

## The Fifth Commandment

- **“Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”**
- In these words of St. Paul about forgiveness and love, we hear something about how we are supposed to behave toward one another. They also reveal something about the love of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which we are called to imitate with their help.
- These words of St. Paul also tie in with the Ten Commandments. Today I would like to continue my series of homilies on the Ten Commandments, which I started before Advent. The Commandments tell us how to love God, and our neighbors, in response to God’s incredible love for us. Now we’re up to the Fifth Commandment: **“Thou shall not kill.”**
- This commandment can be a source of internal conflict for some soldiers and other people who have been responsible for people dying in war. They might wonder, “Did I break God’s law? Did I do something wrong? Will I have to answer to God for these deaths on the Day of Judgment?”
- Well, I have news that I hope is reassuring for you. The Commandment **“Thou shall not kill”** refers to the intentional killing of innocent people, not to legitimate defense against aggressors. In fact, legitimate defense can be not only a right, but a grave duty for someone who is responsible for the lives of others. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, “the defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility. In other words, those responsible for wars, and those who fight them, are not sinning if they kill aggressors, if those deaths are necessary for self-defense.
- This brings up the question, “What is necessary for self-defense?” To answer this question, the Church over time developed what is called the “just

war” theory. The presupposition behind this theory is that war is always a tragedy, and should be avoided unless peaceful efforts to resolve conflicts have failed. But sometimes they do fail, and so war can be morally justified under certain conditions. What are these conditions?

- The “just war theory” states that for military defense to be legitimate, or just:
  1. The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain
  2. All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective
  3. There must be serious prospects of success
  4. The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.
  
- Obviously, the question of which wars and other military actions meet the criteria of a “just war” is open to debate. This includes the wars our county is currently fighting. And even in a “just war,” not anything goes. Non-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners must be respected and treated humanely.
  
- Self-defense is a legitimate right on a personal level, too, outside of war, even if it results in someone else’s death. The right to life includes the right to insist on respect for one’s own life. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful...Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one’s own life than of another’s.”
  
- What about the death penalty? That too can be legitimate defense in some situations. But in modern society, those situations are rare, if not practically non-existent. If there are other ways of protecting society from criminals that don’t involve the death penalty, they should be used instead.
  
- So we see that “**Thou shall not kill**” really means something more like “Thou shall not murder.
- Have any of us murdered? My guess is that some of us might answer “no.” But let’s keep digging deeper.

- The Commandment “**Thou shall not kill**” covers harm to others or to ourselves, either bodily harm, or other kinds of harm. Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to see if we might have violated this commandment:
- Have I failed to work for the avoidance of war?
- Have I exposed myself or others to serious danger, for example by driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or by driving inattentively or at excessive speeds?
- Have I had an abortion, performed an abortion, encouraged someone else to have an abortion, or advocated for laws allowing abortion?
- Have I voted for a candidate who is pro-abortion specifically because he or she was pro-abortion?
- Have I used contraceptive methods that sometimes work by causing early abortions, like the birth control pill and other hormonal methods, or an IUD?
- Have I been involved in in-vitro fertilization?
- Have I helped someone to take their own life?
- Have I taken the life of someone who was seriously ill, handicapped or dying, in other words, committed euthanasia? Many people who have loved ones—or patients—in this situation wonder about this. Does the commandment “**Thou shall not kill**” mean that we must do everything possible to prolong someone’s life? The answer is “no.” This life is a good, but so is eternal life! And we are not obliged to receive medical care that is disproportionately burdensome compared with the benefits to be received. Also, sometimes people at the end of life need a lot of pain medication. If they are dying, this medication may be given even if it indirectly and unintentionally hastens their death.
- Another question: Have I attempted suicide, or seriously considered it?

- Have I committed the sin of scandal—that is, have I led someone else into sin?
- Have I failed to take reasonable care of my health?
- Have I failed to take medications that are necessary for my health?
- Have I been intemperate or excessive in my use of food, alcohol, tobacco or drugs?
- Have I intentionally gotten drunk?
- Have I taken or sold illegal drugs?
- Have I tried to seriously harm someone else?
- Have I intended to cause serious harm to someone else or myself?
- Have I nurtured a wish that someone else would suffer from harm or evil?
- Have I insulted someone or harshly quarreled with them?
- Have I been impatient with anyone?
- Have I refused to forgive someone who sought it from me?
- Have I been too harsh in the discipline of my children?
- Have I mutilated my body, or gotten excessive tattoos or body piercing?
- Have I been sterilized (when it wasn't medically necessary)?
- Have I intentionally failed to bury the body or ashes of the dead?
- Have I willfully engaged in unjust lawsuits?
- Have I been guilty of racism or prejudice?

- Have I been rude to anyone?
- Have I failed to apologize?
- Have I fought over trivial matters?
- Have I used obscene or vulgar gestures in anger?
- Have I sought revenge or retaliation?
- Have I been selfish?
- Have I listened to bad music?
- Have I been excessive in watching TV, playing computer games, or using the internet?
- Have I watched TV, movies or computer games that promote sex or violence?
- Have I been lazy?
- Have I failed to respect the dignity of myself or others?
- Have I treated someone else unfairly?
- Have I intentionally done things to get others angry?
- Have I violated friendships?
- Have I given someone the “silent treatment”?
- All these are ways we might have violated the Fifth Commandment.
  
- If we’ve done so, let’s ask God to forgive us. If we’ve sinned against this Commandment in a serious way, let’s bring it to the Lord in the Sacrament of Confession. God is rich in mercy and eager to forgive us. That’s why Jesus Christ came to earth.

- And let's ask God to help do better in the future. Instead of causing harm to others or ourselves, let's imitate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We'll imitate them if we do what St. Paul urged: **“Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”**