QUESTION AND ANSWER

Why does the Catholic numbering of the Ten Commandments differ from that used by non-Catholics ?

In the Catholic version the first Commandment forbids the worship of other gods *and* the making of graven images ; in the non-Catholic version this prohibition of graven images is reckoned as the second Commandment. Both versions nevertheless retain the same number of Commandments and therefore the Catholic ninth and tenth commandments are combined into one in the other arrangement. This two-fold division existed as early as the third century, for Origen tells us that Philo made the prohibition of images a separate commandment, although the Palestinian Jews, as we know from the *Targum* of Pseudo-Jonathan, considered it as part of the prohibition against strange gods. It is therefore inexact to say, without qualification, that the Jews regarded them as separate. Calvin adopted the division of Philo and the Hellenist Jews and it has become the standard non-Catholic arrangement. It seems certain that the prohibition against the making of images is merely an expansion of the prohibition against the worship of other gods, for false gods were always the work of man's hands, things of clay or wood. Philo may have separated the two elements because he feared that the spiritual nature of Yahweh in contrast to false gods might not be fully appreciated. The division of the ninth and tenth is not so obvious since they are both prohibitions against coveting one's neighbour's property : according to Ex. xx.17 "Thy neighbour's house . . . thy neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is thy neighbour's". This would seem to be one commandment. In Deut. v.21 there is an inversion of the order : "Thy neighbour's wife . . . thy neighbour's house", etc., but the order hardly decides the question. Would the Israelite code admit a difference between desiring another man's wife and his property ? Though the wife was considered as the property of the husband we see that some distinction was made, from the fact that there are distinct prohibitions against adultery and theft, and we have reason therefore to suppose that the original number of ten was obtained by such a distinction. But the essential reason for so dividing the prohibitions against coveting is the teaching of Our Lord Who said, "Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart". (Mt. v.28).

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