

## FIFTH COMMANDMENT

### PROMOTING A CULTURE OF LIFE

(C 2259-2330, USC Ch. 28)

The *Catechism* (2258) states: “*Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.*”

In this lesson we will look at:

- Murder
- Abortion
- Euthanasia
- Suicide
- Death penalty
- Stem-cell research
- War
- Domestic violence

Looked at in a positive way, the fifth commandment calls us to promote a culture in which all life—born and unborn—will be safe, welcomed and nurtured. The principal thrust of this commandment is the sanctity of every human life. The fifth commandment opposes all that threatens the sacredness and dignity of human life. The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* enunciates a long list of threats to life: “*Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than free and responsible persons; all of these things and others like them are infamies indeed*” (27).

**Murder.** Murder is the intentional killing of another human being. Scripture says: “Do not slay the innocent and the righteous” (Ex 23:7). The murder of an innocent person is an affront to our Creator and a grave crime against human dignity. Jesus forbade murder and the attitudes of anger, hatred and revenge that lead to murder. During his passion, Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and while dying on the cross, he forgave his executioners.

**Self-defense.** Killing another in self-defense is morally permissible. The *Catechism* (2265) states: “Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life, the common good of the family or of the state.”

**Abortion.** The *Catechism* (2270) states: “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.” From the earliest years of Christianity, the Church has condemned abortion as morally wrong. In the *Didache*, written towards the end of the first century and revered as an honored guide for Christian life, we read, “You shall not kill the embryo by abortion.” This teaching has not changed and will not change (C 2271).

Despite the Church’s long held position on this controversial issue, many people, including many Catholics, hold that while they are personally opposed to abortion, they would not want to see the state take away that right from those who believe differently from them. When the Church believes and teaches that no state has the right to permit the killing of an unborn child, is she seeking to impose her moral beliefs on others, especially on those who believe that abortion is a woman’s right to choose or not to choose?

The argument of “being personally opposed to abortion but not disposed to taking away other’s right to choose” is flawed. Would any of us say today: “I am personally opposed to slavery, but if others would want to have slaves, I would not want to remove that right from them”? In the same vein, would any of us say: “While I am personally opposed to allowing a mother to kill her unwanted six-month old child, I would not want to take away that right from her if she believes differently from me.”

Just because an act is *legal* does not mean that it is *morally acceptable*.

At a Prayer Breakfast in the White House in 1994, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta spoke the following words: “If we can accept that a mother can kill her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? Any country that sanctions abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use any violence to get what it wants.”

**Compassion for those who have had an abortion.** In his encyclical *Gospel of Life*, the late Pope John Paul II

states: “I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors that may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that, in many cases, it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly, what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try, rather, to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living with the Lord” (94).

Ministries like *Project Rachel* seek to bring healing to all who have been connected with an abortion. The Church also has ministries to help women who are pregnant with an unwanted child.

**Pause:** Why do women have an abortion? What can be done to lower the number of women who choose to end their pregnancy?

**Euthanasia** (sometimes called “mercy killing”). “Whatever its motives [whether selfish convenience or unselfish mercy] and means [whether harsh or gentle], direct euthanasia... is morally unacceptable” (C 2277). In moral issues, the end does not justify the means. A good motive (mercy) does not justify an intrinsically evil act (killing). Mercy killing is killing and the fifth commandment forbids it.

*Active euthanasia* should be distinguished from “aggressive medical treatment,” sometimes called “extraordinary means” of treatment for the ill, such as respirators and feeding tubes. Such “extraordinary means” need not be used if they impose an excessive burden on the patient or on his/her family. However, even if a person is close to death, he/she should receive “ordinary means” of care, e.g., food, water, painkillers. The latter can be used even if they shorten a person’s life for in such a situation, death is not willed as a means or an end; it is merely tolerated as inevitable.

**Suicide** is a grave wrong. It is the ultimate rejection of love of self, love of God and love of neighbor. It is a rejection of God’s absolute sovereignty over life and death. It can also bring scandal.

Even though suicide is always wrong, the Church recognizes that grave psychological problems and overwhelming fear in the face of anticipated suffering or torture, can reduce blameworthiness for the one who takes his/her own life.

Concerning the salvation of such persons, the *Catechism* (2283) states: “We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.”

**Assisted suicide.** The Church also teaches that assisted suicide is a grave sin. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, John Paul II states: “To concur with the intention of another person to commit suicide and to help in carrying it out through so-called “assisted suicide” means to cooperate in, and at times to be the actual perpetrator of, is an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested” (66).

**Pause:** What causes a person to commit suicide? Have you ever been close to a person who took his/her life? What was that experience like for you?

**Death Penalty.** The death penalty, sometimes called capital punishment, remains a controversial issue in our society and Church today. Most Americans, including the majority of practicing Catholics in the U.S., are in favor of retaining capital punishment for criminals who kill innocent persons. While admitting the state’s right to use the death penalty in extreme cases (C 2266), the first edition of the *Catechism* (1992) had been revised to reflect the teaching of Pope John Paul II in the *Gospel of Life*. The encyclical does not state that capital punishment itself is unacceptable. However, it is seen as an extreme measure that should not be taken except “in cases of absolute necessity.” This would be the case when it is impossible to defend society without putting the prisoner to death, the Pope explains. But these cases, he notes, “are very rare if not practically nonexistent” (C 2267).

In 1999, the U.S. Bishops issued a Good Friday statement on the death penalty, part of which states: “Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life. Through education, through advocacy, and through prayer and contemplation on

*the life of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to a persistent and principled witness against the death penalty, against a culture of death, and for the Gospel of Life.”*

In Ezekiel 18:23, God, speaking through the prophet, says he desires not the death of the sinner, but that the sinner repents and lives.

**Pause:** What are your thoughts on capital punishment? Why are so many church-going Catholics in favor of it?

**Stem-cell research** (USC p.392). When discussing the issue of stem-cell research, it is important to make a distinction between stem-cell research associated with human embryos and stem-cell research obtained from adult tissue. In a 2005 statement on the moral issue of stem-cell research, Archbishop Favarola of Miami writes: *Most stem-cell research today involves cells obtained from adult tissue, umbilical cord blood and other sources that pose no ethical dilemma since they do not entail the killing of human beings. Adult stem-cell research has already yielded actual treatments for conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injury, sickle cell anemia, heart damage and corneal damage. Bone-marrow transplants to cure leukemia are an example of the successful results already achieved with adult stem cells.*

*In stark contrast, embryonic stem cells are harvested by a procedure that destroys live human embryos. Experiments have shown that, even though they are able to make virtually any kind of cell, embryonic stem cells are extremely unstable, readily cause uncontrolled tumors and have yet to lead to any beneficial application in any human patients.*

*This experimentation with embryonic stem cells is what the Church opposes, because it entails the direct destruction of innocent human life. That is a moral evil that cannot be brushed aside even when the laudable goal of alleviating the suffering of others is invoked.*

*The reasoning that these embryos are ‘going to die anyway’ is also absurd. We will all die anyway. That does not give others the right to kill us. In opposing embryonic stem-cell research, the Church is not choosing the lives of embryos over suffering patients. We are called to respect them both. In other words, we must help those who are suffering—and the Church witnesses to this in many ways—but we may not use a good end to justify an evil means.*

*The choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not. History is rife with examples of*

*failures to properly channel research and the terrible, broad social repercussions that follow.*

Similarly, *cloning*, whether for reproductive or therapeutic uses, is immoral on many levels, not the least of which is because it too involves the destruction of human embryos.

**Immoral medical procedures.** Procedures like bodily mutilation, amputation, and sterilization are immoral unless they are done to benefit a person medically. (An excellent book on all these issues is *Life Issues, Medical Choices, Questions and Answers for Catholics* by Janet Smith and Christopher Kaczor.)

**War.** The Church is both idealistic and realistic when it comes to the issue of war. The *Catechism* begins its treatment of war by emphasizing the obligation of governments and individuals to work for peace. “Because of the evils and injustices that accompany all war, the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to take action so that the divine goodness may free us from the ancient bondage of war” (C 2307).

But recognizing the sinfulness of humanity, the Church knows that sometimes a country may need to go to war in its own self-defense as a last resort. The *Catechism* outlines strict conditions for what is often called a “just war” (C 2309). At one and the same time, the following conditions must be present:

- *The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or the community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain.*
- *All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.*
- *There must be serious prospects of success.*
- *The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.”*

“War may never be undertaken from a spirit of vengeance, but rather from motives of self-defense and of establishing justice and right order. The government has the right and duty to enlist citizens in defense of the nation. Special provisions should be made for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. These men and women should serve the country in some other way” (USC p.396).

Just because a war has regrettably broken out does not mean that “all is fair in love and war.” The Church condemns the targeting of civilian population by military forces. It also condemns kidnapping, hostage-

taking and terrorism as gravely wrong. “Non-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners must be respected and treated humanely. Actions deliberately contrary to the law of nations and to its universal principles are crimes, as are the orders that command such actions. Blind obedience does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out... One is morally bound to resist orders that command genocide” (C 2313).

**The arms race.** “The *arms race* does not ensure peace. Far from eliminating the causes of war, it risks aggravating them. Spending enormous sums of money to produce ever new types of weapons impedes efforts to aid needy populations; it thwarts the development of peoples” (C 2315).

**Pause:** What can government leaders do to diminish the need for war as a way to resolve conflicts? How do you feel about countries involved in the arms race?

**Scandal** is “an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil” (C 2284). Scandal is a especially serious sin when brought upon by those in authority, e.g., parents, teachers or clergy, who are supposed to teach and give good example. Jesus issued one of his harshest condemnations against those who bring scandal. “*If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depths of the sea*” (Mt 18:6).

**Domestic violence.** Respect for life is also disregarded when domestic violence occurs. Research shows that people are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten or even killed by a family member in their own home than any place else or by anyone else. All forms of domestic violence are a grave sin against the fifth commandment.

### Concluding remarks

The fifth commandment calls us to respect the life of all persons, born and unborn. It calls us to promote a culture of life in our society. The truly pro-life person is going to be concerned about any attack on any life. Fr. Frank Pavone, founder of *Priests for Life*, writes: *While no one person or group can be expected to be actively involved in all life issues, no one person or group is free to be unconcerned about any attack on the dignity of human life, nor are we free to ignore the interdependence of all the efforts on behalf of human*

*life. There are numerous activities being carried out in defense of human dignity. While there may not be room for all of them in our schedule, there must be room for all of them in our heart.*

**Pause:** Domestic violence is a huge issue in our society today. What causes people to be emotionally or physically abusive? What can be done to diminish this problem in our society?

### Suggested actions

Choose one of the life issues mentioned above and become actively involved in it. Pray often for “life warriors” who are daily seeking to protect the unborn and overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision, as well as prevent laws that permit euthanasia and stem-cell research of human embryos. Pray also for people who work to end capital punishment and those engaged in promoting peace between nations at war.

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### RESPECTIVE PRAYER

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*Loving God, Creator of all,  
we recognize that life is a gift from you.*

*Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit  
and renew in us a deep respect for all persons:  
the family, the unborn, the young, the adult,  
the sick, the disabled, the abused, the imprisoned,  
the aged, the dying, the homeless, the unemployed,  
and the oppressed in any way.*

*Bless all of us and instill in us a deep  
love for your gift of life.*

*Through the intercession of Mary, Mother and  
Virgin, may all our words and actions foster  
reverence for human life.*

*May we be true witnesses to the truth that all life is  
precious and has sublime dignity.  
Lead our nation and our world to this understanding  
so that we may be a people dedicated to the protection  
of all your sons and daughters.*

*We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, the Word  
Who became flesh and lived among us.*

*Amen.*

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