

Honoring our Parents

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you. ~ Deuteronomy 5:16

THE FIRST THREE COMMANDMENTS address our relationship with God himself; of the remaining seven addressing our relationship with our neighbor, the fourth commandment, directing us to please God by honoring our father and our mother, is at the head of the list. God's placement of the fourth commandment shows us his priority: after loving and honoring him, we next are to honor our parents, with whom he shared his power of creation of new life and to whom he gave his authority over these children.

The remaining six commandments are expressed as negative "thou shall nots," but the will of God concerning our parents is phrased as a positive commandment. And, unlike all the other commandments, to this one God attached a special blessing: *"that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you"* (Ex 20:12; see also Dt 5:16 above). This commandment is the very foundation of the family, the direct responsibility of children who owe their lives and their nurturing to their parents.

The foundation of the honor due to parents stems from the divine fatherhood *"from whom every family in Heaven and on earth is named"* (Eph 3:14). Respect for parents naturally derives from gratitude to those who have given life, a bond that is nourished by a natural affection: *"With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that through your parents you were born; and what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?"* (Sir 7:27-28).

The fourth commandment requires that children treat their parents with respect, reverence, obedi-

ence, gratitude, and love. The book of Proverbs reminds us of the care that parents lavish upon their children: *"When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you"* (Prv 6:22). Gratitude is especially owed to parents who have given their children not only natural life, but also supernatural life through Baptism, and have nourished this life within the "domestic church" of the family home. Children should respond to parental love and care not only by being respectful and obedient, but also by solicitude and reciprocal care, for *"whoever forsakes his father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers his mother is cursed by the*

Lord" (Sir 3:16).

By this commandment, children also are expected to contribute to the harmony of the family. Filial respect helps promote this harmony, and it extends to sibling relationships. Respect and love for every member of the family brings true light and warmth to the home and family life.

As children grow to adolescence, it becomes harder to obey.

Here Jesus' example

is instructive: at the age of twelve, on the threshold of adolescence, the Gospel of Luke tells us that he remained obedient to his parents (see Lk 2:51). Yet with responsibility increasing for their own decisions and actions, it is necessary for adolescents to weigh, in the light of their own consciences, the moral validity of a parental order. Rarely, it may be needful, even morally essential, for a son or daughter to refuse to obey a command that is in any way contrary to the law of God and the Church.

Adulthood changes the situation again: "Obedience toward parents ceases with the emancipation

"This commandment is the very foundation of the family."



of the children; not so respect, which is always owed to them” (CCC 2217). In our current society, we are busy about many things; in fact, so many things that the care of elderly parents can become an almost overwhelming task. Yet the fourth commandment is as appropriate for us in today’s world as it was for the Israelites wandering in the desert. Today, adult children



Jesus and the little child, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

“The fourth commandment is also one of the foundations of the social teaching of the Church.”

are tempted to refuse to help aged parents. Yet we are admonished: *“O son, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and against your sins it will be credited to you; in the day of your affliction it will be remembered in your favor; as frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away”* (Sir 3:12-15; see also Tb 4:3). We are obliged to care for them and provide for them in accordance with our ability and financial resources. Love and respect, or their absence, will determine the culpability of children who, for example, place their parents in a nursing home or other facility. The motive must not be selfishness, but to ensure care that the children cannot provide.

In broader terms, God’s command to honor, respect, and obey extends not only to parents but also to members of the extended family. In the book of Ruth, we are given one of the most beautiful expressions of this familial love in all of Sacred Scripture. The widowed Ruth begged Naomi, her mother-in-law, who was returning to her home in Bethlehem after the death of her husband: *“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you”* (Ru 1:16-17). Ruth’s deep devotion

to Naomi was praised by their neighbors, who told Naomi that Ruth was *“more to you than seven sons”* (Ru 4:15).

The fourth commandment is also one of the foundations of the social teaching of the Church. It governs our relationship with teachers, employers, civil and other leaders, to the lawful administration of statutes and ordinances, and to our com-

munity and country. The commandment applies to all who are subordinate to justly-exercised authority. Respect for the dignity of the human person must animate all facets of human relationships. Failure to observe this commandment in all its ramifications in social life results in great harm to families, communities, and individuals.

The essence of the fourth commandment is love. Fulfilling the obligations of love has enormous benefits, while failure to do so is tremendously destructive: *“Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure. Whoever honors his father will be gladdened by his own children, and when he prays he will be heard. Whoever glorifies his father will have long life, and whoever obeys the Lord will refresh his mother; he will serve his parents as his masters. Honor your father by word and deed, that a blessing from him may come upon you. For a father’s blessing strengthens the houses of the children, but a mother’s curse uproots their foundations. Do not glorify yourself by dishonoring your father; for your father’s dishonor is no glory to you. For a man’s glory comes from honoring his father; and it is a disgrace for children not to respect their mother”* (Sir 3:3-11). Jesus gave us his own example when, though he was God, he became a babe entrusted to human parents who loved and cared for him in countless ways. He shows us the way; we must follow.

(CCC 2197-2200, 2214-2220, 2234, 2239)