

The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT: FAMILY AND SOCIAL MORALITY

PART THREE • SECTION SIX OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

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PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE
(MORALITY)

SECTION 6: FAMILY AND SOCIAL MORALITY

The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother

1. Catholic social and political morality as rooted in God and family

“Love is the fulfillment of the Law.” (Rom 13:10). The Ten Commandments specify how to love. The first three Commandments (the first table of the Law) tell us how to love God, and the last seven (the second table) how to love neighbor.

Just as the first Commandment is the foundation of the first table of the Law, the fourth is the foundation of the second table. “The fourth commandment opens the second table of the Decalogue. It shows us the order of charity. God has willed that, after [1] Him, we should honor [2] our parents to whom we owe life and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God. We are obliged to honor and respect [3] all those whom God, for our good, has vested with his authority” (C 2197). “This . . . includes . . . instructors, teachers, leaders, magistrates, those who govern, all

who exercise authority over others or over a community of persons” (C 2199).

Thus our relation to social and political authorities is rooted in our even more basic relation to our parents, which in turn is rooted in the most basic of all relations, to our Creator. The three are ordered hierarchically, one derived from the other.

This fundamental principle radically distinguishes Catholic social and political morality from modern secular alternatives. Almost always, the secularist ignoring of God and his authority is accompanied by an ignoring of the family, its authority, and its priority over the state. Secularists naturally tend to overestimate states and underestimate families because states are made by man, and made in many different forms, while the family is designed by God, not man, and cannot be essentially redesigned in different forms — though secularists today often attempt to do just that, for example by declaring the artificial, temporary, and sterile union of two or more homosexuals to be a “family” just as much as the natural, permanent, and procreative union of a husband and wife.

Before outlining the details of Catholic teaching about the private family (paragraphs 6-12) and public society (paragraphs 13-20), we should explain a fundamental principle governing both that is very often misunderstood today: the meaning of “authority” and “obedience” and their compatibility with equality (paragraphs 2-5).

2. The meaning of authority

When St. Paul, in his epistles, summarizes God’s will for man’s social order, he usually mentions four relationships, the four natural relationships that persist in all times,

places, cultures, and political systems: the relations between a) parents and children, b) husbands and wives, c) rulers and citizens, and d) masters and servants. In ancient Rome, this meant masters and slaves; in modern terms, it means employers and employees. (You pay your plumber for his service.)

“Authority” and “obedience” are two concepts nearly every premodern culture uses to describe these fundamental relationships; and the Bible and the Church use them too as things that are natural and proper and good. However, these two terms are very often misunderstood and therefore rejected today.

For one thing, the authority of parents, husbands, rulers, and masters is not one thing but four very different things, in both nature and extent. Rulers’ authority over citizens cannot be expected to be based on unselfish Christlike love; but this love is the only Scriptural basis for a husband’s authority over his wife (Eph 5:22-25), and it is also expected of parents toward children.

For another thing, while wives are told to be “subject” to their husbands, husbands are also told to be “subject” to their wives: “Be subject *to one another*” (Eph 5:21).

Third, if the parents, husbands, rulers, and masters are in authority “over” children, wives, citizens, and servants in authority, they are no less “under” *responsibilities* to those others. Husbands must love their wives “as Christ loved the Church,” (Eph 5:25), not to be their “boss.” God designed these human relationships to be a dance between equals playing different roles, not a power struggle between unequals for the same “top” role. It is to be like the Trinity. When God the Son became man, he revealed to us the

Trinitarian nature of God as a love relationship among three equal Persons who are nevertheless related in an order of authority and obedience. The Son “obeys” the Father in all things. He thus radically changed our understanding of both authority and obedience, and corrected our natural misunderstanding.

This misunderstanding is to confuse *authority* with *power*; and obedience with *inferiority*, weakness, or servility. The misunderstanding comes from using the world’s point of view instead of God’s. The world treasures power, God treasures goodness. Authority in the Biblical sense is not a power word but a goodness word. It means right, not might.

Having authority *over* someone always presupposes being *under* a higher authority and transmitting it faithfully, as the Church transmits the Gospel of Christ. She has no authority (i.e. no right) to invent or change what she has received from God; she is God’s mail carrier, not his editor or critic. Your authority is your right to be obeyed *based on your obeying* – like the Roman centurion who said to Christ when invoking his authority over his servant’s life-threatening illness: “Say but the word, and let my servant be healed. For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes” (Lk 7:7-8). Just as the centurion knew that his authority derived from his obedience to Caesar, he knew that Christ’s authority derived from his obedience to the Father. Christ had authority over demons and diseases because he could truly say: “I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38).

3. *The meaning of obedience*

This example also shows that *obedience is not a mark of inferiority*. No one ever obeyed the Father's will more completely than Christ, yet Christ was divine, equal to the Father in all things.

Therefore, when the fourth Commandment commands children to obey their parents, and when the New Testament tells wives to obey their husbands (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Ti 2:5; 1 Pt 3:1), citizens to obey their rulers (Rom 13:1; 1 Pt 2:13-14), and servants to obey their masters (Col 3:22; Ti 2:9; 1 Pt 2:18), this does *not* imply a relationship between inferior and superior. Indeed, this misunderstanding is explicitly contradicted: "there is no partiality" (Col 3:25).

4. *The social forms of authority and obedience change with time*

Only the authority of God is absolute and unchangeable. All four forms of human authority are culturally relative and rightly take very different forms throughout time and place. The Church no more wishes mankind to return to a Victorian form of the husband-wife, parent-child, or master-servant relationship than she wishes us to return to a medieval, monarchical ideal of statehood.

However, *some* "vertical" or "hierarchical" dimension of authority coming "down" and obedience responding "up" is a necessary dimension of all social order. A "horizontal," or egalitarian, dimension of *equality* among all persons is an equally necessary dimension. Without authority there is chaos; without equality there is tyranny. *How* these two dimensions interact changes with time, place, and culture. The point is simply that authority does not contradict

equality, nor does equality eliminate authority. “. . . God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution. Its members are persons equal in dignity” (C 2203). Yet at the same time Scripture repeatedly affirms authority and commands obedience between these “persons equal in dignity.”

This is God’s design, and no man can change this fact because no man invented it. “. . . God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution” (C 2203) — *that* is the strongest possible basis for equality, as well as for the equally God-ordained fact that “[e]very human community needs an authority to govern it¹⁶” (C 1898).

5. The rewards for obedience to the fourth Commandment

St. Paul notes that “this is the first commandment with a promise” (Eph 6:2). “Respecting this commandment provides, along with spiritual fruits, temporal fruits of peace and prosperity. Conversely, failure to observe it brings great harm to communities and to individuals” (C 2200).

History verifies this promise. The three most stable, long-lasting, and internally peaceful societies in human history have been those continuing communities whose basic moral foundations were laid down by Moses (over 3500 years ago), Confucius (over 2500 years ago), and Muhammad (over 1300 years ago). All three of them were based on a very high regard for families and on the practice of continuous moral education.

Christ did not found a new civil society, but reaffirmed and fulfilled the Mosaic law, which God intended not just for Israel but the for the whole world. *Any* civil society, not

just Judaism, can prosper by taking the Ten Commandments as its foundation.

6. *What is the family?*

The *Catechism* specifies three essential features: the family's essence, origin, and end.

- (1) "A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family" (C 2202). This is the simple and obvious definition of a family's *structural parts*.
- (2) While the ultimate origin of the family is God's design, the *immediate origin* of the family is a man and a woman freely choosing to create this new "body politic," this "one flesh." "The conjugal community is established upon the consent of the spouses" (C 2201).
- (3) The family has *two essential ends*: "Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children" (C 2201).

Thus men only, women only, unmarried people, people forced into marriage, people who marry without basic goodwill toward each other, or people who refuse ever to have children, all fail to fulfill one of the essential features of a family.

7. *The priority of the family over the state*

- (1) The family is prior to the state in *origin and therefore in rights*. The state did not invent the family or give it its constitution or its rights. Therefore the state has no authority to un-invent or re-invent it. "This institution [the family] is

prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it” (C 2202). The family does not hold its rights from the state, but from God, since it holds its existence and its “fundamental constitution” (essential structure) from God.

- (2) The family is prior to the state in *end* or purpose. The state exists to foster the good of families and individuals, not vice versa.
- (3) The family is prior to the state in *importance*, for the family is the first and foundational building block of all society, “*the original cell of social life*” (C 2207). Therefore “[f]ollowing the principle of subsidiarity [see paragraph 18], larger communities should take care not to usurp the family’s prerogatives or interfere in its life” (C 2209).

8. Specific duties of the state to the family

“The political community has a duty to honor the family, to assist it, and to ensure especially:

- [1] the freedom to establish a family,
- [2] [to] have children,
- [3] and bring them up in keeping with the family’s own moral and religious convictions [this applies especially to “public” schools];
- [4] the protection of the stability of the marriage bond . . . ;
- [5] the freedom to profess one’s faith, to hand it on, and raise one’s children in it . . . ;
- [6] the right to private property,
- [7] to free enterprise,

- [8] to obtain work
- [9] and housing,
- [10] and the right to emigrate;
- [11] in keeping with the country's institutions, the right to medical care, assistance for the aged, and family benefits;
- [12] the protection of security and health, especially with respect to dangers like drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.;
- [13] the freedom to form associations with other families and so to have representation before civil authority¹⁵" (C 2211).
- [14] "As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to *choose a school for them* which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental" (C 2229).

9. *The family and morality*

"The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values . . ." (C 2207).

"The home is well suited for education in the virtues. This requires an apprenticeship in self denial, sound judgment, and self-mastery — the preconditions of all true freedom. Parents should teach their children to subordinate the 'material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones'³¹" (C 2223).

10. *The family and religion*

"The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can . . . begin to honor God . . ." (C 2207).

“...[F]or this reason it can and should be called a *domestic church*.”⁹ It is a community of faith, hope, and charity.” (C 2204). It is the only place most of us ever learn life’s most important lesson: charity (*agape*), the love that is the very nature of God (1 Jn 4:16). It is the place where children discover that this charity, and therefore this God, is not just an abstract ideal, but a concrete reality. This is how most of us discover that God exists: by our parents mediating God’s reality (which is charity) to us.

The family teaches children that they are loved equally and unlimitedly, whether weak or strong, healthy or ill, “normal” or “handicapped;” for they are loved, not as they are in the world for how well they can perform some task, whether of body, mind, work, entertainment, or sports, but simply for who they are: children of God and of parents who loved them into existence as God did, with a love that caused their being and their value rather than being caused by it; a love which said, “You are valuable because you are loved,” rather than “You are loved because you are valuable.”

Since the family is where children first meet this love that is unconditional and unlimited and unending, it is rightly called a “church,” a visible “body of Christ,” for this is precisely the love of Christ, made *really present*, in a different form but just as really present as he is in the Eucharist.

11. The duties of children

a. The basis of the duties of children

“The divine fatherhood is the source of human fatherhood [Eph 3:14];¹⁶ this is the foundation of the honor owed to parents” (C 2214). “God the

Father” is not a metaphor, a copy or image of human fatherhood; divine fatherhood is the primal fact and human fatherhood is *its* image or copy.

b. Four basic duties

- 1) **Respect:** “The respect of children, whether minors or adults, for their father and mother¹⁷ is [both] nourished by the natural affection born of the bond uniting them . . . [and] required by God’s commandment¹⁸” (C 2214). It is both natural and supernatural. “Filial respect promotes harmony in all of family life; it also concerns *relationships between brothers and sisters*” (C 2219).
- 2) **Gratitude:** “Respect for parents . . . derives from *gratitude* toward those who, by the gift of life, their love and their work, have brought their children into the world and enabled them to grow . . .” (C 2215). “Remember that through your parents you were born; what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?” (Sir 7:28).
- 3) **Obedience:** “Filial respect is shown by . . . *obedience*” (C 2216). “As long as a child lives at home with his parents, the child should obey his parents in all that they ask of him when it is for his good or that of the family” (C 2217). “Obedience toward parents ceases with the emancipation [leaving home] of the children; not so respect, which is always owed to them” (C 2217).

- 4) *Support*: “The fourth commandment reminds grown children of their *responsibilities toward their parents*. As much as they can, they must give them material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress” (cf. Mk 7:10-12; C 2218).

12. *The duties of parents*

- 1) “The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children,
- 2) “but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation. ‘The role of *parents in education* is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute’²⁹” (C 2221).
- 3) “Parents must regard their children as *children of God* and respect them *as human persons*” (C 2222).
- 4) Parents should *discipline but not provoke* their children (Eph 6:4).
- 5) “Through the grace of the sacrament of marriage, parents receive the responsibility and privilege of *evangelizing their children*. Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith . . .” (C 2225).
- 6) “Parents should be careful not to exert pressure on their children either in the choice of a profession or in that of a spouse. This necessary restraint does not prevent them — quite the contrary — from giving their children judicious advice . . .” (C 2230). Parents are by far the most important influence on

a child in making the three most important choices in life: what God to worship, what spouse to marry, and what career to work at.

- 7) “Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children” (C 2223). This is by far the most effective way to teach morality and religion.
- 8) “By knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them....” (C 2223) Children should be taught that parents too are under the same divine law and the same divine authority.

13. Catholic social morality: the basis for social community is God as the common end

Like the human individual, a human society is “at once visible and spiritual” (C 1880). A society, like a body, is visible, but its principle of unity, like a soul, is spiritual. To be a community it must have some principle of common unity. “A *society* is a group of persons bound together organically by a principle of unity that goes beyond each one of them” (C 1881).

That principle of unity is its end. “Each community is defined by its purpose” (C 1881). In *The City of God*, St. Augustine defined a “city,” or community, as a group of persons “bound together by a common love.” “For where your treasure [your object of love] is, there will your heart [your center, your identity] be also” (Lk 12:34). Many individuals become one community by becoming present to each other through becoming present to a common goal. They identify with each other when they all identify with the same end.

14. God is the ultimate basis for equality

Most fundamentally, this “same goal” is God. “All men are called to the same end: God himself” (C 1878). Because of this common end, men have a common dignity.

The same conclusion — a common dignity and worth — follows also from our common origin: “Created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all men have the same nature and the same origin” (C 1934). This is the real basis for human equality; no other basis (such as human opinion or consensus) is absolutely secure against changing human notions of “superior” races or “unwanted” groups. Only God is unchangeable.

15. God is the basis for the dignity of the human person

Nearly everyone admits human equality and human dignity, and understands how important these truths are for a just society; but not everyone admits that God is the only adequate basis and guarantee of these truths.

A just society recognizes the intrinsic value of each person. But that value is “transcendent.” It is not revocable by any human authority, only because it is not derived from any human authority, but from God. “Social justice can be obtained only in respecting the transcendent dignity of man” (C 1929). “Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature [of God]. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it” (C 1930).

16. Duties of citizens

- 1) Obedience: “God’s fourth commandment also enjoins us to honor all who for our good have received authority in society from God” (C 2234).

This does not mean that there is a “divine right of kings” or of any other particular government or form of government. It means that God designed man as a social and political creature and therefore that in obeying legitimate social authorities we are obeying God’s design. We are told to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” (2 Pt 2:13; see also Rom 13:1).

It is also morally obligatory:

- 2) “to pay taxes,
- 3) “to exercise the right to vote,
- 4) “and to defend one’s country” (C 2240).
- 5) There is also an obligation to be vigilant and critical: “[L]oyal collaboration includes the right, and at times the duty, to voice their just criticisms of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and to the good of the community” (C 2238).
- 6) Sometimes this extends to the duty to disobey: “The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order . . .” (C 2242). “If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience” (C 1903). Human social laws must be judged by a higher “natural law” (see Part III, Section 2, paragraph 2). In fact, *only* if there is such a higher law can protest against human law ever be moral or just. The modern secularist who rejects a “natural law” must by his logic either accept all human law as above criticism and be a

“status quo conservative,” or reject it for no higher moral reason and be an outlaw, appealing only to might, not right.

- 7) Charity: “. . . [T]he often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil, and the violence which under the illusion of fighting evil only makes it worse”¹³ . . . is the path of charity, that is, of the love of God and of neighbor. Charity is the greatest social commandment. . . . Charity inspires a life of self-giving” (C 1889). It is not a nice “extra” for saints, but a necessity for any working family or society.

17. Duties of nations

“The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the *foreigner* in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin” (C 2241).

Rich nations are also obliged in charity to aid poor nations, especially in cases of immediate need such as famine.

Families are also expected to extend charity to other families, just as individuals and nations are. If individual and family charity did its proper work, impersonal government bureaucracies could be less extensive, less expensive, and less intrusive. “Participation [in society] is achieved first of all by taking charge of the areas for which one assumes *personal responsibility*: by the care taken for the education of his family, by conscientious work, and so forth . . .”³¹ (C 1914). These concrete, immediate duties should not be neglected for the sake of abstract, far-away causes that give one the illusion of being very idealistic and moral. Christ

commanded us to love our neighbor, not “humanity.”

18. Subsidiarity and socialization

On the one hand, “‘*socialization*’ . . . expresses the natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities” (C 1882).

On the other hand, “[s]ocialization also presents dangers. Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which ‘a community of a higher [larger] order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower [smaller] order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it . . .’” (C 1883). This applies especially to families.

The model for the principle of subsidiarity is God’s own governing of the universe. “God has not willed to reserve to himself all exercise of power. He entrusts to every creature the functions it is capable of performing, according to the capacities of its own nature. This mode of governance ought to be followed in social life. The way God acts in governing the world, which bears witness to such great regard for human freedom, should inspire the wisdom of those who govern human communities” (C 1884). The Creator of the universe steps back, humbly and anonymously, and lets his creatures get the glory; according to the medieval maxim, “grace does not replace nature but perfects it.” The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching*, observed the same principle in the universe, which is governed by the invisible, self-effacing “Tao”

or “Way” of nature, and he also applied this principle to human governing.

Catholic teaching is two-sided, balanced, and complete here, as everywhere. On the one hand, “the principle of subsidiarity is opposed to all forms of collectivism. It sets limits for state intervention” (C 1885). On the other hand, “socialization” is humanizing, and the state is necessary not only for law and order but also to provide a “safety net” of essential human needs like food, shelter, employment opportunity, and basic medical care to those not served by private initiative, individual charity, or family.

19. Personalism as the key to good politics

“The inversion of means and ends,¹⁰ which results in giving the value of ultimate end to what is only a means for attaining it, or in viewing persons as mere means to that end, engenders unjust structures . . .” (C 1887).

“The common good is always oriented toward the progress of persons: “The order of things must be subordinated to the order of persons, and not the other way around’³⁰” (C 1912). The purpose of all public government, taxes, armies, and laws is the happiness of private individuals and families.

And their goodness. A very simple definition of a good society is this: “a good society is one that makes it easy to be good” (Dorothy Day, quoting Peter Maurin).

A good society is one in which each person recognizes “. . . in every human person, a son or daughter of . . . ‘our Father.’ In this way our relationships with our neighbors are recognized as personal in character. The neighbor is not a ‘unit’ in the human collective; he is ‘someone’ . . .” (C 2212). “Human communities *are made up*

of persons. [Therefore,] governing them well is not limited to guaranteeing rights and fulfilling duties such as honoring contracts. Right relations between employers and employees, between those who govern and citizens, presupposes a natural good will . . ." (C 2213). Good people and good relationships will make the worst society good; bad people and bad relationships will make the best good society bad.

20. Persons and institutions

On the one hand, no social justice or progress can come about merely "from the outside in," from impersonal institutions, but only "from the inside out," from persons, from the heart, and from free choice. "It is necessary, then, to appeal to the spiritual and moral capacities of the human person and to the permanent need for his inner conversion, so as to obtain social changes that will really serve him" (C 1888). This is why the New Testament always speaks about personal conversion and morality and not about reforming institutions. It goes to the root.

On the other hand, "[t]he acknowledged priority of the conversion of the heart in no way eliminates but on the contrary imposes the obligation of bringing the appropriate remedies to institutions and [external] living conditions . . ." (C 1888).

Some readers will find the principles in this book too "far left," others too "far right." This is exactly what one would expect if they are from God and not from man, who like a runaway train has gone off God's track in many opposite ways. Catholic social and political morality does not conform totally to any popular secular establishment. It is neither anarchic, individualistic "libertarianist" nor collec-

tivist “socialism”; neither utopian optimism nor cynical pessimism; neither “Right” nor “Left”; neither the Republican nor the Democratic party platform. Nor is it an inconsistent compromise between them. It is a higher and more complete way, based on the essential reality of human nature, not on the changing fashions of any human ideology.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

¹⁶ Cf. Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*; *Diuturnum illud*.

¹⁵ Cf. *FC* 46.

³¹ *CA* 36 § 2.

⁹ *FC* 21; cf. *LG* 11.

¹⁶ Cf. *Eph* 3:14.

¹⁷ Cf. *Prov* 1:8; *Tob* 4:3-4.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ex* 20:12.

²⁹ *GE* 3.

¹³ *CA* 25.

³¹ Cf. *CA* 43.

⁷ *CA* 48 § 4; cf. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* I, 184-186.

¹⁰ Cf. *CA* 41.

³⁰ *GS* 26 § 3.