

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Fifth Commandment is simple: "Do not kill." After the respect and honor we have for family, the commandments enshrine the sacredness of human life.

The Catechism teaches that there are some circumstances of self defense and military involvement in which the taking of human life is sometimes permissible, but other than these rare exceptions the sacredness of human life is paramount.

This means we may not murder another person, but it also means that abortion of any kind is forbidden. The church also teaches that capital punishment must be avoided if at all possible. Taking one's own life by suicide is a terrible sin against God's love. We must be committed not only to avoid these sins, but to fight against them when they are present in our society.

The commandment not to kill also impacts end of life issues. Catholics are not permitted to use any active means to end the life of someone who is elderly or terminally ill. We do not have to take heroic means to save or continue life. We must continue natural nutrition and hydration for the sick person and alleviate their pain, but active steps to end a life are not allowed.

Taking a life is not permitted, but it is also forbidden to destroy a person's spiritual life through causing a scandal. Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another person to do evil. Abusing our health through alcohol or drug abuse, or promoting the body above the soul through glamor, sports, or achievement is wrong. Endangering another person's life through irresponsible driving, encouraging drug, alcohol or sexual abuse are all ways that we "kill others".

The Fifth Commandment also speaks to the sins of bearing a grudge, refusing to forgive, cursing, or planning revenge. If we wish harm on anyone in any way then we are planning to kill them--if we are not planning to literally take their life, we are planning to take their happiness, their blessing and their welfare. We not only plan to take their life, but we plan to destroy their life which is another form of killing.

Finally, there is a social aspect to this commandment. The Church teaches that there is such a thing as a "just war", but nations must resist war and avoid war in every way possible. The conditions for a just war are very strict. At one and the same time the damage afflicted by an aggressor must be certain, grave and lasting. All means must be taken to avoid war and all other means to stop the aggressor must be shown to be ineffective. There must be a real prospect for success and the use of arms must not cause more suffering and damage than that perpetrated by the aggressor. In addition, innocent citizens may not be hurt or killed, and prisoners must be treated respectfully and humanely.

In all ways the Catholic Church seeks to defend and uphold life. Are you being faithful in this fifth and most important commandment?

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker