

Profanity

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in Heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ~ Philippians 2:9-11

TVERY ONE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS is broken daily, but the Second Commandment, “*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*” (Ex 20:7), seems to be broken by the most people with the least sense of guilt. Few can claim not to have spoken one of the names of God, including “Jesus” and “Christ,” to express feelings very far from awe and praise, and many people use holy names merely as exclamations or as “fill-in” speech, with no meaning behind the words at all.

Our culture’s loss of the sense of the sacredness of God’s name is nearly complete, and with it has come a loss of the sense of God in our lives at all. God gave us the Second Commandment because he knew of the direct connection between what we say and how we think and feel. There is an old saying that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” We all know how false that is; words indeed hurt because there is meaning and intention behind them. **C**ontemptuous words show con-

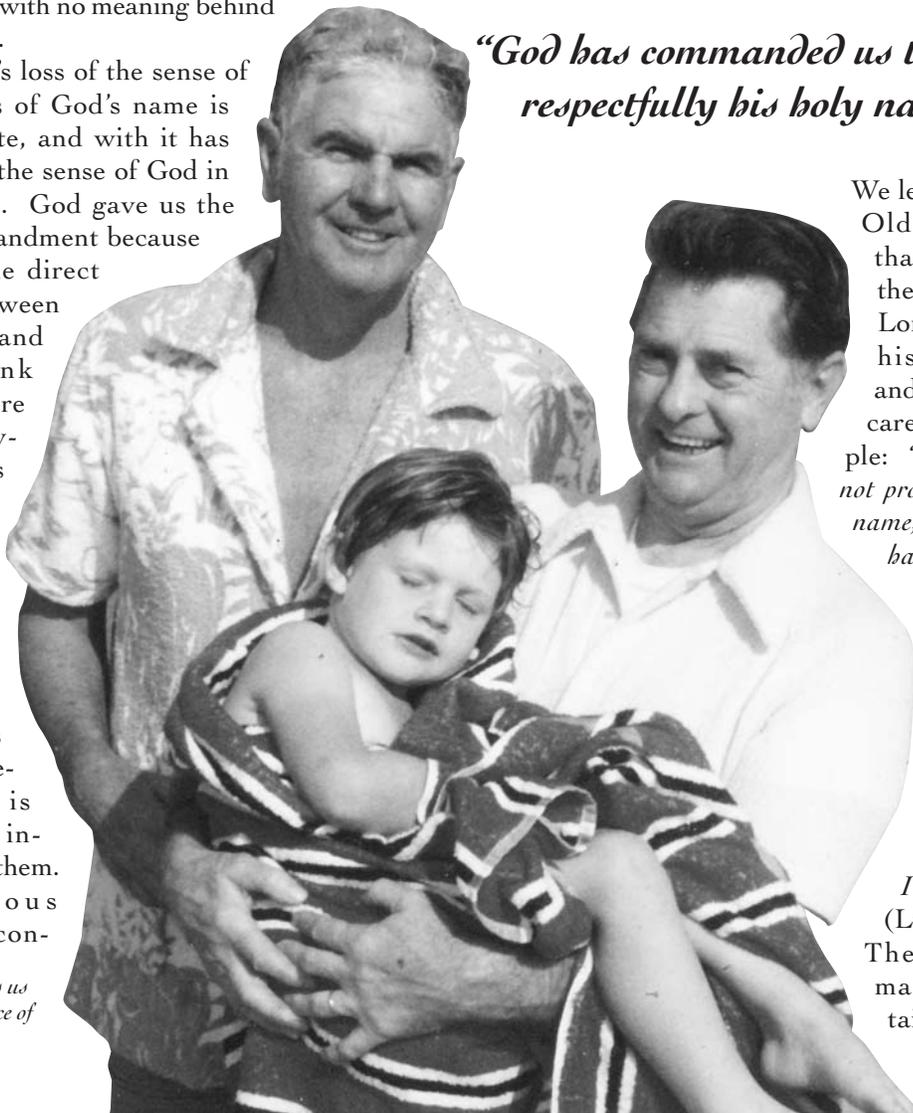
God the Father calls us to guard the innocence of the young

tempt; careless words show lack of care; thoughtless words show how far one is from the mind of the person speaking them. Words reflect our minds and our hearts, and they in turn shape our thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

This is the purpose behind the Second Commandment. God has commanded us to speak respectfully his holy name, and by speaking his name with respect, we learn respect for him and communicate that respect to all who hear us.

“God has commanded us to speak respectfully his holy name.”

We learn from the Old Testament that respect for the name of the Lord proclaims his greatness and his love and care for his people: “*And you shall not profane my holy name, but I will be hallowed among the people of Israel; I am the Lord who sanctify you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord*” (Lv 22:32-33). The God who made us, sustains us as we



draw every breath (see Acts 17:28), who knows all of our needs (see Mt 6:31-32), who numbers even the hairs on our heads (see Lk 12:7), who has done wonderful things in our lives and seeks to make us holy and worthy of himself, is the one to whom we owe the profoundest respect, awe, love, and worship. When we speak God's name with respect, we remind ourselves and those who hear us of this tremendous mystery of God's love and care for us. As we make a conscious effort to speak God's name with respect, we develop in ourselves an ever-stronger sense of the sacred.

There are three names that have been especially chosen by God himself for reverence. The first of these is "I am who I am" or "I am" (Ex 3:14), which God revealed to Moses. The Israelites, the Chosen People to whom God gave the Old Testament, never spoke this name, nor do Jews to this day; when proclaiming Scripture, the word YHWH (the English equivalent of the Hebrew word, which does not use written vowels) is not pronounced, but instead *Adonai* (meaning "Lord") is read instead. When speaking of God, Jews will often say *Hashem* (meaning "the Name") out of respect for the name God himself gave them. The English word "Jehovah" is an incorrect attempt to pronounce YHWH and should not be used.) The closest equivalent to YHWH in English is "Lord," and is a common name we give our Creator in everyday speech and one that is all too often abused. While the Church has never forbidden us to speak his name, every time we do so, it should only be with all reverence.

The second is "Father." In teaching us how to pray, Jesus began with these words: "Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Mt 6:9). The names of the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are the only ones that belong

to God in his very essence, not to him as he relates to his creatures. These names are all to be spoken with great respect. The most significant way the name "Father" is mistreated is in our careless and thoughtless "rattling off" of the Lord's Prayer. The names of the Son and the Holy Spirit are, thankfully, rarely used disrespectfully.

"A wonderful Catholic habit is to slightly bow the head every time the name of Jesus is prayed or spoken."



The third is "Jesus," the name the angel instructed both Mary his Mother and Joseph his foster father to give to the savior of the world (see Lk 1:31; Mt 1:21). Jesus is God the Son in human flesh, and as God and our Savior his name is due profound reverence and respect. A wonderful Catholic habit is to slightly bow the head every time the name of Jesus is prayed or spoken. This habit helps to instill in us through both word and "body language" a habit of adoration. By extension, the name "Christ," which means "the anointed one" and was therefore originally a title rather than a proper name, is to be revered as well. Sadly, both "Jesus" and "Christ" are abused daily.

It is the common human experience that knowing someone's name is the beginning of a relationship, and by introducing ourselves to someone we are offering the same opportunity. This is true of God as well. By giving us his name, God reveals himself to us, offers us the opportunity to believe in him, and initiates a relationship of intimacy and trust. By praying God's name, we offer adoration; by speaking it, we can offer praise and glory, as the Psalmist cries: "Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and for evermore!" (Ps 113:1-2).

The reverence due God's name is, to a lesser degree, also due his holy ones: Mary the Mother of God and all his saints. The misuse of these names

indirectly profanes God's name because it shows disrespect to those who have been his faithful servants, and therefore contempt for the One to whom they gave their hearts and lives.

In addition to everyday speech, there are special occasions when profaning the name of God is especially wrong. The most important of these is in calling on God to guarantee a promise or false oath. God has forbidden this: "[Y]ou shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord" (Lv 19:12). When we make promises or take oaths in God's name, we not only pledge our own truthfulness but God's truthfulness and authority as well. False oath-taking is not only a lie but also a way of presenting God to the world as a liar, a serious profaning of his name. This is true even when the motive is simple lack of respect, for words have power as the act of oath-taking itself implies. For this reason, we must not perjure ourselves, make an oath to do an evil deed, or take a false oath under coercion or that in some way injures the dignity of others.

In our Lord's time on earth, the problem of false oath-taking had evidently become significant enough that in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "[Y]ou have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by Heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Mt 5:33-37). Jesus is telling us that every oath, by its very nature, calls upon God's name for its guarantee. Piling up guarantees of one's truthfulness is itself evidence that there is a lie somewhere, as we all know from our experience of liars who continually embellish a lie in an effort to make it seem more trustworthy. It should be noted that Jesus' prohibition is not absolute, as we learn from St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians when writing of the sincer-

ity of his conversion: "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" (Gal 1:20). Here we learn that oath-taking must be reserved to only the most serious of reasons.

The most terrible misuse of God's name is blasphemy; it is by its nature a grave sin. In thoughts or words, the blasphemer goes beyond disrespect to animosity or hatred of God, or defiance toward him. In deeds, the blasphemer uses God's name to carry out evil acts. Sadly, we are familiar with a great deal of blasphemy in a world that uses God's name to torture, terrorize, or kill others. We should not view this kind of blasphemy as something perpetrated only by non-Christians; the history of Christian-

ity has pages written in blood by those who claimed God's sanction for their actions. In addition to the evil of the heinous sins committed in God's name is the scandal it gives to people who turn their backs on God because of the evil done by those who claim their actions have his approval.

There are forms of speech that are similar to profanity, even though they do not directly use God's

name. The most significant is cursing, because even without using God's name directly, the curse is, in effect, calling upon God to do another person harm. It is thus indirectly profanity. Another form is vulgarity, which in everyday speech is nearly as common as profanity. While it does not offer disrespect to the name of God, it is incompatible with the dignity of the Christian, and with the dignity we should offer to all others.

"Freedom of speech" is an excellent element in civic life. However, the person who does not guard his or her tongue has not yet achieved the deep inner conversion that is the mark of the true Christian. We must consciously and conscientiously purge ourselves of profanity, blasphemy, cursing, and vulgarity. The faithful Christian instead fearlessly bears witness to the glory and sanctity of the Lord's name.

(CCC 206, 209, 2142-2155)

"The blasphemer uses God's name to carry out evil acts."



... Speak no evil