

December 1, 2002  
Third Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The first commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall have no other gods in My stead" (Exodus 20:3), is not the "first" simply in the sense of being the earliest in the sequence. It is not as though the order within the Decalogue could be switched around, so that it might begin with the prohibition of murder, say, or the injunction of the Sabbath. This *lex prima* is not *prima inter pares*.

The first of the Ten Commandments is the first, rather, in the sense that it is the source and fountainhead of the other nine. The commandments are not equal, and the first is formally different from the others. Its priority, that is to say, is not just material but qualitative. Its "firstness" pertains to its essence, not merely its assigned place in the Decalogue's sequential disposition. It is not only first, but the first.

The first commandment of God's Law is first in a manner analogous to the way that the number "one" is the first of the numbers. "One" is not simply the numeral that precedes "two"; "one" is, rather, the number out of which, and by reason of which, that second number comes. "One" is the cause and necessary condition of "two" and all the subsequent numbers. "One" is logically one, then, before it is first. "One" becomes "first" only by the emergence of a second.

One (to hen) is the root and font determining the identity of two and the subsequent numbers. "One" is what we call a principle, an arche. The principle of something is that which confers its qualitative and identifying form. In this sense, there is a formal, and not merely material, disparity between the "one" and all other numbers.

Analogously, the first commandment of the Decalogue is the arche, the principle of the other commandments. Perhaps this truth will be clearer if we examine that commandment in its entirety: "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 in My stead."

Unlike the other commandments, this first commandment

commences with God's self-identification; only then does there follow the immediate prohibition against idolatry. Three things must be said about the auto-identification of God in this commandment.

First, it places the Ten Commandments firmly in the context of God's revelation. This needs to be asserted, I believe, because of a widespread idea that the Decalogue is simply an expression of Natural Law. It isn't. While it is true that there are a number of material equivalents between certain components of the Decalogue and certain dictates of Natural Law (those governing murder and theft, for instance), there is a formal difference between them. In the case of the Decalogue, each of the commandments is rooted in God's self-revelation within specific biblical history - Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are essentially revelatory. They are all extensions of "I am the Lord your God." This is why we call them the "Decalogue," or "ten words" (deka logoi). This Septuagint usage corresponds exactly to the Hebrew expression 'aseret haddevarim, which is common in the Old Testament (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:4).

Second, God's self-identification places the Decalogue entirely in the context of unmerited grace. He is not simply "the Lord your God," but the One who "brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The observance of the commandments is man's grateful response to the God who "first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The Ten Commandments, almost any time the Bible speaks of them, were "given" to Moses on Mount Sinai. Holy Scripture regards them entirely as gifts, component dimensions of God's redemptive grace and covenant.

Third, God's self-identification makes idolatry necessarily the first sin: "You shall have no other gods in My stead." All other sins are material extensions of idolatry. When men exchange "the truth of God for a lie," all other sins follow, because idolatry is the root cause of "all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness," and so on (Romans 1:18-32). It is always the case that those who worship demons do "not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Revelation 9:20-21).

©2002 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**

[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

**Pastoral Ponderings:**

[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)