

Teach Children the Sign of the Cross

Pope Francis

The Pontiff's catechesis at the General Audience

"Teach your children to make the sign of the Cross". This was the "homework" that Pope Francis assigned to parents during the General Audience in the Paul VI Hall on Wednesday, 22 August [2018]. Continuing the series of catecheses on the Commandments, the Pontiff asked that all Christians "take God's name upon themselves", without hypocrisy or falsehood. The following is a translation of the Holy Father's catechesis, which he delivered in Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!

Let us continue our catechesis on the Commandments. Today we shall focus on the Commandment *"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain"* (Ex 20:7). We rightly interpret these words as an invitation not to offend the name of God and to avoid using it inappropriately. This clear meaning prepares us for a more in-depth look at these precious words: not to take the name of God inappropriately or in vain.

Let us listen to them more closely. The precept "you shall not take" translates an expression which, both in Hebrew and in Greek, literally means *"you shall not take upon yourself, you shall not assume"*.

The expression "in vain" is clearer and means *"idly, vainly"*. It refers to an empty casing, a form that has no content. It is a trait of hypocrisy, of formality and lies and of using words or the name of God, but idly, without truth.

In the Bible a *name* is the intimate truth of things and, above all, of individuals. A name often represents a mission. For example, Abraham in Genesis (cf. 17:5) and Simon Peter in the Gospels (cf. Jn 1:42) received a new name to indicate the change in the direction of their lives. And truly knowing the name of God leads to the transformation of one's life: from the moment Moses learned God's name, his story changed (cf. Ex 3:13-15).

In Hebrew rites, the name of God was solemnly proclaimed on the Great Day of Forgiveness, when the people were forgiven because, through one's name, one comes into contact with God's very life, which is mercy.

Thus, *"to take the name of God upon oneself"* means to assume his reality, to enter into a strong relationship, a close relationship with him. For us Christians, this Commandment is the call to remind ourselves that we were baptized *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*, as we affirm each time we make the sign of the Cross, in order to carry out our daily actions in heartfelt and true communion with God, that is, in his love. And on this topic, making the sign of the Cross, I would like to repeat once again: teach your children to make the sign of the Cross. Have you seen how children do it? If you say to children: "make the sign of the Cross", they do something that they do not know about. They do not know how to make the sign of the Cross! Teach them how to do it: in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A child's first act of faith. This is your homework, homework to do: teach children to make the sign of the Cross.

One may wonder: is it possible to take the name of God upon oneself in a hypocritical way, as an empty formality? Unfortunately, the answer is in the affirmative. Yes it is possible. One can live in a false relationship with God. Jesus used to say of the doctors of the law: they did some things, but they did not do what God wanted. They spoke of God, but they did not do God's will. The advice that Jesus gives us is: "Do what they say but not what they do". One can have a false relationship with God, like those people. And this precept from the Decalogue is precisely an invitation to have a relationship with God that is not false, that is without hypocrisy; a relationship in which we entrust ourselves to him with all that we are. After all, until the day we stake everything on the Lord, by experiencing firsthand that life can be found in him, we are only theorizing.

This is Christianity which moves hearts. Why are saints able to move hearts? Because not only do saints speak, they act! Our hearts are moved when a saint speaks to us, tells us things. And they are able to do so because, in saints, we can see what our heart profoundly desires: authenticity, true relationships, radicalism. And this can also be seen

in “the saints next door” who, for example, are the many parents who set for their children an example of a consistent, simple, honest and generous life.

If more Christians were to take God’s name upon themselves without falsehood — by honouring the first request of the Our Father: “*hallowed be thy name*” — the Church’s message would receive more attention and would be more credible. If our daily life were to manifest God’s name, we would see how beautiful Baptism is and what a great gift the Eucharist is; what sublime union there is between our body and the Body of Christ; Christ in us and we in him! United! This is not hypocrisy, this is truth. This is not speaking or praying like a parrot. This is praying from the heart, loving the Lord.

From the Cross of Christ onwards, no one can despise themselves and think badly of their life. No one and never! No matter what they may have done. Because *the name of each of us is on Christ’s shoulders*. He carries us! It is worthwhile to take God’s name upon ourselves because he took our names upon himself, to the very end, including the evil that is within us. He burdened himself, in order to forgive us, to place his love in our hearts. This is why in this Commandment, God proclaimed: “Take me upon yourself as I have taken you upon me”.

Anyone, in whatever situation they may be, can invoke the Holy name of the Lord, who is faithful and merciful Love. God will never say ‘no’ to a heart that invokes him sincerely. And let us return to the assignment to be done at home: teach children to make the sign of the Cross properly.

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