

*The Knights of Columbus presents  
The Luke E. Hart Series  
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

# THE FIRST THREE COMMANDMENTS: DUTIES TO GOD

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PART THREE • SECTION FIVE OF  
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

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*What does a Catholic believe?  
How does a Catholic worship?  
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the  
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

*by*  
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# A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

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This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

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# SECTION 5: THE FIRST THREE COMMANDMENTS

## *1. What are the Ten Commandments?*

Talking about them is pointless if we do not know them. And few people can list all ten. For many generations, most Christians knew them from memory. Today, it is illegal in America even to display them in public schools. So we had better begin by simply listing them, word for word, as the Bible records them in Ex 20:1-17.

**“God spoke all these words, saying:**

**“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.**

**“You shall have no other gods before me.**

**“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous**

**God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

**“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.**

**“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.**

**“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.**

**“You shall not kill.**

**“You shall not commit adultery.**

**“You shall not steal.**

**“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

**“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”**

## 2. *The numbering of the Commandments*

“The division and numbering of the Commandments have varied in the course of history. The present catechism follows the division of the Commandments established by St. Augustine, which has become traditional in the Catholic Church. It is also that of the Lutheran confessions. The Greek Fathers worked out a slightly different division, which is found in the Orthodox Churches and Reformed communities” (C 2066).

Catholics distinguish “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” as the ninth Commandment, which forbids lust, from “You shall not covet your neighbor’s goods,” as the tenth, which forbids greed. Reformed Protestants distinguish “You shall have no other gods before me,” as the first Commandment, from “You shall not make any graven images,” as the second. The numbering makes no difference to the substance; all Christians accept all the words in Ex 20:1-17.

## 3. *The Ten Commandments and Christ*

What did Christ do with the Commandments?

- 1) Christ *acknowledged* the Commandments (Mt 5:17; 19:16-21).
- 2) “He unfolded all the demands of the Commandments. ‘You have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not kill.” . . . but I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment’” (Mt 5:21-22; C 2054).
- 3) He *exceeded* the Commandments. He demanded more, not less: a “righteousness [which] exceeds

that of the scribes and Pharisees'<sup>5</sup>" (Mt 5:20; C 2054).

- 4) He *summarized* the Commandments and showed their unity as the Law of Love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets'<sup>9</sup>" (Mt 22:37-40; C 2055).

*Love* does not worship idols; *love* keeps God's sabbath; *love* honors parents; *love* does not kill, steal, adulterate, lie, or covet. "The Ten Commandments state what is required in the love of God and love of neighbor. The first three concern love of God, the other seven love of neighbor" (C 2067).

- 5) He *fulfilled* the Commandments by obeying them perfectly.
- 6) He *freed* us from "the curse of the Law" (Gal 3:13) and its punishment, by taking that curse on himself on the Cross.
- 7) He *freed* us from the obligation of keeping the burdensome Jewish law (Torah) with its 613 distinct regulations. But not from the obligation to keep the Ten Commandments. ". . . [T]he Ten Commandments are obligatory for Christians and . . . the justified man is still bound to keep them" (C 2068). "They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them" (C 2072).

- 8) However, these Commandments are no longer an impossible burden now, since Christ, by giving us the Holy Spirit, gave us the *power* to keep them, as well as the *motive* and the desire to keep them; out of free love, not servile fear. By his Spirit, the Law of God becomes a law of our own hearts.

#### 4. *The origin of the Commandments*

The commandments are to the moral order what the creation story in the First Chapter of Genesis is to the natural order. They are God's order conquering chaos. They are not man's ideas about God, but God's ideas about man. "They were written 'with the finger of God'<sup>12</sup> [Ex 31:18; Dt 5:22], unlike the other commandments written by Moses<sup>13</sup>" (C 2056).

#### 5. *The end (purpose) of the Commandments: life and freedom*

"The Decalogue is a path of *life*...." (C 2057; see Dt 30 and Ps 1).

It is also the path to *freedom*. The commandments do not *limit* freedom, they *protect* freedom, as the fence around the city schoolyard does not *imprison* the children playing there, but *protects* them from life-threatening dangers (cars, muggers) and frees them to play and enjoy their games within that fence.

"This liberating power of the Decalogue appears, for example, in the commandment about the sabbath rest . . ." (C 2057). "You were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out" (Dt 5:15). Resting one day each week frees us from perpetual labor. It is slaves who have no "free time."

## *6. The Commandments, like the Creeds, summarize our response to God's initiative*

Just as faith, whose content is summarized by the Creeds, is essentially a response to a prior revelation of God, not a state or feeling we work up in ourselves, the same is true of morality, whose content is summarized in the Commandments. "Moral existence is a *response* to the Lord's loving initiative" (C 2062), not a "lifestyle" we invent. "The Commandments properly so-called come in the second place: they express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant" (C 2062), which he, not we, initiated.

## *7. The Ten Commandments and the Natural Law*

"The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation [thus they are "divine law"]. At the same time they teach us the true humanity of man. They bring to light the essential duties, and therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person. . . . [They are] a privileged expression of the natural law: 'From the beginning, God had implanted in the heart of man the precepts of the natural law. Then he was content to remind him of them. This was the Decalogue [from the Greek *deca-logos*, meaning ten words, or Ten Commandments]'<sup>31</sup>" (C 2070). Although they are knowable by natural reason, and all societies have some knowledge of them, that knowledge is clouded and imperfect. "A full explanation of the commandments of the Decalogue became necessary in the state of sin because the light of reason was obscured and the will had gone astray"<sup>32</sup>" (C 2071).

## **8. *The unity of the Ten Commandments***

The Ten Commandments are one Law, not ten Laws. They are one thing: the will of the one God. Therefore, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not kill.’ If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law” (Jas 2:10-11). “To transgress one commandment is to infringe all the others. One cannot honor another person without blessing God his Creator. One cannot adore God without loving all men, his creatures. The Decalogue brings man’s religious and social life into unity” (C 2069).

## **9. *Negative and positive sides to the Commandments***

There is a negative and a positive side to all the Commandments. The fact that their original formulation is usually negative (“You shall *not*...”) does not mean they are “negative” in the sense of being repressive, joyless, or pessimistic. This is so for three reasons:

- 1) Each negation is “the other side of the coin” of a positive command e.g. “no idolatry” means “worship God;” “do not kill” means “respect life;” and No to adultery means Yes to unadulterated love.
- 2) Having just a limited number of negative commandments frees us to do an infinite number of positive things within these “foul lines.”
- 3) The negative commandments free us from negative *things*, protect us from threats to our positive happiness.

## 10. *The priority of the first Commandment*

All sins are sins against the first Commandment; the first Commandment contains the whole of the Decalogue. For all sin serves some other god, obeys another Commander: the world, or the flesh, or the Devil. So if we obeyed only this one Commandment perfectly, we would need nothing more. St. Augustine says, "Love God and then do what you will." For if you give your whole heart and will and love to God, then what you will will be all that God wills.

How liberatingly simple is the moral life of the Christian (or the Jew or the Muslim): only one God, therefore one ultimate object of love and obedience.

## 11. *The positive side of the first Commandment*

The negative side of the first Commandment is: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3). The positive side is: "You shall worship the Lord your God" (Mt 4:10).

What is here commanded is what Scripture calls "the fear of the Lord" (Dt 6:13). This is not the craven, servile fear of something evil, but the awe and adoration of something infinitely good. The *Catechism* describes it this way: "To adore God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the 'nothingness of the creature' who would not exist but for God. To adore God is to praise and exalt him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in the *Magnificat* [Lk 1:46-49], confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is his name" (C 2097).

This is positive, in its effects as well as in itself, for "the worship of the one God sets man free from turning in on

himself, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world” (C 2097).

### *12. Worship includes faith, hope, and charity*

“The first Commandment embraces faith, hope and charity” (C 2086). The reasons for all three are the eternal nature of God himself.

- a) Faith: “When we say ‘God’ we confess a constant, unchangeable being, always the same, faithful and just, without any evil. It follows [for morality always follows from reality] that we must necessarily accept his words and have complete faith in him and acknowledge his authority.”
- b) Hope: “He is almighty, merciful, and infinitely beneficent... who could not place all hope in him?”
- c) Charity: “Who could not love him when contemplating the treasures of goodness and love he has poured out on us?”

“Hence the formula God employs in the Scripture at the beginning and end of his commandments: ‘I am the LORD’<sup>8</sup>” (C 2086).

### *13. Sins against faith*

There are various degrees of sins against faith.

*Apostasy* is the total repudiation of the Christian faith....

*Heresy* is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith [as supernaturally revealed for all]....

“*Schism* is the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff...” (C 2089)

#### 14. *Sins against hope*

There are two opposite sins against hope: despair and presumption.

“By *despair*, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God... or for the forgiveness of his sins” (C 2091).

“There are two kinds of *presumption*. Either man presumes upon his own capacities (hoping to be able to save himself without help from on high), or he presumes upon God’s almighty power or his mercy (hoping to obtain his forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit)” (C 2092).

#### 15. *Sins against charity*

“One can sin against God’s love in various ways:

“*indifference...*

“*ingratitude...*

“*lukewarmness...*

“spiritual sloth,.. to refuse the joy that comes from God...

“*hatred of God...* from pride” (C 2094).

#### 16. *The social aspect of the first Commandment*

“The duty of offering God genuine worship concerns man both individually and socially” (C 2105). Freedom of religion, or religious liberty, is a fundamental social right. “Nobody may be forced to act against his convictions, nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with

his conscience in religious matters in private or public, alone or in association with others, within due limits” (C 2106).

These “due limits” may vary from one society to another. But even “if because of the circumstances of a particular people special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional organization of a state, the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom must be recognized and respected as well” (C 2107).

### *17. The negative side of the first Commandment*

“You shall have no other gods before me” means that we must worship and adore God alone because God *is* alone. Idolatry – worship of anything except God – is forbidden by the nature of reality. “Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods [pagan polytheism, worshipping imaginary gods] or demons [Satanism], power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.” (C 2113).

Treating God as a creature is contrary to reality. So is treating any creature as God.

### *18. How the prohibition against idolatry is positive and freeing*

Idolatry enslaves us. That is why avoiding it frees us. This can be explained in a number of ways.

- 1) A first way comes from the Psalms, which point out that you become like whatever you worship; therefore, just as you become more godly by wor-

shipping God, you become more like a subhuman thing by worshipping it. The idols of wood and stone that ancient pagans worshipped, or the idols of money, power, or pleasure that modern idolaters worship, both work the same “black magic” on the soul: these idols are “the works of men’s hands. They have mouths but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear... those who make them are like them, so are all who trust in them” (Ps 115:5-8). “These empty idols make their worshippers empty” (C 2112).

To worship the God of life is to become more alive; to worship a dead idol is to become more dead.

- 2) A second way to explain how avoiding idolatry frees us is this: since we become more like whatever we worship, we attain our oneness, our integration of personality, by adoring the one Creator rather than the many creatures. We become one great person by having one great goal, one great love. As the *Catechism* explains it, “human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God. The commandment to worship the Lord alone integrates man and saves him from an endless disintegration” (C 2114). The extreme form of this disintegration can be seen in the demon-possessed man who, when Christ asked his name (the word-symbol for one’s individual self), replied, “my name is Legion, for we are many” (Mk 5:9).
- 3) If we are absolute about God the Absolute, we are free from absolutizing anything else. Reality offers

only one absolute good: God. Everything is good if it leads to God or comes from God as his will, and evil if it leads away from God or his will. Obeying “the first and greatest commandment” gives us a meaning, point, goal, and direction in life, and a liberating simplicity. It is like a single lighthouse in a confusing storm.

*19. Specific sins against the first Commandment*

- 1) “*Superstition...* when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or sacramental signs to their mere external performance apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition” (C 2111).
- 2) “The first commandment condemns *polytheism* [worship of many gods]” (C 2112).
- 3) “All forms of *divination* are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to ‘unveil’ the future [see Dt 18:10; Jer 29:8]. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots... clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone” (C 2116).
- 4) “All practices of *magic or sorcery*, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place

them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others... are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion" (C 2117).

- 5) *"Tempting God* consists in putting his goodness and almighty power to the test..." (C 2119)
- 6) *"Sacrilege* consists in profaning or treating unworthily the sacraments and other liturgical actions, as well as persons, things, or places consecrated to God. Sacrilege is a grave sin, especially when committed against the Eucharist, for in this sacrament the true Body of Christ is made substantially present for us" (C 2120).
- 7) *"Simony* is defined as buying or selling spiritual things. To Simon the magician, who wanted to buy the spiritual power he saw at work in the apostles, St. Peter responded, 'Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!'" (Acts 8:20; C 2121).
- 8) "Since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion. The imputability [blameworthiness] of this offense can be significantly diminished in virtue of the intentions and the circumstances. 'Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their... faith... they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion'<sup>62</sup>" (C 2125).
- 9) "Agnosticism... makes no judgment about God's existence, declaring it impossible to... affirm or deny" (C 2127). "Agnosticism can sometimes

include a certain search for God, but it can equally express indifferentism, a flight from the ultimate question of existence.... Agnosticism is all too often equivalent to practical atheism” (C 2128).

## 20. *Images*

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Ex 20:4). “The divine injunction included the prohibition of every representation of God by the hand of man” (C 2129).

“Nevertheless, already in the Old Testament, God ordained or permitted the making of images that pointed symbolically toward salvation by the incarnate Word: so it was with the bronze serpent, the ark of the covenant, and the cherubim” (C 2130).

“Basing itself on the mystery of the incarnate Word, the seventh ecumenical council at Nicea (787 AD) justified against the iconoclasts [image-smashers] the veneration of icons [sacred images] – of Christ, but also of the Mother of God, the angels, and all the saints. By becoming incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new ‘economy of images’” (C 2131).

Like Jews and Muslims, Christians know the Divine Nature is purely spiritual and cannot be pictured, and accept the first Commandment’s prohibition of the attempt. But unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians know that God became man. The primary “image” of God is Christ.

Protestants often accuse Catholics of “worshipping” images. This is a misunderstanding of how Catholics use images for two reasons.

First, Catholics give religious images veneration, or honor, *not adoration*, or worship. “The honor paid to

sacred images is a ‘respectful veneration,’ not the adoration due to God alone....” (C 2132)

Second, this honor is directed not at the image but *along* the image, as attention is directed along a pointing finger to the reality it points to. “Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves.... The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is” (C 2132).

### 21. *The second Commandment*

The second Commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” is a corollary of the first. “Respect for his name is an expression of the respect owed to the mystery of God himself” (C 2144). The awe proper to God should “spill over” to his name.

People today often have a problem with this idea because they simply do not understand this fundamental religious feeling of “the sense of the holy” at all. Others do not see how it can be directed toward a *name*.

With regard to the first problem, the *Catechism* explains that “*the sense of the sacred* is part of the virtue of religion:... ‘feelings of fear and awe... are the class of feelings we *should* have – yes, have to an intense degree – if we literally had sight of Almighty God; therefore they are the class of feelings which we shall have if we realize His presence’” (Newman; C 2144). Again, morality is a conformity to reality. (The next paragraph deals with the second problem, the importance of names.)

### 22. *What’s in a name?*

In most ancient cultures, even a *human* name is sacred, for a person is sacred and a person’s name is a sym-

bol for the person, as a nation's flag is a symbol for the nation. The loss of the sense of the sacredness of names is connected with the loss of the sense of the sacredness of persons today.

But of all names, one is supremely sacred. "Among all the words of Revelation, there is one which is unique: the revealed name of God" (C 2143) given to Moses at the Burning Bush (Ex 3:14): "I AM" (JHWH). This name asserts God's 1) uniqueness, 2) infinite and indefinable mystery, and 3) ever-present reality.

- 1) God is not one of many gods; he is "I," the only one. When you say "I," you mean only one person, no other.
- 2) God does not limit himself as being *this* or *that*, just "I AM." The Hebrew verb could also be translated: "I will be whatever I will be."
- 3) And God has no dead past ("was") or unborn future ("will be"), just living present ("AM").

No Jew will ever try to pronounce this divine name, for to utter the first-person pronoun, the name "I," is to claim to *bear* it, to *be* it. This is why, when Jesus uttered it (Jn 8:58), the Jews who did not believe in him tried to stone him to death, for that was the penalty for blasphemy in Mosaic law. However, so that man may speak to him and about him, God lets himself be named with many other names, not only this unutterable one. All these names are holy and come under the second Commandment.

### 23. *The positive meaning of the second Commandment*

“The faithful should bear witness to the Lord’s name by confessing the faith....” (C 2145) Catholics should be as zealous as any of the sects (though more graceful) in “witnessing” publicly to their faith, for it is not theirs as a private and personal possession, like their good looks, but is a public divine gift. They should be proud of it, and certainly never ashamed – but this is not being proud of *themselves*.

To “witness” to unbelievers is to risk scorn and hostility and, in many places in the world today, even to risk death. There were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in all 19 previous centuries combined. Even in nations which have freedom of religion, to witness to the Faith, even graciously, is to risk social ostracism and misunderstanding. But this is a small price to pay for loyalty to the Christ who paid the ultimate price for us. And it is a price Christ *requires* (see Mk 8:34-38).

### 24. *Sins against the second Commandment*

- a) “The second commandment *forbids the abuse of God’s name*, i.e. every improper use of the name of God, Jesus Christ, and also of the Virgin Mary and all the saints” (C 2146), such as using their names in expletives and curses. If “profanity” must be used at all, *profane* things should be profaned, not sacred things. The name “God” or the name “Jesus” should certainly not be used where a word for excrement would be appropriate! Yet many Catholics thoughtlessly and habitually do this every day.
- b) “*Promises* made to others in God’s name engage the divine honor, fidelity, truthfulness, and authori-

ty. They must be respected in justice. To be unfaithful to them is to misuse God's name...." (C 2147)

- c) "*Oaths* which misuse God's name... show lack of respect for the Lord" (C 2149). However, "following St. Paul [2 Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20], the tradition of the Church has understood Jesus' words [Mt 5:30-34, 37; cf. Jas 5:12] as not excluding oaths made for grave and right reasons (for example, in court)" (C 2154).
- d) "*Blasphemy*... consists in uttering against God – inwardly or outwardly – words of hatred, reproach, or defiance...." (C 2148)

## 25. *The third Commandment ("Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy"): the two purposes of the sabbath*

- 1) "The sabbath is for the Lord, holy and set apart for the praise of God...." (C 2171)
- 2) "The sabbath was made *for man*, not man for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27). "The sabbath brings everyday work to a halt and provides a respite. It is a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money" (C 2172). "[H]uman life has a rhythm of work and rest. The institution of the Lord's Day helps everyone enjoy adequate rest and leisure...." (C 2184)

## 26. *The positive and negative parts of the third Commandment*

The third commandment 1) commands the worship of God and 2) forbids unnecessary work on the sabbath day.

## 27. *The sabbath and public policy*

Since the sabbath serves the natural good of all, therefore “in respecting religious liberty and the common good of all, Christians should seek recognition of Sundays and the Church’s holy days as legal holidays... and defend their traditions as a precious contribution to the spiritual life of society” (C 2188).

## 28. *Sunday or Saturday?*

“Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week – for Christians it has become the first of all days, the Lord’s Day” (C 2174). Sunday is not the seventh, or Sabbath, but the eighth day. For Christians, its ceremonial observance replaces and fulfills the spiritual truth of the Jewish Sabbath.

## 29. *The ultimate meaning of the sabbath*

The sabbath “announces man’s eternal rest in God” (C 2175). God designed it as a reminder and a foretaste of heaven, a glimpse of the city at the end of the road.

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### Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

<sup>7</sup> Mt 5:21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Mt 5:20.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 22:37-40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18.

<sup>12</sup> Ex 31:18; Deut 5:22.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Deut 31:9, 24.

<sup>31</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 15, 1: PG 7/1, 1012.

<sup>32</sup> St. Bonaventure, *Comm. Sent.* 4, 37, 1, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Roman Catechism* 3, 2, 4.

<sup>62</sup> *GS* 19 §3.