

The Greatest Commandment

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Preparing for my First Communion, I remember memorizing the Ten-Commandments and all Catholic prayers. There was no explanation of the meaning of what we memorized. In post-Vatican II and later publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church it has become easier for the average person to understand the teaching of the church. Therefore, the post-Vatican II generation has more opportunities to have deeper knowledge and understanding the teaching of the Church. The hope is that better understanding will enhance our faith, appreciating the sacraments and participating in liturgical worship of the Church.

In US, the Baltimore Catechism was like what I memorized in my childhood in the country of my origin, Eritrea. Faith formation in the pre-Vatican II era was based on memorization, which was an outcome of the Council of Trent, catechism as counter Protestant Reformation. The Catechism written in apologetic style gave short and precise response about Church doctrines. For some of us this was reassuring to follow scrupulously and precisely the Catholic precepts. The nostalgia for pre-Vatican II devotional spirituality and pietism as more authentic marks of Catholic identity is more a retreat from the challenges moral relativism we face in our time. The Church has been always a deposit of living tradition and full of spiritual treasures and charisms, ready to be discovered and emulated aligning with the signs of the time. Equipped with faith, we have to face the challenges of our time, without retreating for safety and insulation. We are called to be “the light of the world, and the salt of the earth.”

In the Gospel reading of Sunday, October 10, 2021, the young man who asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” represents the pre-Vatican approach looking for precise solution for his question. Jesus tells the young man to keep the Ten-Commandments. The young man responded to Jesus sincerely, “Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth.” The young man was looking for something more fulfilling of inner conviction beyond mechanical observance of the Ten-Commandments. Recognizing the young man’s yearning for spiritual fulfillment, Jesus challenges the young man to overhaul his lifestyle like an “extreme makeover.” Jesus’ invitation of the young man was to liberate himself from his material possession and use it as force for good.

The Gospel reading of October 31 ,2021 is again about the Commandments. The scribe asks Jesus, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” The scribe was not a seeker like the young man. Rather, the scribe was testing Jesus’ Jewish orthodoxy and his “Rabbinic” credentials. Both requesters complement and show deference to Jesus: “Good teacher” and “Well said, Teacher.” The paradigm shift is asking from “what” the young man asked, to quizzing of the scribe, implying why. In our context, the “what” and “why” are not exclusive of each other, rather complementing each other for a deeper meaning and purpose. These also reflect the tension between the pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II approach to faith formation, church doctrine and even ecclesiology. Jesus’ response takes us to the fundamental profession of Judaic faith, “Shema’-Hear O Israel...” like the sign of the cross, a sign and symbol of our Catholic identity. Unless we understand the signs and symbols of our faith, our actions become superficial and mechanical. “Love” not only summarizes the 10-Commandments, is the only commandment we are required to understand and observe “to inherit eternal life.” “Love and do what you will” (St. Augustine).