

TAKING IT TO HEART:
A CATHOLIC PRIMER
ON THE THIRD (FOURTH) COMMANDMENT

Hugo Mendez

Christianity received the Law as an inheritance from Judaism. However, subsequent decades would require that the Church evaluate the obligatory character of many of its laws, strictures, and ordinances—especially upon the gentiles. By the second century CE, Catholics crystallized the position that gentiles should observe only those Jewish laws that have been universally and naturally binding upon all men (moral law). This criterion excludes rites and ceremonies introduced in particular covenant relationships (e.g. Abrahamic, Mosaic). Instead, it upholds that legal code naturally universally encoded upon the human conscience, which Paul describes in Rom 2:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness.... (Rom 2:14-15)

In *Against the Jews*, Tertullian of Carthage (c. 197) upholds the universality of natural law—that law written upon the hearts of all men (before, during, and after the Mosaic covenant). He claims that this law alone functions as the eternal standard of conduct binding upon the Christian.

In short, before the Law of Moses, written in stone-tables, I contend that there was a law unwritten, which was habitually understood naturally, and by the fathers was habitually kept. For whence was Noah “found righteous,” if in his case the righteousness of a natural law had not preceded? Whence was Abraham accounted “a friend of God,” if not on the ground of equity and righteousness, (in the observance) of a natural law? Whence was Melchizedek named “priest of the most high God,” if, before the priesthood of the Levitical law, there were not levites who were wont to offer sacrifices to God? For thus, after the above-mentioned patriarchs, was the Law given to Moses, at that (well-known) time after their exodus from Egypt, after the interval and

spaces of four hundred years. In fact, it was after Abraham's "four hundred and thirty years" that the Law was given. Whence we understand that God's law was anterior even to Moses, and was not first (given) in Horeb, nor in Sinai and in the desert, but was more ancient; (existing) first in paradise, subsequently reformed for the patriarchs, and so again for the Jews, at definite periods: so that we are not to give heed to Moses' Law as to the primitive law, but as to a subsequent, which at a definite period God has set forth to the Gentiles too and, after repeatedly promising so to do through the prophets, has reformed for the better; and has premonished that it should come to pass that, just as "the law was given through Moses" at a definite time, so it should be believed to have been temporarily observed and kept. (II)

Forty years earlier, Justin Martyr (c. 160) asserted the same to his Jewish companion in *Dialogue with Trypho*.

But we do not trust through Moses or through the law; for then we would do the same as yourselves. But now—for I have read that there shall be a final law, and a covenant, the chiefest of all, which it is now incumbent on all men to observe, as many as are seeking after the inheritance of God. For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone; but *this* is for all universally. (XI)

...
Since those who did that which is universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved through this Christ in the resurrection equally with those righteous men who were before them, namely Noah, and Enoch, and Jacob, and whoever else there be, along with those who have known this Christ, Son of God.... (XLV)

...
For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness; and every race knows that adultery, and fornication, and homicide, and such like, are sinful; and though they all commit such practices, yet they do not escape from the knowledge that they act unrighteously whenever they so do, with the exception of those who are possessed with an unclean spirit, and who have been debased by education, by wicked customs, and by sinful institutions, and who have lost, or rather quenched and put under, their natural ideas. (XCIII)

The same criterion applies to the laws of the Decalogue. Although the Church recognizes the Ten Commandments as a relevant pattern for Christian conduct (Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon XIX), it embraces its individual precepts only as far as each expresses the natural, moral laws governing all humanity, that is, as "they are in conformity with nature,

which dictates obedience to them.” (*Roman Catechism [of Trent]*: Section III, Third Commandment). (As Scripture clearly attests, their inscription on stone does not suggest permanence [2 Cor 3:7-11].)

Sabbath

Most of the Ten Commandments are clearly moral laws. The Sabbath commandment, on the other hand, represents a special case. Men cannot (and do not) naturally perceive the sacredness of the seventh-day. Furthermore, as its observance was (evidently) first enjoined upon the Israelites in Ex 16, it is not a universal law. The Roman Catechism, issued after the Council of Trent by order of Pope Pius V, aptly expresses these concerns:

The other Commandments of the Decalogue are precepts of the natural law, obligatory at all times and unalterable. Hence, after the abrogation of the Law of Moses, all the Commandments contained in the two tables are observed by Christians... because they are in conformity with nature which dictates obedience to them. This Commandment about the observance of the Sabbath, on the other hand... belongs not to the moral, but the ceremonial law. Neither is it a principle of the natural law; we are not instructed by nature to give external worship to God on that day, rather than on any other. And in fact the Sabbath was kept holy only from the time of the liberation of the people of Israel from the bondage of Pharaoh. (*Ibid.*)

As the majority of the Ten Commandments are inherently moral obligations, the singular position of a ceremonial observance among them attracts some curiosity. (Seventh-day Adventists contend that the listing of the Sabbath among these precepts demonstrates that it too is morally obligatory, in spite of the strong evidence to the contrary.) More likely, this phenomenon reflects the Sabbath’s unique function within the Mosaic covenant.

Exodus 31 introduces Sabbath observance as the ritual sign of the Mosaic covenant (akin to circumcision in the Abrahamic pact, as borne out by linguistic parallels with Gen 17):

You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. For six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the Israelites

shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. (Ex 31:13-17; cf. Ez 20:12,20)

As in Genesis 17, God designates the ritual sign of a particular covenant (in this case the Sabbath) as the “covenant” itself (cf. Gen 17:3-7 to 17:10-11,13-14). As God sanctified the Sabbath, setting it apart from all other days, so also He sanctified Israel blessing it above all nations (Ex 19:5-6; Lev 20:26; Deut 26:19). Intriguingly, this is the final word issued to Moses, as the next verse indicates: “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (Ex 31:18). The entire Mosaic Covenant reaches its plenitude (judicially and symbolically) in the command enjoining the observation of the Sabbath.

The Pentateuch identifies yet another individual element of the Mosaic covenant as the “covenant” itself. In Deut 4:13, Moses reminds Israel that God “declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets” (cf. Deut 9:9,11; Ex 31:18). Thus, the Decalogue also, in some way, symbolizes the pact entire between God and Israel.

Not surprisingly therefore, Yahweh places the Sabbath command at the very heart of the Decalogue, which itself stands at the very heart of the Mosaic covenant (Ex 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). Among the moral precepts embodying the very essence of holiness lies the very ceremonial sign that itself symbolizes that holiness (cf. Ex 31:13).

Still, a moral component undergirds the Sabbath command, as the Roman Catechism asserts:

[On the other hand] this Commandment is like the [other ten], not in so far as it is a precept of the ceremonial law, but only as it is a natural and moral precept. The worship of God and the practice of religion, which it comprises, have the natural law for their basis. Nature prompts us to give some time to the worship of God. (*Roman Catechism [of Trent]*: Section III, Third Commandment)

St. Thomas Aquinas expressed the same truth in these words:

The precept about hallowing the Sabbath, understood literally, is partly moral and partly ceremonial. It is a moral precept in the point of commanding man to aside a certain time to be given to Divine things... But, in so far as this precept specializes the time [that is, literally the *seventh* day of the week]... it is a ceremonial precept. (*Summa Theologica*, II of II, 122:5)

As mentioned earlier, Catholics embrace individual precepts of the Decalogue insofar as each expresses the moral laws governing humanity. All men are universally, naturally, and morally bound to consecrate time to the worship of God, though not necessarily on the seventh-day (or any

other day). It is in this (minimal) respect, then, that the Catholic Church embraces the third (or fourth) commandment. As it asserts humanity's obligation to worship, it provides the moral framework that justifies the observance of the Church's feasts (including Pascha [Passover/Easter] and the Lord's day).

However, these particular days, as also their manner of observation, are not in and of themselves required by the third commandment: rather, they are enjoined by the discipline and "precept of the Church" (CCC 2180). Respecting the moral essence of the third commandment, the Church is free to determine the ceremonial implementation of that moral obligation by her canonical authority (since the Mosaic ceremonial law of seventh-day Sabbath observance is no longer binding). The modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the Sunday obligation in these words:

Sunday is expressly distinguished from the sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the Sabbath....

The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship "as a sign of his universal beneficence to all." (CCC 2175,2176)

It is only in this respect that the Church has "transferred" the Sabbath's solemnity to the Lord's day. Morally, the third commandment only demands the consecration of time to the worship of God. The ceremonial implementations of this precept—like the seventh-day Sabbath—are temporal.

In the Old Testament, Israel fulfilled that moral obligation in the ceremonial observation of the seventh-day Sabbath. Today, Christians (partly) fulfill this precept in the consecration of Sunday (among other feast days: CCC 2177), which assumes the "rhythm and spirit" of the weekly Sabbath, without directly corresponding to the former institution. The Servant of God, Pope John Paul II asserted that distinction in his Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*:

The distinction of Sunday from the Jewish Sabbath grew ever stronger in the mind of the Church, even though there have been times in history when, because the obligation of Sunday rest was so emphasized, the Lord's Day tended to become more like the Sabbath. (*Dies Domini*, 23)

The Lord's day is not "the Sabbath (in the new covenant)," however reminiscent of the latter institution in certain respects. This distinction should aid Catholic-Adventist dialogue in the future.