

## Superstition

The first commandment reads: 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. (Ex 20 v 2-5)

Speaking about the first commandment, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: The first commandment embraces faith, hope and charity. When we say “God” we confess a constant, unchangeable being, always the same, faithful and just, without any evil. It follows that we must necessarily accept his words and have complete faith in him, and acknowledge his authority. (para 2086)

The catechism then goes on to discuss some of the ways in which we may be in danger of giving other so-called authorities the sole place that God should have in our lives and which are therefore forbidden by the first commandment.

The first of these is *superstition* (para 2111). Superstition attributes an importance to certain practices which they clearly do not have. There is absolutely no practical significance to the number thirteen, for example, or to the thirteenth day of the month falling on a Friday. There are no direct consequences to stepping on cracks in a pavement, to seeing or crossing the path of a black cat, or any of the multitude of other superstitious practices. In the cold light of day we have to admit that there is no logic to such beliefs, but the more basic reality from our point of view is that they erode the actual and total belief and trust that we should have in God. If we are afraid of what might happen if we do, or don't do, something out of superstition, what we are saying, in effect, is that God is not in total control of his creation and of our lives.

The catechism also mentions the danger of religious practices becoming more a matter of superstition than of devotion. One example that comes to mind is when you see footballers run out on the pitch and touch the grass and make the sign of the cross presumably to ask God's blessing for a safe game – and yet why touch the grass, why not just make the sign of the cross? Has it got more to do with superstition than devotion? Still more of a question arises when players actually use some of the grass to bless themselves! Also some bless themselves three times – why three times? Again, is it superstition rather than devotion?

The catechism actually refers to external devotional actions becoming more important than our internal disposition. For example, the blessing of throats on the feast of St Blaise. Why are crossed candles used rather than a simple blessing? If there were no candles, would people still have faith in the blessing itself? Or why do so many people come to Mass on Ash Wednesday to receive

the ashes who don't ordinarily come to church on a regular basis? Are they somehow afraid of missing being anointed with ash even though they don't seem to mind missing Mass on other occasions? The catechism isn't criticising such practices, but what it is saying is that they should be an expression of interior spiritual devotion otherwise why we do them could have more to do with superstition – a fear of not doing them – and that superstition, in whatever form, has no place in our lives as people who should have faith and trust in God alone.

Another topic listed in the catechism as being contrary to the first commandment is *divination* (para's 2115-2117), which the dictionary defines as: “foretelling events or revealing occult knowledge by means of augury or alleged supernatural knowledge”.

God, it says, can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints. Still, a sound Christian attitude consists in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it. (para 2115) “All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to ‘unveil the future’. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history and, in the last analysis, other human beings. They contradict the honour, respect and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” (para 2116)

Only God knows the future and we are “playing at God” by trying to acquire that knowledge. If we trust in God and his providence then we don't need to know what might be going to happen to us. People may claim they only read their horoscope as a bit of fun, but why read it at all? Even if we don't take it seriously, there is a possibility that something of what we have read sticks in our mind and causes us to wonder and to look for its happening in the future. A seed is sown and there is no need for it, especially if we trust in God alone. (Worse is true of mediums and the use of tarot cards and Ouija boards<sup>1</sup> - which begins to move into the much darker and equally forbidden world of spiritualism and the occult.)

To repeat: “The first commandment embraces faith, hope and charity. When we say “God” we confess a constant, unchangeable being, always the same, faithful and just, without any evil. It follows that we must necessarily accept his words and have complete faith in him, and acknowledge his authority.” (para 2068)

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<sup>1</sup> which we also need to warn our children about as these are often just seen as games and are sold in toy shops and games shops.