believe everything God has said including things I do not understand." I understand that He has said them. That is enough. Take a few instances from our Lord's life and watch Him teach the lesson of Faith. The Roman centurion came to Him and begged Him to cure his servant. Our Lord said: "I will come down and cure him." The soldier protested. There was no need of that. He was not worthy for Christ to come under his roof. "Say but the word and the man will be cured." That was FAITH. The man saw the unseen power that was Christ's, not with his eyes but with his mind and heart. That power could break through space and time. The servant was cured. And Christ said: "Amen I say to you I have not seen such great faith in Israel." This centurion believed and so did his household. After that, he honored God by his worship. But the first thing was faith. If he had not believed, he could not have worshiped. (See Matthew chapter 8.)

Faith Is a Gift.

When God asks for our Faith He says to us: "Will you take My Word no matter how strange it may sound? Will you stand by that Word even though common sense and the whole world of sense appear to contradict it? When our Lord first promised the Blessed Sacrament He gave the people and His apostles a great test of Faith. He had given them abundance of bread to eat one day, taking a few loaves and multiplying them for several thousand people. They thought it wonderful. They did not know how it was done. But they saw with their eyes that it was done. So they said: "We will make Him our king." He refused their earthly kingship. But the next day He said to them: "I am the Living Bread that has come down from heaven. Unless you eat this Bread, you will not have life in you. This Bread is My Body and Blood." What a statement! They answered: "This is a hard saying and who can believe it?" His reply was to repeat with emphasis the truth that He would give Himself to be the food of every soul. Many walked no more with Him. For Faith is free. God does not compel it. He gives it and we take it or leave it. God does not argue with us. Why should He? He is God. He calls for the homage of our Faith. Simon Peter gave the answer of Faith when on this occasion He said speaking for his fellow apostles: "You ask us if we, too, will go away as so many are doing. To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and we have known that You are the Christ, the Son of God." That is Faith. That is fulfilling the First Commandment. That is worshiping God. (See John, chapter 6.)

Faith is a precious gift and we should thank God for it every day of our lives. It can become weak. It can go stale. It can be lost. Judas once had it. Nearly all Europe once had it. So did the entire Middle East and North Africa. So it can be lost. If we think of it as a bright flame, we know that it is for us to keep it bright and glowing. We do this by prayer and the sacraments. Neglect of prayer and sacramental life means dimming that sacred flame. It may mean putting it out. That is the tragedy of lost Faith. Because I am free, I may put out that flame. But I cannot relight it. Only God can do that. There is not any power of mind and brain that can enable a man to know God by Faith. Nor can any man by his own effort find Faith once he has lost it.

V.

REAL FAITH LEADS TO HOPE.

IF Faith is real, it leads to Hope. God has not only told us things that we can know by Faith. He has promised us things. Things in this life and the Big Thing which is Eternal Life. We worship Him by Hope when we trust these promises. Believing and trusting lead us to action. Action is Love. By

loving God we mean acting out our lives in doing His Will, loving Him before everything else, loving Him above everyone else, for His own sweet sake. This is Charity. "So we have these three, Faith, Hope, Charity, but the greatest of these is Charity." (1 Corinthians 13.) This is what St. Paul called Religion. It means all the powers of body and soul worshiping God as The Supreme Being. It means not only saying things but doing things. "Why call you Me, Lord, and do not the things that I say?" (Luke 6:46.) Religion means life. Not only life inside a church but outside a church. Not only on Sunday but on every day. It means God in everything and everything for God.

As God is entitled to our worship, and He alone, it is easy to see that we sin if we give honor to false gods. False gods are not only the gods of paganism, gold or wood or stone carved into images. Money is a false god if it is looked upon as the important thing of life. Anything is a false god that usurps God's place. Money has been the false god of the ages. You can find its worshipers at all times and in all places. And today Science is taking a place alongside Money as a modern false god. The true scientist does not place science above God. For he knows that science like everything else comes from God. But a great many who write or talk in the name of science give the impression that science is the god of the modern world. Nationalism is a false god for it makes the nation or the State supreme and the individual nothing but a cog in the State machine. Racism is a false god for it idolizes the race and forgets that all races stem from two individuals who were created by God. Science, Nationalism and Racism are the big false gods of the modern world.

It is a striking fact that if men will not obey the First Commandment and honor God as He should be honored, they will worship a false god of one kind or another. Modern man laughs at the idolatry of the ignorant pagan and forgets that when he places science or State or race before God, he, too, is an idolater.

Sins Against Faith.

As Faith, Hope, Charity and Religion are virtues in the soul by which we give God the honor due Him, it is plain that if we fail in these virtues we sin against the First Commandment. Remember we fulfill the First Commandment when we worship God by believing what He has revealed on the authority of His Word. That is Faith. We worship Him by Hope when, relying on His goodness and His promises, we confidently expect to attain Eternal Life and the means necessary to attain it. We worship Him by Charity when we love Him above all things for His own sake and observe His Law. We worship Him by the virtue of Religion when we honor and adore Him as The Supreme Being.

What is a sin against Faith? Like every sin, it may be in thought, word or deed. If a thought comes to my mind that the Church is not infallible or the Pope is not infallible or any other teaching that I hold as a Catholic may be wrong, and I dwell on it, and do not reason and pray, until finally I say in my mind:

"I do not believe this or that any more," I commit a sin of thought against Faith.

Of course, this does not mean I shall never have difficulties about Faith, that I shall never be tempted against Faith. "A thousand difficulties do not make one doubt," said Cardinal Newman [now beatified]. Just as a thousand temptations do not make one sin. The first rule in every temptation is: PRAY. "Lord I believe, help You my unbelief." (See Mark 9:23.) It is consoling to remember that the greatest saints have suffered temptations against Faith. They conquered them by prayer. God gives everyone the grace to do the same.

It is plain, too, that I sin against Faith if I deliberately declare I am not a Catholic or as a Catholic openly repudiate any teaching of the Church. It is one thing to conceal the fact that I am a Catholic when I may or may not declare myself. I say nothing about it. For I am not obliged to state my Catholic belief on all occasions. But it is a much different thing to openly deny the fact when I am challenged. That is a sin against Faith. “Have a reason for the Faith that is in you,” were St. Peter’s and St. Paul’s words to the Catholics of his day. (See 1 Peter 3:15) The more we know our Faith, the more we grow to love it and gladly profess it, even though we suffer in doing it.

St. Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, keenest of legal minds in the Europe of his day, knew his Faith and loved it. He died for one principle of that Faith. He died for the principle that the Pope is supreme in matters of Faith and morals. Was that easy? Not at all. For it was a principle very much clouded at the time. Today every Catholic in the world knows clearly that the Pope’s supremacy is the real test of Catholic belief. Not so in the sixteenth century. For more than a hundred years all Christendom had been debating it, the England of More’s day was at odds over it. “To his own family as a whole probably, to his wife certainly, to nearly all his friends and to the mass of Englishmen of his time, his position was not heroic but absurd. He was utterly alone. He had no support from without.” This is Belloc’s picture of the man who saw his Faith so clearly and loved it so intensely that he gave his life rather than deny what he believed. That is the Faith of a hero. So the Church proclaims him saint and martyr.

It is a sin against Faith to declare that all religions are the same or that one is as good as another. So for a Catholic to join in services of any other religion is to proclaim by his action this falsehood. (The Church provides certain exceptions to this rule – provided there is no compromise with the error mentioned in the first sentence of this paragraph.) When a Catholic declares in the words of the creed — I believe in the one, holy, apostolic Church — he means any and every other religion is false. One is true. For it comes from God. All others are false for they come from men. History proves that. The gospels prove that. Common sense proves that.

To join any secret society forbidden by the Church is a sin against Faith. To say: “I may become a member of the Masonic Order for business or social reasons, and still be a Catholic” is to live a lie. For Freemasonry is a religion and a false religion. To join the Communist Party because it may be in a position to secure a man some help is to deny the Faith. For the Communist Party is at war with the Catholic Church and every Church. It is an enemy of God and the very idea of God, working to blot out the teachings of God from every human heart.

Sins Against Hope.

As by Faith I believe God’s Word, so by Hope I trust in His promises. I sin against the virtue of Hope in two ways, by presumption and despair. If I bank on God’s promises and do nothing for myself, I am presuming. God helps those who help themselves. God cannot do otherwise for He has created us free. To be free means to have power to do or not to do, to do this in preference to that.

So, if instead of fighting passion and sin and the occasions of sin, I do nothing but say:

“God will be merciful,” I sin by presumption.

Good will is what God looks for. “If you have a wishbone where your backbone should be, wish for peace. If you have a backbone where your backbone should be, then fight for peace,” so read a recruiting poster in Canada during the last World War. In the battle for heaven and the war against sin, wish is not a weapon. But will is.

Centuries ago, St. Augustine remarked: “God who created us without our consent will not save us, without our consent.”

Sin of Despair.

Despair is the opposite of presumption. It is complete lack of trust in God’s mercy. “The mercy of God is above all His works,” so sang David the poet-king. (See Psalm 145, numbered 144 in the Vulgate.) He knew what he was saying for he had sinned and sinned terribly and God had forgiven him. The man who despairs, forgets that wonderful line. He forgets all of God’s mercies coloring the pages of the Old Testament, forgiving constantly His “stiff-necked people” as Moses and God Himself called them. He forgets the teachings of the gentle Christ gleaming out of the pages of the New Testament, the Gospels that tell His Life. He forgets that no matter how awful his sin, how low his fall, the Hand of God is strong enough to lift him up, the Sacred Heart ever longing to forgive. He forgets that our Savior said: “I have come to call not the just but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13.) He forgets the story of Magdalene and Peter and the robber who with a simple heart-throb beating in contrition - linked with the prayer — Remember me — really “stole Paradise.” (See Luke 23: 39-43.) He follows Judas who instead of declaring his contrition to God, proclaimed his remorse to men. What God did for Peter He would have done for Judas. But Judas would not have God. He sold Him for silver. He could have bought Him back but only for gold, the gold of contrition. Remorse means only sentiment, natural emotion and is the pathway to despair. Contrition is supernatural will-power and is the road to Heaven.

VI.

“BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY.”

BESIDES Faith and Hope, we worship God by Charity.

One day in the busy days of our Lord’s life on earth a doctor of the law in an attempt to pose a difficult question said to Him:

“Good Master, which is the great commandment of the Law?” Jesus said to him: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole mind and with your whole soul. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:34-40.)

This is Charity. And these two commandments are the greatest because they practically contain all the others. Charity then is love of God above all things for His own sake. It is supernatural because it is above (super) any natural power of mind or heart or soul.

It is based on motives of Faith. I cannot have Charity unless I believe in God and believe what God has said. And it cannot be in my soul without grace. When a great many people think about Charity, they imagine themselves feeling sympathy for someone and helping someone in distress. Ordinarily they think of the Good Samaritan. But they do not think enough about him. For they picture him as a man that helped his neighbor who was in distress while two others who should have known better passed him by. They forget that the Good Samaritan helped his neighbor not merely because suffering appealed to his human sympathy but mainly because the man who had been beaten up by bandits was the image of God, the child of God. (See Luke 10.) Human sympathy is good. Charity is better. For Charity is human sympathy lifted up to a higher plane. Charity begins with God. God is infinitely good and perfect and worthy of all love. God is good to us and has proved and is always proving His love for us. God wishes and commands us to love Him. Everything we have, we have

from God. Everything we are, is because of God. Are not these reasons for beginning with God? The child learning the catechism is puzzled when told that God should be loved for His own sake. But the child is not puzzled if he is told God is to be loved for His own sake because He is so good. So good, that everything anyone has, is given him by God.

The Meaning of Sanctity.

The more I know about God the more I will love Him. We marvel at the language of the saints when they speak about God. Well we must remember they have learned much from prayer, reading and meditation. They are specialists in the love of God. We are amateurs. That is the difference. The saints grew in divine grace until they possessed it in the highest degree. What does that mean? It means they were willing to lose the dearest things in life and even life itself rather than commit a mortal sin. That was their first step in sanctity. Then they grew stronger in God's love until they had a fixed purpose to surrender all that was precious in life rather than be guilty of a venial sin. Their ambition, however, to love God was not satisfied by this hatred and horror of mortal and venial sin. Their love for God growing under the inspiration of grace led them to desire to work and suffer for God not because they feared the consequences of sin or yearned for the rewards of heaven but simply and solely because they said to themselves: "We want to be like the dear Savior who labored and suffered so much for us." St. Ignatius in calling his companions to the battle for sanctity said: "Worldlings love and seek after honors, reputation, fame. So you who follow Christ must seek the opposites. You must yearn to labor as He labored, to suffer as He suffered, to become fools for Christ in the judgment of the world that pronounced Him a fool. Your life ambition must be to imitate and resemble in some way the Lord Jesus Christ and to imitate and follow Him, seeing He is the true Way that leads men to life." That is what sanctity means. That is loving God above all things. That is the First Commandment fulfilled to perfection.

Charity then means first love of God and then love of neighbor. Love of neighbor proves love for God. "How can a man say he loves God whom he has not seen, when he does not love his neighbor whom he sees?" (1 John 4:20) This is the challenge too of St. James. When I speak of loving a person, I mean that I am ready to do good to that person. For real love means action and service.

How clear this is from the constant teaching of our Lord. Summing up all that teaching when the shadow of death was upon Him, He said: "As the Father has loved Me I also have loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My Commandments, you will abide in My love; as I also have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no man has, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do the things that I command you." (John 15.)

Charity in Action.

It was the charity of the first Christians more than anything else that impressed the pagan world. For the pagan world knew hatred. It loved little. But the small group that was the early Church lived charity. Its life was its strongest message. The pagan world hated the alien and the stranger. The Christian community made no distinction between Jew, Greek, Roman or barbarian. That is the meaning of the First Commandment. All men are God's children, all are made in His image, all are redeemed by the Precious Blood of Christ. So we are commanded to love our neighbor even as ourselves. It is what is called The Golden Rule. "As you would that men should do to you, do you also to them in like manner." (Luke 6:31.) We do this in obedience to God's command, to please God and because God loves all men. Loving people who are good to us is not charity. "If you love

them that love you what thanks are to you? For sinners also love those that love them.” (Luke 6:32.) The test of charity is in loving people who do not appeal to us. It is easy to serve agreeable characters. It is charity to serve disagreeable characters. Step into any home for the aged conducted by the Little Sisters of the Poor. There you will find what love of neighbor means better than anything written in books or preached from pulpits. For there you will see in consecrated lives the law of charity in action.

As we are commanded to love all men so is there order in the command. It may be expressed thus: Parents, family, friends, others.

And we must not forget our country. That is patriotism. It is taught by Christ who loved His nation and His people. It does not mean nationalism. For nationalism means a disordered love of country. It means loving my own nation and hating others. That is neither patriotism nor charity. When we do good to others, that is love them in God’s Name, we serve God and show our love for God. In fact, Christ takes the place of the person we serve.

“Lord when did we see You hungry and feed You; thirsty and gave You to drink? And when did we see You a stranger and took You in? Or naked and covered You? Or when did we see You sick or in prison and came to You? And the King answering shall say to them: "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these My least brethren you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25.)

We have the great charter of charity in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The corporal works of mercy are: To feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbor the stranger, visit the sick and the prisoner and bury the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are: To instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubting, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive injuries, comfort the sorrowful and pray for the living and the dead. The Charter of Charity is the code of Christ’s kingdom. If we want to know whether or not we are followers of Christ the King, we have only to look at the code of the kingdom.

“What the soul is to the body, what the root is to the tree, What the sun to all creation, to the soul is charity.

First and greatest of commandments, piety’s beginning, end.

All the Law and all the prophets on the Law of Love depend.”

Sins Against Charity.

What is a sin against charity? If we reflect a moment, we shall see that every sin is a sin against charity. This is why. Every sin either weakens or destroys the bond of love between God and the individual. If it is a serious sin, it destroys God’s grace in the soul. If it is a venial sin, it weakens the love that I have for God. But when I speak of sins against charity, I particularly mean those sins that stand out as special outrages against the Lord of Love. Hatred is the opposite of love. And the spirit of hate is the contradiction of the spirit of charity. The hatred of person against person, nation against nation, destroys the spirit of charity “which is in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given to us.” (Romans 5:5.) Our Lord speaks especially against hatred even of enemies. And when hatred leads to refusal to forgive then we are warned that God our Judge will measure out to us as we measure out to others. People say at times that they cannot forgive. What they mean is they find it hard to forget. We are not commanded to forget injuries but to forgive them. An injury may linger long in the memory. There is no sin in that. But when it speaks out in revenge, there is sin.

“Vengeance is Mine,” God says. (See Romans 12:19.) Moreover, the person who harbors unforgiveness in his heart calls on God to condemn him every time he prays the Our Father. For he asks God not to forgive him. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” (See Matthew 6.) That is self-indictment if we are unforgiving.

It is a sin against Charity to ruin or besmirch the character or reputation of another. The rash judgment, the hasty ill-advised and destructive criticism, the snap-opinion are all sins against Charity. “Show me the man that does not offend in speech and I call him a perfect man,” says St. James (3:2). It is so easy to see the mote in another’s eye and miss the beam in our own. (See Matthew 7:1-5.) It is so easy to dilate on the faults of others and so hard to acknowledge our own. No one has a right to broadcast sins or faults even though these are true. Among the sins called Capital are enumerated envy and jealousy. They are called capital because they are the heads under which a number of sins follow. And from them a number of sins stem. If I find myself extremely critical of another, I may tell myself I am surely jealous or envious of another. Of what use to spread the news of the sin, fault, or weakness of another? It does not stop the sin or save the sinner. This was the great sin of the Pharisee. It hardened the Pharisee’s heart into the greater sin of hypocrisy. If the Pharisee had come into the life of our Lord to learn His teaching, he would have learned and have been happy. But he came to criticize. He saw the good deed done on the Sabbath day and was envious and jealous of the Great Doer. Envy, jealousy, hypocrisy led him to the murder of the Son of God and the destruction of his own soul.

Fulfilling the First Commandment.

We worship God then, by Faith, Hope and Charity and so fulfill the First Commandment. As St. Paul told the Catholics of Corinth: “If I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not charity I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have Prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity it profits me nothing. Charity is patient, is kind; charity envies not, deals not perversely, is not puffed up. Is not ambitious, seeks not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinks no evil. Rejoices not in iniquity but rejoices with the truth. Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... And now there remain faith, hope and charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Corinthians, Chapter 13).

VII.

RELIGION.

RELIGION is a virtue whereby we offer to God outward and public acts of faith, hope and love. St. James expresses it by saying: “Be you all doers of the Word and not merely hearers deceiving your own selves.” (James 1:22.) For religion means life. Nor is it difficult to decide whether a man is religious or not. For God has placed the test. The test is to worship God as He wants to be worshiped. Religion means that. It means showing publicly what I believe. Public worship and prayer and sacrifice are the proofs I give that I believe in God, that I hope in God and rely on His promises, that I love God above everyone and everything. From the days of Moses to the days of Christ, God directed the public worship of His people. Christ came and established His Church and commissioned that Church to do as He did. That means to teach, to legislate, to sanctify. And so the Church tells me how God wants to be worshiped. The Church makes laws governing public prayer

and worship. And the highest form of prayer is sacrifice for it is the prayer that acknowledges God's supreme dominion over man. And we, unlike the people of the Old Law, have the true and perfect sacrifice. In the Third Commandment we learn about that.

Is public worship the complete fulfillment of the First Commandment? Yes and no. Yes, if my life squares with my public prayer. No, if I do not live as I pray. Common sense shows me that, but much more our Lord's teaching makes it clear. What was the big sin of the Pharisee? Just this, that he made public prayer substitute for real religion, which means life. He cheated and lied, he was heartless and cruel to his fellow man and then he went up to the Temple where everyone could see him and took part in the public service of religion. It was not prayer as Christ told him. It was an insult to God. It was hypocrisy. There is no value in public prayer unless it is backed up by right living. Unless I put love into my home, honesty into my private life, no amount of public prayer will make me pleasing to God.

Idolatry and Superstition.

How do we sin against the virtue of Religion? By idolatry and superstition. Idolatry is paying divine honor to a creature. Time and time again in the history of the Jewish people, we find the practice of idolatry. Paganism past and present has been darkened by idolatry. Read the modern mission magazines or the Old Testament and you will find the same story. Man will adore God or he will make gods of his own and adore them. Probably one-half of the world's population today is guilty of idolatry.

Idolatry then is all direct worship of false gods and all direct worship of idols. In the story of mankind, idolatry probably began in this way. A great man or a group of great men did noble service for the tribe or clan. After death, they were honored as heroes. This honor grew with the passing of time, with legend and myth gathering around their names until the honor given was divine. They became the gods of the tribe. Statues or images were made of departed heroes as worthy memorials. After a while, divine power was attributed to these statues or images. We might call this the evolution of idolatry, or how it came about.

Statues and Images.

This does not mean that God forbids all honor to statues and images. In the Old Law, God sanctioned the honor due to the figures of the angels that were placed in the Tabernacle over the Ark: "You shall make also two cherubims of beaten gold on the two sides of the oracle" (Exodus, 25:18). God commanded Moses to set up a brazen serpent that whoever might look on it would be cured if bitten by the poisonous serpents; "And the Lord said to him: Make a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign; whosoever being struck shall look on it, shall live. Moses therefore made a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign, and when they that were bitten looked upon it, they were healed" (Numbers, 21:8). The brazen serpent was the sign chosen by God to show His mercy. Moreover, it was a figure of the Savior who was to be, as our Lord pointed out to the people of His day: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so must the Son of Man be lifted up. That whosoever believeth in Him may not perish but may have life everlasting" (St. John 3:14-15).

And so when we pass from the old religion which was but the preparation for the true religion established by our Savior, we know that statues and pictures and images are in use among all members of Christ's Church. They are not honored for themselves but for what they represent. The same is true of the veneration of relics. And God from time to time shows His approval by performing miracles to confirm the rightness of the practice. Is it not strange that people who wish

to deprecate these practices treasure the pictures of their own loved ones? Is it not remarkable that men will carp at religious veneration of images, statues, pictures and relics and yet the world over will venerate the tomb of the Unknown Soldier? Any material thing may become sacred as the water or the dirt that our Lord used at times when He wrought a miracle. It is the same with the medal that has the blessing of the Church upon it. For the blessing of the Church is the blessing of God. A medal may be made of valuable or cheap metal. That makes no difference. By the blessing of the Church, it is made sacred.

So we may call a medal a sacramental of the Church in as much as it is made sacred by the blessing of the Church. It is a reminder too of what we believe. A medal of the Immaculate Conception brings vividly to my mind that I believe our Lady was conceived immaculate. It is not merely the wearing of a medal that is an act of Religion. It is wearing a medal and living the message of the medal and so honoring God, His Blessed Mother or the saints that is an act of Religion. The same is true of pictures and statues. We honor them to show respect to the persons they represent. This truth is brought out very clearly in the act of consecration to our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. In this prayer, we say: "May this medal be for each one of us a sure sign of your affection for us and a constant reminder of our duties toward you. Ever while wearing it may we be blessed by your loving protection and preserved in the grace of your Son."

VIII.

SUPERSTITION.

THE word superstition means placing above (super - above) or giving a thing a position it has no right to hold. To believe in charms, spells, omens, dreams, chain prayers — all this is superstition. Magic, witchcraft, spiritism, fortune telling, seriously indulged in, fall under the heading of superstition. Superstition has its roots in two human motives, the motive of fear and the motive of curiosity. It is wrong to imagine that only ignorant people are prone to superstition. It is right to conclude that irreligious people are superstitious. It is also true to say that people who at heart are religious but who have not a sufficient knowledge of their religion are inclined to superstition.

Spiritism.

Spiritism, which was rampant after the last war, (the Great War of 1914 -18 especially,) and which today claims many adherents is probably the most widespread of all superstitions. This practice is an endeavor to communicate with the souls of the dead. It takes many forms. Books without number have been written about it. Claims innumerable have been made in its favor. The outstanding fact however is this. Nothing has been proved to show that any one has talked with a soul that has left this life. Verbal or written messages have come through at different spiritualistic meetings, but the identity of the messenger has never been proved. So much for the claims of spiritism.

But do not some wonderful things occur at a spiritualistic séance? They most assuredly do. It is both unfair and senseless to deny this. How then explain these happenings? There are three explanations. Trickery is one explanation. Many dishonest mediums have been exposed who for years admitted that they had duped the followers of the cult. Another explanation is that there are psychic forces or powers possessed by certain individuals that enable them to do things that the ordinary person cannot do. We do not know all there is to know about the workings of the human mind. We probably never shall. As we do not know all the powers hidden in the stone, or the soil or the blade of grass. We have only recently discovered the cosmic ray and we do not know what it is except that it is a great force hidden in nature. We know the great power of electricity and we do not know what

it is. [This was written in 1939, and what scientist today can say he has had the last word on these phenomena?] And so for the undoubted psychic powers that at times reveal themselves in a spiritualistic medium. The last explanation of clearly proven spiritualistic happenings is this. The devil is capable of possessing a medium and using the medium as an instrument for his own purpose. His own purpose is to dishonor God. A false religion does this. So it may be surely said that in some of the results of spiritualistic meetings the devil has had a hand.

Father Charles De Heredia, S.J., a student of spiritism for many years gives this rule for interpreting spiritualistic phenomena: "First look for fraud, then for the tricks of the magician and finally for Satan." As a matter of fact, Father De Heredia duplicated many a marvel of spiritism by his clever and magician methods.

When we speak of the magician today, we do not mean what the Bible means. For by a magician we mean an entertainer who amuses by sleight-of-hand or card tricks. But the magician in the biblical sense means one who performs marvels by the aid of Satan.

As the book of Exodus states in the time of Moses:

"And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: When Pharaoh shall say to you: 'Show signs', you shall say to Aaron: Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh and it shall be turned into a serpent... And Aaron took the rod before Pharaoh and it was turned into a serpent. And Pharaoh called the wise men and the magicians and they also by Egyptian enchantments and certain secrets did in like manner. And they every one cast down their rods and they were turned into serpents; but Aaron's rod devoured their rods" (Exodus, 7:9-12).

What Aaron had done with the help of God the magicians of Egypt did with the help of Satan. That is 'magic' of which the Bible speaks and condemns.

Witchcraft.

Witchcraft means invoking the devil for evil purposes and generally to work injury. The witch of Endor whose story is told in the first book of Kings (1 Samuel as it is known to Protestants,) called up the spirit of Samuel to King Saul (1 Kings {1 Samuel} 28:7). This is witchcraft as the Bible describes it and condemns it. In Shakespeare's "Macbeth", we have the three witches enter upon the scene to work upon the ambition of their victim and so lead him to his doom.

Astrology.

Astrology is the art of foretelling life's future by studying the stars. Belief in omens means judging of the future by things of mere chance, as the flight or the song of birds or the lines in the hand. Belief in dreams explains itself. All such foolishness is disdained by the devout Catholic.

The catalogue of superstition is a long one. It is a tale of human fear, curiosity, hope. On its darkest pages, I read how low man can fall as he wanders farther and farther away from God. Gripped by this sin he sinks not to the level of the brute but lower than the brute. Making unto himself false gods, he is a pitiful figure. The truly Catholic mind abhors superstition in any and every form.

For the truly Catholic mind is conscious of God's presence in all the ways of life, knowing with David:

The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall want nothing.
He has set me in a place of pasture.

He has brought me up on the waters of refreshment;
He has converted my soul.
He has led me on the paths of justice for His own Name's sake.
For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death
I will fear no evils for You are with me...
And Your mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

(Psalm 23, numbered 22 in the Vulgate.)

To sum up.

The honor we pay to God stands alone.
It is adoration in the strict meaning of the word.
For it is the acknowledgement of God as the Supreme Being.
It is His right and He commands it.
He commands it through the gentle whisper of the voice of conscience.
He commands it amid the thunders of Sinai.
He commands it by the clear teaching of His Beloved Son who placed His Church upon earth to repeat, teach and explain His Command.
Faith, hope, charity, religion — this is man's complete answer to that command.
And in that answer faithfully given man finds his happiness in life upon earth and secures his eternal destiny in heaven, "where eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive the ineffable bliss that God has prepared for those who love Him."
(1 Corinthians 2:9)
