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* Knights of Malta *

Chancellor's Update

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Some Observations on the Fifth Commandment

When we recite the Beatitudes, we remember *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God*. The Council Fathers at Trent believed that one of the best ways to practice this Beatitude was to give a careful explanation of the Fifth Commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*.

The Fathers explained that the purpose of this commandment was “to protect the life of each one. These words, *Thou shalt not kill*, emphatically forbid homicide...

“In the explanation of this Commandment the Lord points out its twofold obligation. The one is prohibitory and forbids us to kill; the other is mandatory and commands us to cherish sentiments of charity, concord and friendship towards our enemies, to have peace with all men, and finally, to endure with patience every inconvenience.

Exceptions to the Prohibitory Part of this Commandment

The Killing of Animals. “It is not prohibited to kill animals; for if God permits man to eat them, it is also lawful to kill them. ‘When’, says St. Augustine, ‘we hear the words, *Thou shalt not kill*, we do not understand this of the fruits of the earth, which are insensible, nor of irrational animals, which form no part of human society.’

Execution of Criminals. “Another kind of lawful slaying belongs to the civil authorities, to whom is entrusted power of life and death, by the legal and judicious exercise of which they punish the guilty and protect the innocent. The just use of this power, far from involving the crime of murder, is an act of paramount obedience to this Commandment, which prohibits murder. The end of the Commandment is the preservation and security of human life. Now the punishments inflicted by the civil authority, which is the legitimate avenger of crime, naturally tend to this end, since they give security to life by repressing outrage and violence. Hence these words of David: *In the morning I put to death all the wicked of the land: that I might cut off all the workers of iniquity from the city of the Lord* (Psalm c. 8).

Killing in a Just War. “In this manner, the soldier is guiltless who, actuated not by motives of ambition or cruelty, but by a pure desire of serving the interests of his country, takes away the life of an enemy in a just war.

“Furthermore, there are on record instances of carnage executed by the special command of God. The sons of Levi, who put to death so many thousands in one day, were guilty of no sin; when the slaughter had ceased they were addressed by Moses in these words: *You have consecrated your hands this day to the Lord* (Exodus xxxii. 29).

Killing by Accident. “Again, death caused, not by intent or design, but by accident, is not murder. *He that killeth his neighbour ignorantly, and who is proved to have had no hatred against him yesterday and the day before: but to have gone with him to the wood to hew wood,*

and in cutting down the tree the axe slipped out of his hand, and the iron slipping from the handle struck his friend, and killed him: shall live (Deuteronomy xix. 4-5). Such accidental deaths, because inflicted without intent or design, involve no guilt whatever, and this is confirmed by the words of St. Augustine: ‘God forbid that what we do for a good and lawful end shall be imputed to us, if, contrary to our intention, evil thereby befall any one.’

“There are, however, two cases in which guilt attaches (to accidental death). The first case is when death results from an unlawful act; when, for instance, a person kicks or strikes a woman in a state of pregnancy, and abortion follows. The consequence, it is true, may not have been intended, but this does not exculpate the offender, because the act of striking a pregnant woman is in itself unlawful. The other case is when death is caused by negligence, carelessness or want of due precaution.

Killing in Self-Defence. “If a man kills another in self-defence, having used every means consistent with his own safety to avoid the infliction of death, he evidently does not violate this Commandment.”

Murder, Suicide and Sinful Anger Forbidden by this Commandment

The Fathers continued that all killing other than the exceptions described above is forbidden regardless of who kills, who is killed, or how the person is killed. No one is ever allowed to kill. As to who is killed, everyone is protected by this commandment. This Commandment forbids killing by “laying violent hands on (the victim), by means of a sword, a stone, a stick, a halter, or by administering poison. It also strictly prohibits the accomplishment of the death of another by counsel, assistance, help or any other means whatever.”

Suicide. “No man possesses such power over his own life as to be at liberty to put himself to death. Hence we find that the Commandment does not say: ‘Thou shalt not kill another’, but simply: *Thou shalt not kill*.

Sinful Anger. “The Christian, instructed in the interpretation of Christ, has learned that the precept is spiritual, and that it commands us not only to keep our hands unstained, but our hearts pure and undefiled; hence what the Jews regarded as quite sufficient (not taking life with their own hands), is not sufficient at all. For the Gospel has taught that it is unlawful even to be angry with anyone: *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be liable to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, ‘Thou fool!’ shall be liable to the fire of Gehenna* (Matt v. 22). From these words it clearly follows that he who is angry with his brother is not free from sin, even though he conceals his resentment; that he who gives indication of his wrath sins grievously; and...he who...treats another with harshness... and utters reproaches against him sins still more grievously.

“This, however, is to be understood of cases in which no just cause of anger exists. God and His laws permit us to be angry when we chastise the faults of those who are subject to us.”

[To be continued](#)

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