

The Fourth Commandment: “Honor Your Father and Your Mother”

The following is excerpted from Pope John Paul II's letter to families in 1994, the Year of the Family.

15. The fourth commandment of the Decalogue deals with the family and its interior unity—its solidarity, we could say.

In its formulation, the fourth commandment does not explicitly mention the family. In fact, however, this is its real subject matter. In order to bring out the communion between generations, *the divine Legislator could find no more appropriate word than this*: "Honour . . ." (Ex 20:12). Here we meet another way of expressing what the family is. This formulation does not exalt the family in some "artificial" way, but emphasizes its subjectivity and the rights flowing from it. The family is a community of particularly intense interpersonal relationships: between spouses, between parents and children, between generations. It is a community which must be safeguarded in a special way. And God cannot find a better safeguard than this: "Honour."

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives to you" (Ex 20:12). This commandment comes after the three basic precepts which concern the relation of the individual and the people of Israel with God: "*Shema, Izrael . . .*", "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Dt 6:4). "You will have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3). This is the first and greatest commandment, the commandment of love for God "above all else": God is to be loved "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt 6:5; cf. Mt 22:37). It is significant that the fourth commandment is placed in this particular context. "Honour your father and your mother," because for you they are in a certain sense representatives of the Lord; they are the ones who gave you life, who introduced you to human existence in a particular family line, nation and culture. After God, they are your first benefactors. While God alone is good, indeed the Good itself, parents participate in this supreme goodness in a unique way. And so, honour your parents! *There is a certain analogy here with the worship owed to God.*

The fourth commandment is closely linked to the *commandment of love*. The bond between "honour" and "love" is a deep one. Honour, at its very centre, is connected with the virtue of justice, but the latter, for its part, cannot be explained fully without reference to love: the love of God and of one's neighbour. And who is more of a neighbour than one's own family members, parents and children?

Is the system of interpersonal relations indicated by the fourth commandment one-sided? Does it bind us only to honour our parents? Taken literally, it does. But indirectly we can speak of the "*honour*" owed to children by their parents. "To honour" means to acknowledge! We could put it this way: "let yourself be guided by the firm acknowledgment of the person, first of all that of your father and mother, and then that of the other members of the family." Honour is essentially an attitude of unselfishness. It could be said that it is "a sincere gift of person to person," and in that sense honour converges with love. If the fourth commandment demands that honour should be shown to our father and mother, it also makes this demand out of concern for the good of the family. Precisely for this reason, however, it makes demands of the parents themselves. You parents, the divine precept seems to say, should act in such a way that your life *will merit the honour* (and the love) of your children! Do not let the divine command



that you be honoured fall into a moral vacuum! Ultimately then we are speaking of *mutual honour*. The commandment "honour your father and your mother" indirectly tells parents: Honour your sons and your daughters. They deserve this because they are alive, because they are who they are, and this is true from the first moment of their conception. The fourth commandment then, by expressing the intimate bonds uniting the family, highlights the basis of its inner unity.

The commandment goes on to say: "*that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you*". The conjunction "that" might give the impression of an almost "utilitarian" calculation: honour them so that you will have a long life. In any event, this does not lessen the fundamental meaning of the imperative "*honour*," which by its nature suggests an *attitude of unselfishness*. To honour never means: "calculate the benefits." It is difficult, on the other hand, not to acknowledge the fact that an attitude of mutual honour among members of the family community also brings certain advantages. "*Honour*" is *certainly something useful*, just as every true good is "useful."

In the first place, the family achieves the good of "being together." This is the good par excellence of marriage (hence its indissolubility) and of the family community. It could also be defined as a good of the subject as such. Just as the person is a subject, so too is the family, since it is made up of persons, who, joined together by a profound bond of communion, form a single *communal subject*. Indeed, the family is more a subject than any other social institution: more so than the nation or the State, more so than society and international organizations. These societies, especially nations, possess a proper subjectivity to the extent that they receive it from persons and their families. Are all these merely "theoretical" observations, formulated for the purpose of "exalting" the family before public opinion? No, but they are another way of expressing what the family is. And this too can be deduced from the fourth commandment.

This truth deserves to be emphasized and more deeply understood: indeed it brings out the importance of the fourth commandment for the modern system of *human rights*. Institutions and legal systems employ juridical language. But God says: "honour." All "human rights" are ultimately fragile and ineffective, if at their root they lack the command to "honour"; in other words, if they lack *an acknowledgment of the individual* simply because he is an individual, "this" individual. *Of themselves, rights are not enough.*

It is not an exaggeration to reaffirm that the life of nations, of states, and of international organizations "passes" through the family and "is based" on the fourth commandment of the Decalogue. The age in which we live, notwithstanding the many juridical Declarations which have been drafted, *is still threatened to a great extent by "alienation."* This is the result of "Enlightenment" premises according to which a man is "more" human if he is "only" human. It is not difficult to notice how alienation from everything belonging in various ways to the full richness of man threatens our times. And this affects the family. Indeed, *the affirmation of the person* is in great measure to be referred back *to the family* and consequently to the fourth commandment. In God's plan the family is in many ways the first school of how to be human. *Be human!* This is the imperative passed on in the family—human as the son or daughter of one's country, a citizen of the State, and, we would say today, a citizen of the world. The God who gave humanity the fourth commandment is "benevolent" towards man (*philanthropos*, as the Greeks said). The Creator of the universe is *the God of love and of life*: he wants man to have life and have it abundantly, as Christ proclaims (cf. *Jn 10:10*); that he may have life, first of all thanks to the family.



At this point it seems clear that the "civilization of love" is strictly bound up with the family. *For many people the civilization of love is still a pure utopia.* Indeed, there are those who think that love cannot be demanded from anyone and that it cannot be imposed: love should be a free choice which people can take or leave.

There is some truth in all this. And yet there is always the fact that Jesus Christ left us the commandment of love, just as God on Mount Sinai ordered: "Honour your father and your mother." Love then is not a utopia: it is given to mankind as a task to be carried out with the help of divine grace. It is entrusted to man and woman, in the Sacrament of Matrimony, as the basic principle of their "duty," and it becomes the foundation of their mutual responsibility: first as spouses, then as father and mother. In the celebration of the Sacrament, the spouses give and receive each other, declaring their willingness to welcome children and to educate them. On this hinges human civilization, which cannot be defined as anything other than a "civilization of love."

The family is an expression and source of this love. *Through the family passes the primary current of the civilization of love, which finds therein its "social foundations."*

The Fathers of the Church, in the Christian tradition, have spoken of the family as a "domestic church," a "little church." They thus referred to the civilization of love as a possible system of human life and coexistence: "to be together" as a family, to be for one another, to make room in a community for affirming each person as such, for affirming "this" individual person. At times it is a matter of people with physical or psychological handicaps, of whom the so-called "progressive" society would prefer to be free. Even the family can end up like this kind of society. It does so when it hastily rids itself of people who are aged, disabled or sick. This happens when there is a loss of faith in that *God for whom "all live"* (cf. *Lk 20:38*) and are called to the fullness of Life.

Yes, *the civilization of love is possible; it is not a utopia.* But it is only possible by a constant and ready reference to the "Father from whom all fatherhood on earth is named" (cf. *Eph 3:14–15*), from whom every human family comes.

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