

# HOW TO HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER

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The fourth commandment involves both the duties of children to their parents and those of parents to their children. Principally considered here are the duties of children to their parents.

It is not uncommon to hear it said in these times that the fourth commandment of God has fallen upon evil days. The fault is probably equally shared by both children and parents: children, because they permit the free-and-easy spirit of the times to make them think lightly of the obligation of obedience; and parents, because they so often fail their children through selfishness, indifference and failure to direct and discipline them from their earliest years.

This will not be an unwieldy attempt to study all the angles from which the neglect of the fourth commandment can be viewed. It will confine itself to one side of the problem alone, namely, what are the obligations of children toward their parents according to the fourth commandment? It will consider this question under two heads: 1) The obligations of all children toward their parents in general; 2) the solution to specific problems that arise for children because of the wrong actions of their parents.

## I. GENERAL OBLIGATIONS

The obligations of children toward their parents arise from two facts that may be seen as an expression of God's will and the foundation of a natural or divine law. The first is the fact that, in the very nature of things as God established them, He delegates His authority over children to the parents who bring them into the world. The second is the fact that children are dependent on their parents, after God, for their very life, and for the physical, spiritual, intellectual and moral development that will form them into mature human beings.

The fourth commandment of God, therefore, merely accepts these two facts and expresses them in the precept: Honour thy father and thy mother. In other words, this commandment says to every child: Your father and mother are, after God, responsible for your coming into the world. They are responsible, after God, for your proper upbringing, and in carrying out that responsibility they are the delegates or representatives of God. You, in turn, needed them to be born; you need them to grow into a mature human being; long after you actually need them no more you will owe them your gratitude for what they did for you. Therefore it is God's will that you honour them always.

The word "honour" in this commandment breaks down into three separate obligations. These obligations are founded upon and similar to the obligations that every human being owes to God Himself, because of the fact that parents are the delegates of God. Consider these three obligations.

### 1. Love

What is this love that children are bound to give their parents? Its basis is gratitude; its internal spirit is a desire to make their parents happy and to save them from pain: its external manifestations are words and actions that assure parents that they have the love of their children.

This obligation of children toward their parents never comes to an end, not when the parents are old and no longer needed by the children, nor even when the parents have, by their sinful lives, made themselves in a sense repulsive to their children. That is because the gift of life is the greatest thing that one person can give to another, and children must be grateful to parents for that gift even when the latter have hurt or repelled them in any of a multitude of ways. What is to be done about feelings of hatred that arise in the hearts of some children toward their parents, because of their neglect and sins, will be dealt with later on in this article.

In normal circumstances, seeking the happiness of one's parents, which is the essence of love, embraces two things. It means wanting to do anything necessary or possible to help them save their souls. All children, no matter what their circumstances or external relations to their parents, can pray for their parents, and this they must do. Children who come of age only to realize that their parents have faults, or that they are living in sin or outside the true faith or the grace of God, must pray in a special way for them, and back up their prayers by any practical measures that may help to bring them to the grace of God. Obviously children are bound to pray for the souls of their parents after their death.

But loving one's parents also means wanting to bring joy to them even in a temporal way. Thus a child who really

loves his parents will show an eagerness to relieve them of some of the burdens of their daily life; to help with household tasks; to give little presents and remembrances on birthdays and anniversaries; to provide opportunities of relaxation and enjoyment for them. At the same time, loving one's parents means avoiding actions, words, omissions, that would cause them sorrow or pain.

## **2. Reverence.**

Just as every human creature is bound to cultivate and show reverence for God, so children are bound to respect their parents as taking the place of God. This means that children are always bound to see in their parents the authority that they possess, whether that authority be rightly or wrongly used, whether the parent seems at a given time worthy of the authority or not.

Fairly common offenses on the part of children against the reverence that is due to parents are the following: talking back to them in a bitter and angry mood; calling them scurrilous or undignified names, making fun of their faults; worst of all, striking at them even though it be only by way of a gesture of defiance. It need scarcely be added that for a son or daughter deliberately to curse their parents would be a terrible sin against the reverence and love due to them.

Reverence for parents also requires that children resist every temptation to speak about them in an unkind and derogatory way to others. A child's parents may have had very little opportunity to acquire an education, and as a result may be ungrammatical in speech and lacking in some of the refinements of etiquette. Yet these parents may have sacrificed much to give their child the best possible education. It is a terrible thing to hear such a child ridiculing his parents, or complaining to others over their lack of social graces. Even when parents are guilty of great sins, their children should steel themselves to refrain from speaking about their sins, except with spiritual advisers and very close friends whose help and counsel they are seeking.

Like the obligation of love, this reverence for one's parents should extend even unto their old age, when perhaps they have grown somewhat childish and irresponsible through the weight of years. It may become necessary for a grown son or daughter who is taking care of aged parents to be firm and authoritative in dealing with them for their own good; but underneath their words and actions there must always be the obvious sense of reverence that a child owes to those who have brought him into the world.

## **3. Obedience.**

While love and reverence toward parents are duties that bind children throughout life, obedience varies in its binding force according to the age and circumstances of the children.

The general principle may be laid down that so long as children remain in the home belonging to their parents and under their supervision, they are bound to obey them.

Surely until they reach their majority, accepted as twenty-one years of age, in moral matters children are bound to obey all their parents' commands, so long as there is nothing of evil in anything they command. In this regard a child must be early and deeply convinced that its parents represent the authority of God, and that disobedience to them can be a venial sin or a mortal sin according to the gravity of the matter commanded and the extent of the sorrow brought to the parents by disobedience. It is no good argument against the binding force of obedience for a child to say that other parents permit things that their own parents have forbidden. It is to his own parents that every child owes obedience, not to what an indefinite group of other parents decide for their children.

When children reach their middle and late teens, it is true that now and then the question may legitimately be raised as to whether a certain command of their parents is a reasonable or unreasonable demand. In all such questions two principles should guide the young people concerned in seeking a solution. The first is that the presumption is in favor of the authority of the parents as long as no sin is involved. In every human relationship in which one human being is subject to the just authority of another, the subject will at times feel that the commands of the superior are unreasonable. This fact would lead to the breakdown of all authority if it were not accepted as a presumption that lawful authority must ordinarily be obeyed even when it seems to the subject to be ordering something unreasonable.

The second principle acts as a buffer for the first. It is this: that even when a teen-ager is convinced that a command of his parents is unreasonable, he should not act on his own conviction without having recourse to some other

objective and authoritative guide. This can always be his confessor or pastor, whose decision in the matter should be followed.

How far is obedience to parents binding on sons and daughters who have passed twenty-one years of age, but still live in their parents' home? Such children are no longer bound to obey their parents in every minute matter that pertains to even their private lives, as young and undeveloped children are bound. It is assumed that by the time children reach the age of twenty-one, their parents' obligation to educate and train them has been completed, and they are mature enough to make many personal decisions on their own. But they are still bound, while living in their parents' home, to obey the latter in all things that pertain to the discipline and external management of the home. It may be added that, if they have an income of their own, they are bound also to contribute proportionately to the upkeep of the home.

It must be remembered, however, that when a son or daughter marries, they have a greater obligation of obedience and subjection to their partner in marriage than to either or both of their parents. This holds whether the young married couple lives in the home of the parents of one of them, or whether they have brought one of their parents into their own newly established home. They are always bound to love and respect their parents; but they will ruin or at least diminish the happiness of their marriage if either one of them is more subservient to the will and the demands of a parent than to those of their spouse. God Himself commanded that when two people marry "They shall leave father and mother and cleave to each other." This is also the reason behind the advice given to newly married couples that they live apart from their in-laws if that be at all possible. When true charity makes it impossible, husband and wife must both remember that their first duty is to each other, not to the will of the parents of either one.

## II. SPECIAL PROBLEMS

The above outline sets forth the principles that must be held as an ideal for every Christian family, even though the ideal may be failed against often and in many ways. As long as the ideal is held sacred, and striven after by both parents and children, families will not be in great danger of falling to pieces.

But in the kind of society in which we live today, many special problems arise in regard to the obligations of the fourth commandment. Children often find themselves in special circumstances that make it difficult to know just what their obligations are. Here are some of the special problems that arise in this matter, stated just as they are often presented by children themselves.

1. *My father is an alcoholic, has not been able to hold a job for several years, has forced my mother to go to work, and has brought shame on us all. I cannot love him; in fact, I have a feeling of hatred and loathing for him. Am I committing a sin in hating my father?*

You must learn to distinguish between feelings, which may not be controllable, and the obligations that can still be fulfilled, with the grace of God, by your free will.

There is no sin in a feeling of revulsion for one who disgraces himself, wrongs your mother, brings shame on your whole family by his sins. Our feelings react automatically to what hurts us and our loved ones with what seems to us to be a kind of hatred. It is not, however, the real hatred, which is necessarily a product of our own free will.

No matter what your feelings are, you are bound to love your father in two ways. You must pray for him each day, begging God to grant him the grace to overcome his weakness and to save his soul in the end. Secondly, you are bound to try to hide your feelings and to do everything you can to influence your father to change his ways. Some day you may understand that there was as much sickness of mind responsible for your father's actions as moral guilt. When that realization comes, you will not want to look back and recall that you added to his difficulties by signs of bitterness and hatred.

2. *My father divorced my mother and attempted marriage with another woman. Am I bound to call on him as he wants me to do? I cannot do so without at the same time calling on the woman who wrecked our home. Since he is living in sin with this woman, may I not stay away from him entirely?*

Even if you still felt a great affection for your father, it would be wrong to act in any way that would show approval of his sinful living. The fact that you feel bitter toward him for having wrecked your family does not of itself give you a right to ignore him; but you may stay away from him on the ground that it is impossible to see him without seeming

in a way to accept the whole sinful set-up in which he is living.

At the same time you must pray for him, and, as you grow older, look for opportunities to use your influence to make him realize the terrible state in which he is living. You may not and must not hate him, in the sense of refusing even to pray for him, or to see him under any circumstances whatsoever.

3. *I am eighteen years old, am just finishing first year of college, and I would like to become a nun. But my parents will not hear of this. They say I must wait until I am at least twenty-one before they will give their permission for my entering a convent. Do parents have the right to prevent their children from following what they think is their vocation?*

Strictly speaking, parents do not have the right to interfere with their children's choosing a priestly or religious vocation, either before or after the children are twenty-one. Since such vocations are very often lost if the individuals wait to enter upon them until they are twenty-one, parents who forbid a daughter to enter a convent until she has passed twenty-one are in effect decreeing that their child shall not follow a religious vocation. This parents have no right to do; such a vocation is a matter between an individual and God.

However, many circumstances can enter into a situation of this kind that make it unwise, and often even impossible, for a teenager to walk out of his or her home, against the commands of parents, to follow a religious vocation. There is always the possibility that a youth has a mistaken idea of his fitness for such a vocation. Therefore any young person who feels a call to the higher life should select a regular confessor who will also be an adviser in this matter. No step should be taken without the backing and encouragement of the spiritual director.

4. *Have parents a right to decide with whom their children should or should not keep company? I am an eighteen-year-old girl, and my parents insist on deciding for or against my boy friends as soon as I start to go out. Do I have to be obedient to them?*

Parents do have an obligation to see to it that their children do not keep company with persons who are objectively unfitted to make good partners in marriage. Thus they have full authority to forbid a son or daughter to go out with a divorced person, or one who clearly lacks the moral character indispensable for a happy marriage. Parents should also use their authority, combined with loving exhortations, to prevent their teenaged sons and daughters from keeping company with persons who are not of their faith.

Apart from these important obligations, parents would do wrong if they were to set themselves up as autocratic censors or dictators concerning their children's friends when the children reach their later teens. Some parents try to prevent any possibility of their children getting married by forbidding them to keep company; others set up arbitrary and unreasonable standards for the kind of person with whom they will permit their children to keep company. In all such cases the son or daughter thus treated should have recourse to a confessor or spiritual director, and follow the advice that he gives.

## **EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE FOR THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT**

### **I. MORTAL SINS**

1. Have I deliberately given in to hatred of my mother or my father, refusing to speak to them over a considerable period of time?

2. Have I deliberately wished serious harm to my parents, e.g., that they would die so that I might possess their goods?

3. Have I habitually treated my parents harshly, speaking contemptuously to them or of them, ridiculing them, cursing them, causing them severe pain and sorrow?

4. Have I refused to relieve the serious needs of my parents when I was able to do so, leaving them dependent on strangers for necessary food, clothing, or without medical care in sickness and danger of death?

5. Have I done nothing to insure spiritual care for my mother or father when it was needed, neglecting to provide for their receiving the Sacraments in danger of death?

6. Have I, as a lawyer or politician or influential business man, used my power to break down or render useless just laws of the state made for the welfare of all?

7. Have I purposely struck my mother or father in resentment or deliberate bad will?
8. Have I disobeyed parents when they forbade my going with bad companions, or to bad shows and dangerous places?
9. Have I, as an official of the state, seriously failed in my duty by accepting bribes, permitting corruption, letting criminals off, etc.?
10. Have I, as a parishioner, fomented rebellion and disobedience among the people of a parish, by slander, conspiracy, etc., against my pastor?
11. Have I upset the home of my parents by frequently disobeying the rules they had a right to make—concerning the persons to be brought into the house, concerning the hours I kept at night, concerning decent conduct within the home?
12. Have I, when earning money while living under the parental roof or while still subject to parents, refused to give them part of my earnings when they needed it or demanded it?
13. Have I, as a parent, given in to deliberate hatred of a son or daughter, by continual mistreatment, cursing, driving them out of my home without a serious reason?
14. Have I failed entirely to teach and discipline my children in serious matters such as morality and religion?
15. Have I, with deliberate and grave carelessness, endangered the life of a child, either by seriously dangerous conduct before birth, or by neglect of proper attention through the years of infancy?
16. Have I failed to have my child baptized at least within two weeks or thereabouts after birth, when there was no serious obstacle to so doing?
17. Have I given serious bad example to my children, by cursing in their presence, by serious quarreling, by impure talk, by neglecting serious religious obligations?
18. Have I failed to correct and punish my children for serious wrongs, or to forbid them to enter serious occasions of sin?
19. Have I refused to send my children to a Catholic school when I could have done so and had no permission from bishop or pastor to do otherwise?
20. Have I selfishly interfered with the vocation of a son or daughter when God seemed to be calling them to marriage or to a religious vocation and I had no serious reason for refusing to let them go?
21. Have I, as a pupil in school, seriously undermined the authority and harmed the work of my teacher by slander, rebellion, etc.?
22. Have I, as a teacher, seriously neglected my duties by failing to prepare myself in any way for my classes, by not teaching subjects I was hired to teach, etc.?
23. Have I as an employee, failed to a grave degree in carrying out commands of an employer for which I was hired, or fomented rebellion and disobedience and sabotage among others?
24. Have I, as an employer, been seriously unjust to one or many of my employees, by driving them tyrannically, by demanding more than human nature could do, by allowing inhuman working conditions?

## II. VENIAL SINS

1. Have I failed to show love and gratitude to my parents, either by neglecting opportunities to do so, or by positively hurting them in small ways?
2. Have I failed in the respect due my parents, by laughing at them, being openly ashamed of them, talking harshly or angrily to them, saying unkind things about them?
3. Have I disobeyed my parents in small things that they commanded or forbade?
4. Have I lied to my parents to avoid a reprimand or punishment?
5. Have I been stubborn and peevish and openly resentful against parents?
6. Have I neglected to ask or take advice from parents in matters in which their knowledge and experience are meant to guide me?
7. Have I selfishly refused to make life more comfortable and enjoyable for my parents when I could have done so?

8. Have I, in my own mature years, left my parents alone, seldom visiting them, seldom showing any gratitude or love?
9. As a parent, have I slothfully neglected the lesser duties I owed to my children, such as taking an interest in their school work, explaining difficult religious matters to them, encouraging extra habits of piety?
10. Have I given bad example to my children in venial matters, by anger, gossip, lying, etc.?
11. Have I failed to cooperate with teachers of my children by criticizing them to the children, countermanding some of their orders, etc.?
12. Have I, as a pupil in school, been disrespectful and disobedient to teachers?
13. Have I, as a teacher, given bad example to pupils, or failed to prepare well for my classes, or to fulfill minor obligations I assumed?
14. Have I, as an employee, been disobedient to just orders given by my employer, thus causing slight losses?
15. Have I, as an employer, given way to anger, partiality, unfairness in dealing with my employees?
16. Have I, as a citizen, disregarded laws made for the safety and well-being of all, or ridiculed those in authority who made the laws?

### **III. HELPS AND COUNSELS**

1. Have I convinced myself of the truth that all valid authority comes from God, and that obedience to such authority is obedience to God?
2. As a son or daughter, have I ever reflected on the gratitude I owe to parents, which is the basis of the love, respect and obedience I owe them?
3. Have I trained myself to overlook the human faults in those who hold authority, remembering that these faults do not remove my obligation of obedience to all just commands?
4. Have I meditated on what chaos would engulf the world if there were no obedience, and on how much misery has already been caused by rebellion against authority?
5. Have I realized the old Scriptural principle that obedience to parents in youth is the surest means of gaining loyal obedience from others when I may be placed in authority?
6. Have I meditated on the example of Christ, who became man out of obedience and who was obedient to all lawful authority even unto His death?

ASPIRATION: All for Thee, most Sacred Heart of Jesus! (300 days indulgence.) [203]

### **PRAYER:**

O Jesus, my Saviour, Thou didst say on entering the world: "I am come to do Thy will, O God," and didst fulfill Thy promise by becoming obedient even unto the death of the cross—O, do Thou teach me to be obedient in all things like unto Thee. In the past I have often rebelled against those who represent Thy own authority; permit me now by Thy grace to rebel no longer. Thou didst obey Mary and Joseph at Nazareth, and all Thy civil and religious rulers. Let me see in my own superiors the same divine authority Thou didst obey, no matter what human defects Thy representatives may possess. And if Thou willest that I should have authority over others in any sphere, grant that I may exercise that authority with the same gentleness, meekness, kindness and charity that were always present in Thee. O Mary, who didst say to the angel who represented God: "Be it done unto me according to thy word," let me echo thy beautiful submission whenever God's will is made known to me through my superiors.

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