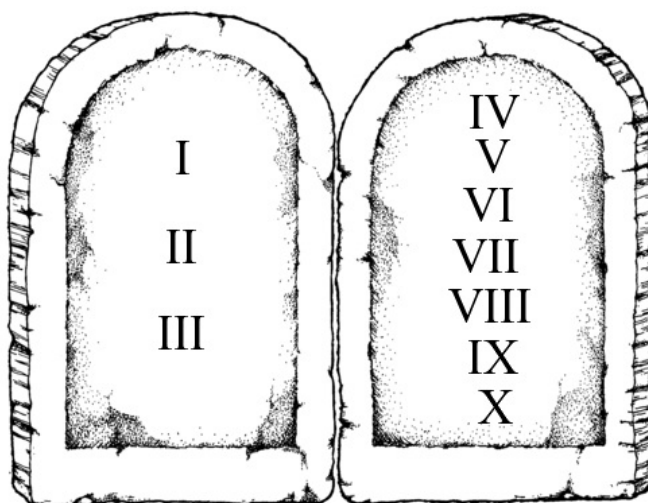


Our first reading from the book of Exodus opens with a list of laws the people were called to obey. “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, you shall not abuse any widow or orphan, if you take your neighbours cloak you shall return it before sundown. And the list goes on and grew into over six hundred laws.

The people of Israel who wished to be faithful followers of Yahweh were expected to keep six hundred and thirteen laws and regulations that governed everything from what they ate, to their personal hygiene. Though the people considered all these laws of Moses important, they also realized that some were more important than others.



In today's Gospel a lawyer asks Jesus which commandment in the law was the greatest. Jesus tells him and us that the greatest and the first commandment is to love God. The second commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments are the foundation of our faith. Jesus concludes that the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. If we observe them, then even the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

If one looks at all of church history — not just at the last sixteen or seventeen hundred years — the reforming bishops of Vatican II didn't create anything new. They simply asked us to return to the teachings and practices that the earliest followers of Jesus would have been comfortable with.

For many faithful Catholics, such a request felt like they were being asked to commit to something brand-new, to accept ideas and practices conjured up by a group of radical liberals. It's interesting that even Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, the sixteenth-century papal legate sent to interrogate Martin Luther on his beliefs, wrote back to Pope Leo X that he found no heresy in much of what this German monk was preaching. But he added that Catholics hadn't heard some of these things for many centuries.

This gives me the opportunity to share with you some of the basic teachings of our church which you may not have heard for quite some time. These teachings are as valid today as they were when first taught many centuries ago.

Last week we heard of the three Theological Virtues Faith, Hope and Charity. These virtues can simply be pictured a tree of life, where the roots are our faith implanted in us as a gift from God and nurtured by the world around us, the earth and all it holds, the sun and water. These are images of the community of faith that nurtures us so that we will grow strong in our faith.

Hope sprouts from our faith and can be displayed as the branches of the tree. And of course our faith is lived in the hope of eternal life prompts us to bear fruit, fruit that will last forever. The fruit that we bear is symbolized by the fruit of the tree and are our acts of charity which lead us to holiness and reduces the suffering of those around us, all building up the kingdom of God here on earth.

From the Theological Virtues flow the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it (CCC no. 1806).

Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour. Justice toward God is called the 'virtue of religion'. Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good (CCC no. 1807).

Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life (CCC no. 1808).

Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honourable (CCC no. 1809).

Whenever we receive the sacraments of the Church we know we receive Jesus, but it is important to know we receive our Trinitarian God in his fullness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our one God, though three in persons, cannot be separated one person from the other. When receive one we receive all.

When we receive any sacrament we therefore receive the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord (CCC no. 1831).

These gifts configure us more closely to Christ into whose life we were baptised. They make us more ready to obey the divine inspirations of God through the Holy Spirit.

When we live our lives in cooperation with the gifts of the Holy Spirit our lives bear spiritual fruit which we refer to as the fruits of the Spirit which are: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity (CCC no. 1832).

By displaying these virtues in our lives it is apparent that we have reduced are attraction to their opposite vice and have grown in holiness and are living under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Our Church has five precepts which we are all called to live (CCC nos. 2042 & 2043). One: You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation and remain free from work or activity that could impede the sanctification of such days. Two: You shall confess your sins at least once a year. Three: You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season. Four: You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church. And five: You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.

The obligatory character of these positive laws decreed by the pastoral authorities is meant to guarantee to the faithful the very necessary minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbour (CCC no. 2041).

Our Church also calls us to works of mercy. The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour in his spiritual and bodily necessities (CCC no. 2447). There are seven corporal works of mercy: Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Shelter the homeless. Visit the sick. Visit the imprisoned. Bury the dead.

There are also seven spiritual works of mercy: Counsel the doubtful. Instruct the ignorant. Admonish sinners. Comfort the afflicted. Forgive offences. Bear wrongs patiently. Pray for the living and the dead.

We all know that sin exists, that it is the failure to love. Some sin is less offensive which we call venial sin. Some sin is grave which we call mortal sin because it breaks our relationship with God and each other. The Church identifies seven capital sins also referred to at times as the seven deadly sins. They are: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth (CCC no. 1866).

When all is said and done we must consider the four last things: death, judgement, hell and heaven. We pray in our Apostles Creed that Jesus, "is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead". From that judgment it will be determined where we will spend eternity, heaven or hell.

That Judgment will be based on how well we, "loved the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind," and how well, "we loved our neighbour as our self."