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*The Covenant on Mt. Sinai*



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# *The Covenant on Mt. Sinai*

In this talk we shall look at the Mosaic covenant sealed with Israel on Mt. Sinai through the mediation of Moses.

## **Why Several Covenants with Israel?**

A question that immediately arises in a study of God's covenants with Israel, is whether there is fundamentally one covenant or more than one. And if there is more than one, why?

The most important relationship between God's various covenants with mankind is that of promise and fulfillment. What was promised to Abraham is fulfilled in various stages. We saw last week that God gave him three fundamental promises: he would be the father of a great people; they would inherit the land of Canaan; and in his seed all nations would be blessed.

The promise of a great people was gradually realized through Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's twelve sons, and their descendants. The unity of the people was cemented through the giving of the Law through Moses.

The promise of the land was realized first through the Exodus from Egypt, followed by the initial conquest under Joshua, and was further completed by King David. The Mosaic covenant spells out the conditions for life in the Land of promise. This fundamental covenant is renewed various times at key stages of Israel's life. The first renewal is given at the end of the forty years of wandering in the desert, as recounted in the book of Deuteronomy.

The covenant God made to David makes more explicit the final promise given to Abraham of a blessing for all nations, to be realized through a descendant of David, the Messiah. It is fulfilled only in the New Covenant.

The various covenants with Israel can be illuminated by an analogy with the founding of the Church by Christ. Surprisingly, there is not one act by which the Church was founded, but several, each of which accomplished an essential step in the process. The first step was the Incarnation, preceded by the Immaculate Conception of Mary. A second step came with Christ's public ministry in which He announced that the Kingdom/Church was at hand, and defined its spirit—the New Law of Christ—in the Sermon on the Mount and his other discourses. A third step came with the realization of the Paschal mystery in His death and Resurrection. The fourth step was His Ascension into heaven, preceded by the missionary mandate, and followed by the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Only with Pentecost is the constitution of the Church complete. However, she is not entirely complete at Pentecost, for she must still preach the Gospel to every nation.

Israel has a similar genesis. Her first beginning is with the calling of Abraham out of his father's house into the land of Canaan and the growth of the people in exile in Egypt. The second step is the Exodus from Egypt, beginning the realization of the promise of the Land. A third step is the giving of the Law, sanctifying the people for the possession of the land of God's indwelling. The fourth step is the gradual conquest of the land, which is completed with David.

The calling of Abraham and the promise of a son is parallel to the Annunciation and the Incarnation. The Exodus is parallel to and prefigures Christ's paschal mystery. The giving of the Law on Mount Sinai is parallel both to the public ministry of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit. And the conquest of the land is parallel to the whole time of the Church from its beginning at Pentecost until the Second coming of Christ and the Church triumphant in the Heavenly Jerusalem, which we await with longing.

## **The Mosaic Covenant: God Remembers His Covenant with Abraham**

Let us look now at the Mosaic covenant. The book of Exodus begins with God remembering His covenant with Abraham, and calling Moses on Mt. Horeb. In Exodus 6:2–8, God says to Moses:

And God said to Moses, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they dwelt as sojourners. Moreover I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold in bondage and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.'"

In this text we see three fundamental promises: liberation from the bondage of Egypt, the people adopted by God as His people, and the possession of the land promised to Abraham. Of the three promises, the most central and also the most enduring is that of the adoption of the people of Israel as the people of God. The liberation and the promised land are for the sake of the adoption of Israel. The adoption is sealed with the covenant on Mt. Sinai.

Moses' request to Pharaoh is not for political liberation for its own sake, but the freedom to encounter God in the wilderness and worship Him:

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.” Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us; let us go, we pray, a three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The Covenant and Theophany on Mt. Sinai: Exodus 19**

After the great miracles of the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the water from the rock, and manna from heaven, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai in which the Mosaic covenant is solemnly sealed. The Exodus and the preceding miracles all serve to give extraordinary weight and credibility to the sealing of the covenant, fifty days after the Passover.

The Mosaic covenant is described in Exodus 19–24. It begins with God calling the people to the covenant:

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. And when they set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness; and there Israel encamped before the mountain. And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

The essential promise of God is adoption as His people. God speaks of them as His own possession. The Hebrew word סגולה (*segulah*) means a treasured possession.

As we saw last week, the key idea of God's covenants with mankind is the establishment of a relationship with mankind that does not belong to man as such, but involves a totally gratuitous elevation to bring him into a familial relationship with God. God must take the initiative in offering this relationship to man. The relationship involves a mutual “possession.” Israel becomes God's treasured possession (*segulah*), and God is Israel's treasure. We can compare this to filial and spousal relationships: the son is the father's treasure, and vice versa; and the bride is the bridegroom's treasure, and vice versa.

Other texts express this idea with the notion of inheritance. God is Israel's inheritance, and Israel is *God's*

*inheritance*. In Exodus 34:9, Moses prays: “If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and *take us for thy inheritance*.” The covenant thus involves a mutual, although infinitely unequal, self-gift.

Because God adopts Israel as His own treasured possession, this makes the people a “holy people”—consecrated to God and to His worship. Thus the whole people is a “kingdom of priests” (ממלכת כהנים). Although the Mosaic Law provides for a hereditary priesthood, the whole people participates in the priestly dignity of offering a pleasing sacrifice to God so as to receive His blessing and transmit it to others, and ultimately to all nations.

God's offer requires a response on the part of Israel, which involves both faith and fidelity. Israel must believe the Lord and strive to follow His Law. Israel's response is recorded in Exodus 19:8: “And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do.’”

### ***Preparation of the People to Encounter God***

In order to prepare the people for the sacred encounter with God, He asks them to abstain from conjugal relations for three days, to wash their clothes, and to refrain from touching the holy mountain in which God's presence is manifested.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments, and be ready by the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Take heed that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death; no hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” So Moses went down from the mountain to the people, and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, “Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman.”

The preparation of the people for the encounter shows the reverence that is required in any encounter with the living God. In this way it serves as a type for the reverence that must be shown above all in Holy Communion.

### ***God Reveals Himself in the Cloud***

In order to seal the covenant, God reveals Himself to the people through sensible phenomena—a dense cloud, thunder, lightning, fire, smoke, and trumpet blasts—that are signs of His presence. This theophany manifests the interpersonal nature of the covenant as the establishment of an utterly gratuitous and unlooked-for bilateral relationship

<sup>1</sup> Ex 5:1–3.

between God and His people. In this way God manifests both His divine transcendence and His closeness to the people that He has called to be His own. His transcendence is underlined by the fact that He speaks from a cloud, remaining hidden even while manifesting Himself. Exodus 19:16–18 describes the dramatic encounter:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.<sup>17</sup> Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.

The sensible phenomena manifest the divine attributes. The thunder and trumpet blasts show His majesty and the penetration and power of His Word; the cloud and the smoke manifest the fact that He transcends all human understanding. The fire manifests the burning love of God. In the light of the New Testament revelation of the Trinity, we can glimpse a Trinitarian aspect to the theophany. The Father is especially manifested in the unapproachable majesty and in power; the Son is manifested in the fact God speaks to man and in the penetration of His Word; the Holy Spirit is manifested in the overshadowing cloud and smoke and in the fire that reveals the ardor of the divine love that wills communion with man and our sanctification.

### *Moses's Mediation*

The theophany on Mt. Sinai displays Moses's mediation in a most dramatic way. In Exodus 19:19–20, God speaks with Moses through the thunder, and calls him up to the summit of Sinai to speak with him alone:

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

In Exodus 19:9, God says that He will communicate with Moses in this public and momentous way so that His words—and especially the ten words of the commandments—would be believed by Israel forever: “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you for ever.” God works miracles to show that it is He who speaks, so that the divine Revelation may be accepted for what it is: the Word of God.

Moses's mediation is brought out even more in Exodus 20:18–24:

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled;

and they stood afar off, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.”<sup>2</sup> And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.” And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. And the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

Moses's mediation, speaking to the people on behalf of God, is a magnificent type of the greater mediation of Christ, as Moses himself makes clear in Deuteronomy 18:15–19:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, “Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.” And the Lord said to me, “They have rightly said all that they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.”

### **The Torah and the Covenant**

God's covenant with man requires that he be faithful to God's law. This is not an arbitrary requirement of the

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<sup>2</sup> See the longer parallel text in Deut 5:24–31: “And when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; and you said, ‘Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire; we have this day seen God speak with man and man still live. Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and has still lived? Go near, and hear all that the Lord our God will say; and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you; and we will hear and do it.’ “And the Lord heard your words, when you spoke to me; and the Lord said to me, ‘I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they have rightly said all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children for ever! Go and say to them, “Return to your tents.” But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandment and the statutes and the ordinances which you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess.”

covenant, but intrinsic to the very notion of communion with God. We saw that the Abrahamic covenant involved the command of God to Abraham to “walk” with Him: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.”<sup>3</sup> The commandments spell out what it means to “walk with God.”

The covenant involves an intimate communion that is a spousal kind of friendship, which requires that man participate in God’s holiness. The revealed Law of God, the Torah, shows the implications of man’s call to participate in the life and holiness of God. This call is an incomprehensible dignity and challenge. Leviticus 19:2 makes this explicit: “Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.”

God’s commandments in the Pentateuch are often prefaced by a phrase, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” as in Exodus 20:1, at the beginning of the Ten Commandments.<sup>4</sup> Numbers 15:40–41 says likewise: “So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God.”

This shows that the commandments are to be understood as a personal response to the Lord and His holiness, and the gift of Himself to us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2063 explains:

The covenant and dialogue between God and man are also attested to by the fact that all the obligations are stated in the first person (“I am the Lord.”) and addressed by God to another personal subject (“you”). In all God’s commandments, the *singular* personal pronoun designates the recipient. God makes his will known to each person in particular, at the same time as he makes it known to the whole people.

Christians often think of the Torah as a burden, or sometimes even as a punishment. On the contrary, we should regard the Law of the Torah as a revelation of God’s holiness, and of what it means to be a human person. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2059 stresses that the laws are God’s gift and revelation: “They belong to God’s revelation of himself and his glory. The gift of the Commandments is the gift of God himself and his holy will. In making his will known, God reveals himself to his people.”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2060–62 also brings out the intimate connection between the Torah and the covenant:

The gift of the commandments and of the Law is part of the covenant God sealed with his own. In *Exodus*, the revelation of the “ten words” is granted between the proposal of the covenant and its conclusion—after the people had committed themselves to “do” all that the Lord had said, and to “obey” it.<sup>23</sup> The Decalogue is never handed on without first recalling the covenant (“The LORD our God made a covenant

with us in Horeb.”).

The Commandments take on their full meaning within the covenant. According to Scripture, man’s moral life has all its meaning in and through the covenant. The first of the “ten words” recalls that God loved his people first. . . . The Commandments properly so-called come in the second place: they express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant. Moral existence is a *response* to the Lord’s loving initiative. It is the acknowledgement and homage given to God and a worship of thanksgiving. It is cooperation with the plan God pursues in history.

Christians have much to learn from Orthodox Judaism in this regard. Jewish Pentecost—the feast of Shavuot—commemorates the gift of the Torah to Israel on Mt. Sinai. I think that many, or perhaps most, Christians unfortunately never think of thanking God for the gift of His Law, and would have difficulty imagining a liturgical feast thanking God for His revealed Law. This can be seen also in the respective connotations of the words for “law” and “commandment” in Hebrew as opposed to modern Western languages. “Torah,” which literally means “instruction,” but is used of God’s revealed law, and “mitzvah”—commandment—are words that are spoken with reverence and are considered as the most beautiful of words. “Mitzvah” is practically synonymous with “good deed.” But in modern English, very few, tragically, would associate “commandment” with “good deed.” Similarly, the word “law” does not evoke positive connotations, but rather a burden.

### ***Different Kinds of Precepts***

The Torah, or revealed Law of God, is not monolithic whole, but includes different kinds of precepts that can—and must—be hierarchically ordered. Not all the commandments receive the same emphasis, even though all are from God. The hierarchy is shown in Scripture in various ways. The precept to love God with one’s whole heart, mind, and soul is singled out in the prayer of the *Shema*, which is to be recited daily and put in the doorway the house (*mezuzah*):

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The supreme filial love for God is the essence of man’s covenantal obligation to God, and the source of every other precept, including the entire Decalogue. For our neighbor is to be loved as our self insofar as he is made in the image of God and is destined for an eternal communion with the

3 Gen 17:1–2.

4 See also Deut 5:6; Lev 19.

Him. Every other precept, therefore, is to be done for the sake of the love of God.

The hierarchy of the Torah is also shown in the fact that the Ten Commandments are singled out and distinguished from the other commandments because they are written by the “finger of God” Himself on the holy mountain, whereas the other precepts are written down later by Moses according to what he heard on the mountain.<sup>5</sup> In Deuteronomy 5:22, Moses speaks to the people about the Ten Commandments: “These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tables of stone, and gave them to me.” Hence the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2056 says that the Ten Commandments are “pre-eminently the words of God.”

For this reason, St. Thomas distinguishes three levels of the revealed moral law: the double commandment of love; the Ten Commandments, which show the immediate implications of the double commandment; and the other moral precepts commanded by Moses which spell out further implications of the Ten Commandments and the double commandment of love.

St. Thomas holds that it is significant that the Ten Commandments were written directly by the finger of God on the tablets of the Law, for they are also engraved by God on the human heart.<sup>6</sup> The other moral precepts of the Torah were given by God through the mediation of the teaching of Moses, which is a sign of the fact that these corollaries of the commandments require social mediation. They are indeed from the God, but, unlike the Ten Commandments, they are not always immediately grasped, and require education.

### *The Decalogue*

In Exodus 20:1–17, God speaks the Ten Commandments from the “thick darkness” of the cloud:

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of

those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“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.

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

“You shall not kill.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

The Ten Commandments are recounted a second time in Deuteronomy, which narrates Moses’ preaching forty years later.

### **The Ten Commandments Are a Perfect Formulation of Natural Law**

The first three commandments follow from the principle that God is to be loved above all things and is to be given the reverence due to Him as Creator. The first commandment teaches that idol worship goes against the supreme love and reverence due to God alone. The second commandment shows that in order to offer the reverence due to God, His name is to be sanctified, and worship is to be given to Him. The third commandment teaches that in order to worship God, it is necessary to set aside a time that is sacred and given to God rather than to our own secular pursuits.

The remaining seven commandments have to do with our relationship to our neighbor, and are based on the golden rule and the principle of justice, which is to give to each his due. The fourth commandment tells us to give to our parents a respect and honor that is due to them for having brought us into the world and educated us. That honor is a certain participation in the honor due to God. The fifth through tenth commandments protect fundamental goods that all men naturally recognize as such because they are objects of our natural inclinations for life and health, matrimony and the family, property, and honor. The fifth commandment is based on the fundamental good of innocent human life that must always be respected in others as we would have it respected in ourselves. The sixth

<sup>5</sup> Ex 31:18; Deut 5:22.

<sup>6</sup> See CCC 2072: “Since they express man’s fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, *grave* obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart.”

protects the great good of marital fidelity and intimacy, and the sanctity of marriage. The seventh protects private property, and the eighth commandment protects honor and the good name of a person against false witness. The ninth and tenth commandments extend the sixth and seventh commandments to include desires of the heart.

The Ten Commandments, therefore, pertain to natural law, and can be discovered “written on the heart” of all men who come to the age of reason, as St. Paul says in Romans 2:15: “They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.”

St. Thomas has two marvelous articles (I-II, q. 100, aa. 5 and 6) in the *Summa of Theology* in which he shows that the Decalogue is the perfect expression of natural law. In article 5, he asks whether the precepts of the Decalogue are suitably set forth. The answer, of course, is affirmative—everything that God does is well done—but what is of interest is seeing why the Decalogue is a perfect expression of the fundamental precepts of natural law. St. Thomas first points out that the Commandments order man’s relation to God as to the head of the human community, and to his fellow man. To God man owes fidelity, reverence, and service, which corresponds to the first three commandments. The commandments regarding one’s neighbor are divided into what is particular and what is general. The fourth commandment regards the particular debt to one’s parents, and the necessity to repay that debt. It is a positive action of honor to them that is required. The fifth through tenth commandments have to do with a general obligation to all men, and this is realized through negative precepts which prevent harm to one’s neighbor, in act, word, and thought. St. Thomas mentions that the first three commandments can also be classified as giving honor to God in thought, word, and deed.

### **The Order of the Decalogue**

In I-II, q. 100, a. 6, St. Thomas shows that the Commandments are set forth perfectly in order of importance, according to the gravity of the contrary sins. The first three commandments which stem from the love of God have precedence over the other seven, which are rooted in fraternal charity. Since God is our Creator, our Final End, and our infinite Benefactor, sins directly against God have far greater gravity than sins against neighbor. Furthermore, God Himself is the reason for the gravity of sins against our neighbor, who is to be loved for God’s sake, in whose image he is made. Since Exodus 31:18 tells us that the Ten Commandments were written on two tablets, the first three commandments are fittingly referred to as the “first tablet,” whereas the fourth through tenth commandments are referred to as the “second tablet.”

The order of the first three commandments of the first tablet is based on the fact that we owe God fidelity (having no other god beside Him), reverence, and service, in that order. Of these fidelity must come first. Just as the maximum sin for a soldier is treason, so the maximum disorder with regard to God is to worship false gods in the place of the true God.

After the commandments concerning God, a special commandment is given to the fidelity, reverence, and service to be shown to our parents, who hold a place similar to God, in that they are the source of being and education for their children.

The next four commandments are in order of importance with regard to the fundamental goods that they protect: life, marriage, property, and reputation. Clearly life is the most fundamental of human goods, followed by marriage by which life is transmitted and nurtured. Property comes after marriage because its value derives primarily for the sake of the maintenance of life and making possible the fitting support of a family. The eighth commandment protects the good of personal reputation and the truth in general.

The ninth and tenth commandments extend this protection of the fundamental human goods from being endangered by illicit desires. Although such desires are what lead to deeds, their direct consequences are less harmful than those of deeds.

### **The Sacrifice Sealing the Covenant**

We have seen that covenants with Noah and Abraham were sealed with the offering of sacrifices. The Mosaic covenant is likewise sealed with a solemn liturgical sacrifice, recounted in Exodus 24:3–8:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

The fact that the blood is divided into two portions, one poured on the altar, and the other sprinkled on the people, manifests the bilateral aspect of the covenant, bringing God and man into communion. The sacrifice makes symbolic atonement for sin and brings about the sanctification of the people through the forgiveness of sins, so that they may

participate in the holiness of God. This sign of communion, however, requires the commitment to follow the Law.

The aspersion of the blood seems to have several inter-related meanings.

The fact that God and man share in the blood of the sacrifice represents the communion worked by the covenant. This sharing between man and God in the sacrifice is analogous to a sharing in a solemn feast to ratify a human covenant, such as marriage.

Secondly, the blood of the bulls offered in sacrifice is a type of the blood of Christ, the true Sacrifice for the sins of the world, more pleasing than all sin is displeasing.

Third, since blood signifies the life, the aspersion of the blood on the people can signify, as a type, the supernatural life of God received by the people, as they are adopted to be God's own people. In this sense it is a magnificent type of communion in the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

Fourth, mutually receiving the blood also has the meaning of a mutual sign of commitment to the covenant. The covenant partners are bound to the covenant by the blood poured out at its ratification. St. Paul brings out this last aspect, with regard to the blood of Christ in the Eucharist, in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.

After the sacrifice, Moses and the elders receive a vision of the glory of God:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.<sup>7</sup>

This vision, like that received by Moses during the forty days and nights on the mountain, does not seem to be the beatific vision itself, which is the life of heaven, but some kind of sensible type or figure of the vision of God that is the destiny of the saints in glory. This is the end to which all of God's covenants are directed: the full communion of God and man in the glory of the vision of God.

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7 Ex 24:9-11.