

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

# THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: TRUTH

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PART THREE • SECTION TEN 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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*Nihil obstat:*  
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*Imprimatur:*  
Bernard Cardinal Law  
December 19, 2000

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Catholic Information Service  
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council  
PO Box 1971  
New Haven CT 06521-1971

Printed in the United States of America

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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.

## Part I: What Catholics Believe (Theology)

- Section 1: Faith
- Section 2: God
- Section 3: Creation
- Section 4: The Human Person
- Section 5: Jesus Christ
- Section 6: The Holy Spirit
- Section 7: The Holy Catholic Church
- Section 8: The Forgiveness of Sins
- Section 9: The Resurrection of the Body
- Section 10: The Life Everlasting

## Part II: How Catholics Pray (Worship)

- Section 1: Introduction to Catholic Liturgy
- Section 2: Introduction to the Sacraments

- Section 3: Baptism and Confirmation**
- Section 4: The Eucharist**
- Section 5: Penance**
- Section 6: Matrimony**
- Section 7: Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick**
- Section 8: Prayer**
- Section 9: The Lord's Prayer**
- Section 10: Mary**

### **Part III: How Catholics Live (Morality)**

- Section 1: The Essence of Catholic Morality**
- Section 2: Human Nature as the Basis for Morality**
- Section 3: Some Fundamental Principles of Catholic Morality**
- Section 4: Virtues and Vices**
- Section 5: The First Three Commandments: Duties to God**
- Section 6: The Fourth Commandment: Family and Social Morality**
- Section 7: The Fifth Commandment: Moral Issues of Life and Death**
- Section 8: The Sixth and Ninth Commandments: Sexual Morality**
- Section 9: The Seventh and Tenth Commandments: Economic and Political Morality**
- Section 10: The Eighth Commandment: Truth**

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PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE  
(MORALITY)

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## SECTION 10: TRUTH

### *1. The importance of the eighth Commandment*

The eighth Commandment is really much more far-reaching than it seems. It forbids not only perjury, false oaths, calumny, and slander, but all kinds of falsehood, and commands total truthfulness.

This Commandment is one of the most neglected and most disobeyed of all the Commandments. For like the first Commandment, it is disobeyed whenever *any* Commandment is disobeyed. Just as all sin is some kind of idolatry (choosing some false god), so all sin is some kind of falsehood, some kind of choice of darkness over light.

The eighth Commandment does not merely tell us to speak the truth to others but also to love and live the truth in ourselves, to commit our whole hearts to truth and to live that commitment. It forbids not only false witness against our neighbor, but also against ourselves, since we are to love our neighbor “as ourselves.”

### *2. How all sin is a form of lying*

Bearing false witness against our neighbor means lying to our neighbor, deceiving our neighbor. But lying to

our neighbor always begins with lying to ourselves. All sin does. The pattern for all sin is shown in the first sin, in Genesis 3, the eating of the forbidden fruit. This sin began by listening to the Devil's lie, sin's false advertisement, the lie that this sin would bring joy and delight while obedience to God's command would bring misery or boredom.

The first step in barring the door to sin is refusing to listen to any false witness that contradicts God's revealed truth. Faith is this bar against sin. Therefore Scripture says "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom 14:29). St. Paul contrasts sin with faith, not just with virtue, and contrasts faith with sin, not just with doubt. Believing the darkness of Satan's lie rather than the light of God's commandment was the beginning of the Fall, and continues to be the beginning of every fall. We eat the forbidden fruit of falsehood with our minds before we eat any other forbidden fruit with our bodies and our deeds.

### *3. The importance of truth for morality*

Man, having both body and soul, lives in two worlds, a material world and a moral and spiritual world. The Ten Commandments (Ex 20) are to the moral world what the Six Days of Creation (Gn 1) are to the physical world. God ordered man's physical world by the Days of creation; then he ordered man's moral and spiritual world by the Ten Commandments. The source of both orders is Truth.

In all cultures, *light* is the natural symbol and expression of truth. No good work can be done without light. The world's best doctor in the world's best hospital with the world's best technology cannot perform the simplest oper-

ation without light. God himself did not order the universe without light; he created light first.

Created light was the first reflection of uncreated light. Light came first for God, and it must come first for us too, if we are to echo God's will and God's priorities. Our very first choice must be: "Let there be light!" We must love and seek and live and speak the truth. For if we do not *love* the truth, we will not *know* it. If we do not first seek it with our will, we will not find it with our mind.

The crucial importance of truth for morality is not generally understood today. People are rarely taught that morality is more than kindness and compassion, more than good intentions, even more than love. For love without truth is not true love.

Love and truth are equally absolute, for both are divine attributes, infinite and eternal. Truth and love are "what God is made of." These two are one in God, and the more godly we are, the more they are one in us.

#### *4. The theological basis for the eighth Commandment*

"The eighth commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth . . . . This moral prescription flows from... God who is the truth and wills the truth" (C 2464).

As with all the Commandments, this one is based on reality; what ought to be follows from what is. The reality here is the ultimate reality, God – his essential nature. Repeatedly, Scripture describes God as "true." The Hebrew word used, *emeth*, means not just "objectively accurate thinking and speaking" but "personal reliability, trustability, integrity, fidelity."

We are to be people of truth because our God is truth. In him, truth is perfectly personified; truth is a *Person!* – the One who proclaimed, “I AM the truth” (Jn 6:14). “Since God is ‘true,’ the members of his people are called to live in the truth<sup>255</sup>” (C 2465).

### 5. “*What is truth?*”

What truth means in God, its origin, determines what it means for man, God’s image. And the *Catechism* mentions three aspects of truth in God: “God is the source of all truth.

[a] “His Word is truth.

[b] “His Law is truth.

[c] “His ‘faithfulness endures to all generations’<sup>255</sup>” (Ps 119:90; C 2465).

What do these three things mean for us?

- a) The truth of God’s Word is the revelation of his *mind*.
- b) The truth of God’s Law is the revelation of his *will*.
- c) The truth of God’s promises is the revelation of his *heart*.

These three aspects of truth fulfill the needs of the three parts of the human soul.

- a) God’s Word fulfills the mind’s search for true *thought*.
- b) God’s Law fulfills the will’s search for a true *life*.

- c) God's promises fulfill the heart's search for true *joy*.

They also correspond to the three "theological virtues."

- a) God's Word (revelation) specifies what *faith* believes ("Thy Word is truth" – Jn 17:17).
- b) God's Law specifies what *charity* chooses ("If you love me, keep my commandments" – Jn 14:15).
- c) God's promises specify what *hope* trusts ("This is what he has promised us: eternal life" – 1 Jn 2:25)

The three lasting cultures of ancient times – Greek, Roman, and Hebrew – especially emphasized these three aspects of truth, as enshrined in their very words for "truth."

- a) *Aletheia*, the Greek word for truth, means the "unhiddenness" or revelation of a mystery to a mind.
- b) *Veritas*, the Latin word for truth, means rightness or righteousness of thought or deed.
- c) *Emeth*, the Hebrew word for truth, means faithfulness in the heart and character.

All three are fulfilled in Christ, the "Light of the world."

- a) Christ is the ultimate revelation of the mystery of God to us.
- b) Christ is our ultimate righteousness, or holiness.

- c) Christ is the fulfillment of all God's promises to us.

### *6. The Christocentrism of the eighth Commandment*

“In Jesus Christ, the whole of God's truth has been made manifest. ‘Full of grace and truth,’ he came as the ‘light of the world,’ he *is the Truth*<sup>257</sup>” (C 2466). Before Pilate, Christ proclaims that he “has come into the world to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18:37), and Judge Pilate scornfully asks, “What is Truth?” when the most complete answer any man ever got to that question is standing right in front of him. Pilate let Christ be crucified in his court because he first let truth be crucified in his soul.

### *7. Lying is wrong because it is contrary to human nature*

“Man tends by nature toward the truth” (C 2467). This is not a naive optimism that ignores Original Sin, which draws us toward falsehood, or the struggle between truth and falsehood. It means that man's essence, man's God-created nature, has truth as its natural end, its spiritual food. Man is meant for truth.

That is why lying is wrong. “By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others” (C 2485).

(Once again the categories of “human nature” and “natural purpose” come up as central and indispensable to Catholic morality. They are simple, common-sense concepts, but modern skeptical philosophers have made them unpopular in modern times for the first time in history.)

## 8. *The social necessity for truth-telling*

“Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another”<sup>263</sup> (C 2469). Thus the eighth Commandment is an essential part of Catholic *social* ethics as well as individual ethics.

## 9. *Truth as a form of justice*

“The virtue of truth[fulness] gives another his just due” (C 2469).

The demand to be truthful and to love truth is absolute and unqualified, but the demand to communicate it is subject to justice, which must take account of the circumstances and the other person’s right to know. We are not morally obligated to “tell the truth” by revealing secrets we promised to keep, or to reveal all our thoughts – for instance, to say to a person we think ugly, “I think you’re ugly!” “Truthfulness keeps to the just mean between what ought to be expressed and what ought to be kept secret; it entails [both] honesty and discretion” (C 2469).

Honesty does not mean saying everything you feel. (That’s either *candor*, when good, or *shamelessness*, when bad.) Nor is honesty opposed to keeping just secrets or withholding truth from those who have no right to know it – for instance, those who intend harm.

## 10. *“Witnessing”*

“The Christian is not to ‘be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord’<sup>267</sup>” (C 2471).

“In situations that require witness to the faith, the Christian must profess it without equivocation . . .” (C 2471).

“The duty of Christians to take part in the life of the Church impels them to act as *witnesses of the Gospel* . . .” (C 2472). For that *is* “the life of the Church.” Christ’s command to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) did not come with a “clergy only” tag.

Witnessing, however, should be done with prudence, grace, and sensitivity, rather than in a boorish or pushy way, or in any way that harms the Gospel more than helping it. On the other hand, we must also avoid timidity (a far greater danger for most) and not tailor Christ’s Gospel to man’s desires, omitting its unfashionable and offensive teachings. Christ warned us: “woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Lk 6:26).

### *11. Martyrdom*

“*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death” (C 2473). The Christian tradition has always put a high value on martyrdom, since this was the most important thing Christ himself did, the reason he came into the world. The word “martyr” *means* “witness” in New Testament Greek; a martyr is not merely one who endures wrongful death, but one who does so for truth, as a “witness” to truth.

Few things are worth more than life itself. Only what is eternal is worth more than all of time, worth more than a lifetime. But Truth is eternal.

Jim Eliot, twentieth-century missionary martyr in Ecuador, explained the wisdom of martyrdom succinctly: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to win what he cannot lose.”

Martyrdom is not something from some bygone era. There were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in all nineteen previous centuries combined. As history moves closer to its end and to Christ’s promised Second Coming (however near or far away that may be), martyrdom will not cease, but will continue to be a “sign of contradiction,” a *cross*. It is a sign of the spiritual warfare between Christ and Antichrist, light and darkness, truth and falsehood – which is Scripture’s persistent theme from Genesis to Revelation, because it is the central drama of human history and of each individual life.

## *12. Some specific sins against truth*

- 1) *“False witness and perjury.* When it is made publicly, a statement contrary to the truth takes on a particular gravity. In court, it becomes false witness.<sup>276</sup> When it is under oath, it is perjury. Acts such as these contribute to condemnation of the innocent, exoneration of the guilty, or the increased punishment of the accused.<sup>277</sup> They gravely compromise the exercise of justice . . .” (C 2476).

- 2) “He becomes guilty: of rash judgment who . . . assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor;
- 3) “of *detraction* who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another’s faults . . .<sup>279</sup>
- 4) “of *calumny* who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them” (C 2477).

### 13. *Lying*

“A *lie* consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving<sup>281</sup>” (C 2482).

“Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. To lie is [1] to speak or act against the truth [2] in order to lead someone into error” (C 2483). Both of these elements must be present for a lie. 1) *Unintentional* falsehood is not a lie. 2) Nor is play-acting or fiction. However, “[t]he *right to the communication* of truth is not unconditional. . . . [F]raternal love . . . requires us in concrete situations to judge whether or not it is [morally] appropriate to reveal the truth to someone who asks for it” (C 2488).

### 14. *Different degrees of lying*

“The *gravity of a lie* is measured against the nature of the truth it deforms, the circumstances, the intentions of the one who lies, and the harm suffered by its victims” (C 2484).

### *15. The secret of the confessional*

“The *secret of the sacrament of reconciliation* is sacred, and cannot be violated under any pretext” (C 2490). A priest cannot and will not reveal to anyone for any reason any thing he hears in sacramental confession.

### *16. Privacy*

“Everyone should observe an appropriate reserve concerning persons’ private lives. Those in charge of communications should maintain a fair balance between the requirements of the common good [this does not include the right to hear gossip!] and respect for individual rights” (C 2492).

### *17. Censorship and propaganda*

At the opposite extreme from Western societies, in which the communications media are very free and subject to little or no moral authority or censorship, totalitarian societies sin against the truth in the opposite way, by censoring truth and broadcasting false propaganda for political purposes. “Moral judgment must condemn the plague of totalitarian states which systematically falsify the truth, [and] exercise political control of opinion through the media . . .” (C 2499), whether this is done under Communism, right-wing dictatorships, Muslim fundamentalism, or even democracy. (Is it only “totalitarian states” that “systematically falsify the truth [and] exercise political control of opinion through the media”?)

## 18. *The media*

“Within modern society the communications media play a major role in information, cultural promotion, and formation [of opinion, mind, and character]. This role is increasing, as a result of technological progress . . .” (C 2493). As their power to mold minds increases, so does their moral responsibility. The danger is that the media become increasingly secularist and morally irresponsible. As a consequence, modern man can easily become more docile to secularist media and less docile to God’s revelation; often the “gospel” of the world draws more faith than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The communications and entertainment media are one of the major battlefields in the war between truth and falsehood today, and one of the most important opportunities for Christians to bear witness to the truth and influence their society for the good. Christians should be encouraged to be active in this field, whether professionally or privately, and hold the media to higher moral standards.

In addition to immoral *content*, there is a concern for the psychological effect of the very form and structure of modern media: the mass media “can give rise to a certain passivity among users, making them less than vigilant consumers of what is said or shown” (C 2496).

This is due mainly to the fact that *images* cannot be argued with as clearly as ideas can. This is true of all images, good or bad, naturally or supernaturally planned. According to the Saints and Doctors of the Church, evil spirits cannot directly influence our minds or wills but they can tempt us by influencing our imagination, by

bringing up deceptively attractive, erotic, or confusing images that are already in our memories, many of which come from the media. Thus good images – good movies and stories, lives of the saints, sacred art – have much more power and importance than we suspect in the spiritual warfare between truth and darkness.

### *19. Truth, goodness, and beauty*

These three ideals of the human spirit, based on attributes of God, are by nature one. “The practice of goodness is accompanied by spontaneous spiritual joy and moral beauty. Likewise, truth carries with it the joy and splendor of spiritual beauty” (C 2500). Truth and goodness are beautiful. Pope John Paul II entitled his encyclical about the foundations of moral goodness “*The Splendor [beauty] of Truth,*” thus showing the unity of these three things.

### *20. The truth of natural beauty*

“Truth in words, the rational expression of the knowledge of created and uncreated reality, is necessary to man, who is endowed with intellect. But truth can also find other complementary forms of human expression, above all when it is a matter of evoking what is beyond words: the depths of the human heart, the exaltations of the soul, the mystery of God. Even before revealing himself to man in words of truth, God reveals himself to him through the universal language of creation, the work of his Word, of his wisdom: the order and harmony of the cosmos – which both the child and the scientist discover – ‘from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator’ . . . <sup>290</sup>” (C 2500).

## 21. *The truth of art*

“Created ‘in the image of God,’<sup>294</sup> man also expresses the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works. Indeed, *art* is a distinctively human form of expression; beyond the search for the necessities of life which is common to all living creatures, art is a freely given superabundance of the human being’s inner riches. Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man’s own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill,<sup>295</sup> to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God’s activity in what he has created. . . .<sup>296</sup>” (C 2501).

## 22. *The truth of sacred art*

“*Sacred art* is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God . . .” (C 2502). We can judge sacred art by its effects, according to the principle “you will know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:16). “Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God . . .” (C 2502).

If sacred art (especially sacred liturgical celebration) fails in this, its primary purpose, it is deformed, no matter how relevant, popular, or attractive it may be. Liturgical abuses are not just aesthetic lapses but offenses against truth. For the liturgy is not a display of human taste but of truth, even of divine truth.

The greatest works of architecture were built to glorify the Architect of the universe. These were the cathedrals, miraculous “sermons in stone” that made rock and glass seem to take wing and fly like angels. Many of the world’s greatest paintings and statues were made for churches, and much of the greatest music was composed for Masses. For what happens within that sacred time and place is the most beautiful work of art ever conceived: God’s work of redeeming man from eternal darkness into Heavenly light by himself enduring that Hellish darkness in man’s place on the Cross. The most beautiful thing man’s eyes have ever seen in this world is the bloody martyrdom of God himself. There, in every Mass, where Christ becomes truly present again in an unbloody manner but in the same act of love, offering himself for our salvation, we find truth incarnate, goodness incarnate, and beauty incarnate, and their perfect union.

# CONCLUSION

This is the Catholic Faith. It is the “greatest story ever told” – either the greatest lie or the greatest truth. It is the incredible story of the Creator’s proposal of spiritual marriage to the creature. You can accept or reject this proposal. You can believe it or not, as you choose. But if you do believe it, you should be prepared, you should know that this is no ordinary thing. You are embarking on life’s greatest adventure, and you will never be the same again for all eternity.

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

<sup>256</sup> *Rom* 3:4; cf. *Ps* 119:30.

<sup>255</sup> *Ps* 119:90; cf. *Prov* 8:7; *2 Sam* 7:28; *Ps* 119:42; *Lk* 1:50.

<sup>257</sup> *Jn* 1:14; 8:12; cf. 14:6.

<sup>263</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 109, 3 *ad* 1.

<sup>267</sup> *2 Tim* 1:8.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. *Prov* 19:9.

<sup>277</sup> Cf. *Prov* 18:5.

<sup>279</sup> Cf. *Sir* 21:28.

<sup>281</sup> St. Augustine, *De mendacio* 4, 5; PL 40:491.

<sup>290</sup> *Wis* 13:3, 5.

<sup>294</sup> *Gen* 1:26.

<sup>295</sup> Cf. *Wis* 7:16-17.

<sup>296</sup> Cf. Pius XII, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*; Discourses of September 3 and December 25, 1950.