



Donal Dorr

COMMANDMENTS OR IDEALS?

In the 1950s, shortly before Vatican II, I was studying moral theology before becoming a priest. Our textbook was in Latin and had been written fifty years earlier by a scholar call Noldin. His approach was to give a detailed account of how we as priests should apply each of the Ten Commandments when instructing Catholics and hearing Confessions.

When I look back now, more than sixty years later on those years of study, I find myself saying: What a pity that we were taught to base our whole approach on moral commands. Wouldn't it have been more inspiring if instead we were encouraged to invite people to live by the wonderful ideals put forward by Jesus in 'The Beatitudes' of his 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5:3-11; see also Luke 6:20-26)? Is it not likely that people would be more encouraged to act morally if they were invited to have special care for the poor, to be gentle in their relationships with others, to forgive others and to be peacemakers rather than being commanded to honour their parents and not to covet their neighbour's wife or goods?

I must admit, however, that high ideals may not be enough for us as Christians. We do need to have some clear guidelines about what is right and what is wrong. But I think that in those not-

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Moses and the Ten Commandments – detail from a window in the church of St Gervais et Protais, Paris, France. (Photo: Fr Lawrence Lew OP)

so-long-ago days many teachers of moral theology and Church leaders fell into a trap. They were inclined to reduce much of our Christian faith and religion to a matter of obeying moral laws and rules. And that in turn led, in many cases, to a very narrow legalist approach, where both the teachers and those who were being taught got tied up in the 'nitty-gritty' of trying to measure how far we could go without breaking the laws.

Worse still, this approach caused many of us to think of God as a strict law-giver and a judge, ready to punish us with an eternity in hell if we failed to keep all the very detailed rules that had been worked out. As a result, we became burdened by guilt and shame when we failed to keep the laws.

NEW APPROACH

During and shortly after the Vatican Council most moral theologians came to adopt a very different approach. They put the main emphasis on encouraging us to develop a deep personal relationship with Jesus. And, of course, this led people to experience the mercy of God which was central to the teaching and behaviour of Jesus. For those who took this 'on board', going to Confession was no longer such an ordeal. And if they found a sympathetic priest it could even be an occasion for encouragement and support and new inspiration.

In more recent years a relatively small number of priests and people have come to see that we Western Christians have not paid sufficient attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the way we live out our faith. When we look at the writings of St Paul, we see that for him the Spirit is the key to living as true followers of Jesus.

The Love-Energy of God which animates all of Creation is also poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5), given freely, not earned by our efforts. This creative Love-Energy warms our hearts, so we can experience gifts of the Spirit including love, joy, peace and patience. There is a lovely Taizé hymn which is based on the ancient Latin hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. In the Taizé version we call the Holy Spirit the light of our hearts, who renews and comforts us and gives us strength in times of trouble.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit gives us guidance, from moment to moment, showing us the danger of some situations and inviting us to respond generously to its inspirations. All this appeals to us more than being called to obey commandments.

THE ORIGINAL COMMANDMENTS

When I look back at the original versions of the Ten Commandments in the Jewish Scriptures (which we Christians generally call *The Old Testament*), I see that these Commandments of God were situated within a context which is quite different from our situation today. Key texts are Exodus 20:2-17 and 34:1-34, as well as Deuteronomy 5:6-22.

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The Commandments were given to the Jewish people who had just been rescued from slavery in Egypt and were now being led by Moses, under the personal protection of God, into 'the promised land'. There they will be surrounded by tribes and peoples who worship other gods and have very different religious practices from the Jews.

The surrounding passages in the Jewish scriptures throw light on the main purpose of the Commandments. It was to ensure that the Jews would retain their awareness that they are a Chosen People with whom God has made a special 'covenant'. This is a two-way commitment: the mysterious Being who has been revealed to Moses has chosen the Jews in a unique way as God's own people; and they in response have bound themselves to worship no other God. All this suggests that God's purpose in giving them the Commandments was not primarily to impose heavy obligations on them. It was rather to remind them of how privileged they were, and of the special care that God has for them.

The situation for us today is rather different. We now realise that God has a special care for every people, and for each particular person. We must keep the example of Jesus always before us and we have the whole body of Catholic Social Teaching to guide us in living truly moral lives. But we are called to find common ground as far as possible with those who practise other religions or none.

It remains true that we should endeavour to obey the Ten Commandments in our own different situations. But we must never forget that we are privileged people, chosen by God and called to share with others our experience of God's love and care for each of us, for each of the other people we meet, and for every creature in this wonderful universe in which we are privileged to live out our lives. ■

Fr Donal Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick's Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland. Donal's book, *A Creed for Today* is published by Veritas in Ireland and Orbis Books in the USA.