

The Fifth Commandment — Sanctity Of Life (The Agnus Dei).

Text: Exo 20:13

1) Physical life is precious

Suggested Hymns:

2) Spiritual life is even more precious

502, 370, 610, 122, 544

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Exodus 20:13, ¹³ *You shall not murder.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we are considering the Fifth Commandment which deals with the sanctity of life. We will be made aware that we all need *The Agnus Dei* of the liturgy, which is based on John 1:29, ***Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*** May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Physical Life Is Precious

The most valuable possession of a person is undoubtedly life itself. Man can neither create nor manufacture it. He can indeed put an end to it, but once he has done so, he cannot undo the act and resurrect the corpse.

His part in the creative and preservative process is that of a junior partner with God. Man can transmit life from himself to his offspring, he can preside over the reproductive process among animals, and he can sow the seeds of life into the ground and harvest them when they are grown, but he cannot bring life into existence. That remains the prerogative of God alone.

Therefore, given the fact that once the spark of life has gone and cannot be restored, the instinct of man is to preserve it. Thrown into water, he will struggle to stay afloat. Gassed, he will gasp for breath. Shot at, he will run or drop to the ground. He will manufacture medicines, build hospitals, engage in expensive research projects in an effort to prolong his own earthly existence.

Sometimes, indeed, he will set out on a project of extermination which is called war, but this, except where he has become depraved, is an offence against his own

conscience. If he has any awareness at all of the divine Law, he recognises war as the greatest of evils. Destructiveness is Satanic. God's will is for the opposite.

The Fifth Commandment is but a verbal restatement of the will to live which the Creator implanted in the human soul. It says that, just as we ourselves desire to live, so we should let others live, and help them to live as they should.

This much is natural law, and those who regard human life as a cheap thing, not to be respected and cruelly to be dishonoured, are sinning not merely against the Christian law of love but also against that Moral Law which is common to the whole human race.

Oppression must not be excused on the ground that the oppressor is not Christian. He is a man, and every person who has not become degenerate honours personality. He will not unjustly, without due process of the law, lay a hand on what God has made and given.

But there is more to this than the life which animates our bodies. When death comes, physical life stops; but here again the instinct of man protests and reaches out for some continuance of his existence beyond the grave.

He feels that death cannot, and must not be the end, for if it is, life is utterly futile. Man was made for something higher than this. The burial of the body cannot be the last of him. Now, what is this but a distinction between the body and the soul?

When the body dies, the soul lives on. This belief the whole Bible supports. And while the body lives, the soul is housed in it. This twofold existence is likewise taught by Scripture. Therefore if to lay violent hands on the physical life of the body is an offence against the divine Law, an attack on the spiritual life of the soul is a still more grievous sin. And this brings us to the real spirit of the Fifth Commandment.

Our Lord said, "*Whoever hates his brother is a murderer,*"¹ — going far beyond the ancient prohibition of physical violence to that of respect for another person's personality which is the cornerstone of freedom.

The attitude of the heart is the hub of the matter, said Christ. It is not the act of killing alone which is involved, otherwise state's executioners and soldiers would be murderers.

The sin lies in unrighteous anger, which brings the Fifth Commandment into play in all areas of life; governments, unions, our homes, and our private lives. It condemns us all, for there is not one of us of such perfectly balanced temperament that he has never lost control of himself to lash out against someone who has hurt him.

There is such a thing as holy indignation, but it is, to say the least, far less common than the irritable resentment to which wounded pride so often gives expression. The Catechism says that this commandment forbids anything whereby our neighbour's life may be *"destroyed, shortened, or embittered,"* and there is not one of us who, after searching his soul, would have the audacity to say that he did not stand condemned by this.

However, all this is the *"Do not"* side of the commandment. What does the Fifth Commandment tell us to do? First, to do everything within our power to sustain and prolong the physical life of mankind. That includes everything which comes under the heading of organised charity: child welfare societies, hospitals, homes for the aged and the poor, housing projects, nursing services, the supply of food and clothing, etc.

It is an error to think that since the state has taken over much of this work, that the church need no longer concern herself with it. The Fifth Commandment, like all the rest, has particular force for Christians. They know the law of love; they have seen it illustrated by Christ; they themselves are the special recipients of God's grace.

The parable of the Good Samaritan was spoken by their Lord. So was the description of the Last Judgment which concludes, *"inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."*² Therefore the Christian duty continues even when the state enters the field of charity.

The state ministers to the body. It is not concerned with the soul. And since the latter is the more important, the church has the bigger responsibility. Her obligation is to see to it that the needs of both, body and soul, are supplied.

2. Spiritual Life Is Even More Precious Than Physical Life

The positive side of the Fifth Commandment means much more than just the preservation of physical existence. It means the fostering of that life of the spirit which is the very soul of man.

The question of Cain has peculiar significance for the Christian who understands the importance of the spiritual life. All of us are our brothers' keepers. Not only have families obligations within their own circle, but the divine family has similar responsibilities.

The apostle reminds us of the duty of brotherly admonition, just as our Lord teaches us to be aware of the missionary opportunities which He opens before us. Soul-keeping is the inevitable sequel to soul-winning. Both are tasks which we very readily delegate to others. This is understandable, for both are difficult assignments. Nevertheless, they are assignments which the Master expects us to do. It is here that our sins of omission become manifest.

We may not think that our moments of hatred have been very frequent, and perhaps that is true. But how about the moments when we have actively extended the love of Christ to someone? Did you, for example, invite or offer to bring someone to church last week? Have you gone out of your way to welcome others into our family? Have you ever spoken to someone who began to absent himself from Divine Service and from Holy Communion?

Have you done what you could to foster an observance of the Ten Commandments, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted? What have you done to promote righteousness in your home, your circle of friends, your community and nation?

All this belongs under the heading of the Fifth Commandment. For our Lord said in John 10:10, ***I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*** He meant pre-eminently that life which a man might enjoy in Him.

Again and again, Christ and His apostles stress this. ***"In Him was life,"***³ cries St. John. ***"I am the Resurrection and the Life,"***⁴ proclaims our Lord. ***"Christ ... is our Life,"***⁵ shouts St. Paul. So it goes. Jesus is the Bread of Life, the Light of life, the Door of Life, the Giver of eternal life. He who believes in Him has life but He who does not believe shall not see life. Christ gives the water of life, the fruit of the tree of life, the crown of life.

In Holy Communion Christ conveys to us the blood which He shed for the life of the world. Through the means of grace the Holy Spirit of life works. All of God's interest and activity, in short, lies in the direction of that life which Adam

and Eve lost by sin, but which the Son of God has regained for us, and which He holds out to us in a promise of a glorious future.

Satan, who is the instigator of all oppression, is even more concerned with the destruction of this life of the Spirit, for he recognises it to be his greatest enemy. That is why he hates the church, for he knows the church is God's great regenerative tool for the salvation of humanity. Here people are reborn, here they live together as brothers and sisters, here they proclaim their opposition to war, hate, and death. Here they are on the side of the Conqueror of the grave, from whom the Spirit of life proceeds.

The church is Christ's living body. He who hates life hates the church; and he who hates the church cuts himself off from the life which the church communicates.

It is amazing how the great mass of the human race continues to stand aside from the all-important work of building the kingdom of God. Their aloofness is to be explained only by the ugly fact of original sin. ***"But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life,"***⁶ said our Lord to the Jews, putting his finger on the cause for unbelief throughout the ages, which is the proud, wilful, stubborn refusal of man to enter into the life which God offers.

Man wants to live his own way, not according to the will of another. More than that, he wishes to impose his own way of living on his neighbours, so arrogant is he in his own conceit and so blind to the virtues of others. That is why Christianity is hated where nationalism runs wild or where class or race prejudice is fostered.

Christianity turns people outward, away from self to what is noblest in another, in Christ, the perfection of man and of God. It points people to the highest life, which is knowledge of the Saviour. It teaches them to set their affections on things above this life.

Jesus instructs us in John 6:27,²⁷ ***"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."*** It raises their eyes to the higher values; not to worry and fret about what to eat or drink or to put on but to ***"seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."***⁷

All this is infuriating to a variety of people ranging all the way from the dictators of the earth down to the man on the street who refuses to look further than his own pay cheque. They think that helping others will take life from themselves. Like the Pharisees of old, they neither want to have eternal life for themselves, nor will they allow others to receive it. Sin bars the door to Christ.

The trouble with these enemies of Christ is that they have a wrong idea of the purpose of life. St. Paul stated the difference between them and us when he wrote, ***“[Christ] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”***⁸ In other words, the arrow must point upward and outward, not inward.

Our Lord said, ***“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”***⁹ And, lest anyone should be in doubt as to what this means, Christ demonstrated it on Calvary for all the world to see. There He gave Himself for us, teaching us to do likewise. We are to dedicate our lives to Christ being living sacrifices for Him.

There Christ marked the story of the Good Samaritan with the sign of the cross. He illustrated the Sermon on the Mount in a way the world will never forget. ***“Love your enemies,” “bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”***¹⁰

On Calvary He showed us how to do it that we, too, might be the children of the Father in heaven, who makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

It is either Christ’s way of sacrifice or Satan’s way of violence, blasphemy, and furious hostility. It is either crucify or be crucified — and the Son of God says to us that the latter, although more painful it is infinitely better.

So, then, if you ask, *“What shall I do with my life?”* or, *“What shall I do about the lives of others?”* let the cross be your answer. Of course, you can do nothing which even approaches in perfection, completeness, or atoning value, the holy sacrifice of the Saviour.

And yet our service, poor as it may be, is privileged to enjoy a certain union with His, for St. Paul writes, ***“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.”***¹¹ He knew that life was not something to be hoarded but

given back to God who gave it, regardless of the cost. He knew that he was expendable, and he knew that by so being he was extending the cross through history.

Christ continues to suffer in His mystical body as He had suffered in His physical body. Life must still be sacrificed so that the kingdom of God might be built. The throne of Christ had been erected; now subjects must be brought to worship at His feet.

That would require dedicated people: apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and the consecrated life of every baptised Christian. Whoever has seen what this means has understood Christian living, as did the Macedonians who ***“first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.”***¹² The Good Samaritan illustrates one side of this, and Saint Paul the other, who did not count his life dear to himself, but that he might finish his course with joy and the ministry which he had received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God.

Now, such an understanding of the sanctity of life is a counsel of perfection. The concerning person might say, *“It is too difficult; I cannot achieve it.”* This is true; but our progress ought to be in that direction. It was to hasten growth toward this ideal that our Lord gave us the Sacrament of the Altar, whereby the memory of His self-dedication is freshened and power is transmitted to enable us to be conformed to His image.

Listening to the words of institution reminds us of this at every celebration. Here is the body that was broken, the blood that was shed. Here we show forth the Lord’s death. It reminds us of how our sins are taken away. This, then, is how we are to live and die, who are His, who receive Him into ourselves.

We are to regard life as something which is to be laid upon the altar of God as an offering. We, too, must pattern ourselves after the Sermon on the Mount, being meek, merciful, and pure in heart, unmindful of the inevitable insults, persecution and slandering. And thus our lives, like His, will be blessed.

We find, however, that we are continually falling short of this ideal. That is why, as the moment of Communion with Christ approaches, we pray the Agnus Dei: *“O Lamb of God, who takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.”* The gap between us and Christ is painfully evident, yet we do not hesitate, because of

the very sacrifice we are commemorating, to ask Him to close the gap and grant us His peace.

This Jesus does when He comes to us through the visible elements of bread and wine, assuring us that in spite of our shortcomings we are His brethren and the children of His Father. That is why the sacrament is so sweet to us. It not only requires great things; it assures us of our forgiveness when, try as we might, we fail to achieve them. So new life flows into us, the life of the resurrected and reigning Son of God, who said, ***“He who eats this bread will live forever.”***¹³

“Thou shalt not kill,” God said in the Old Testament. Do not injure life in any way, said Christ; not the life of the body or the life of the soul. Desire it, cherish it, sustain it, foster it, make it blessed and eternal. Lose your own life in the redeeming life of God, and you will know what it means really to be alive and to live forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 John 3:15

² Matthew 25:40

³ John 1:4

⁴ John 11:25

⁵ Colossians 3:4

⁶ John 5:40

⁷ Matthew 6:33

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:15

⁹ Matthew 10:39

¹⁰ Matthew 5:44

¹¹ Colossians 1:24

¹² 2 Corinthians 8:5

¹³ John 6:58