

Sixth of the Ten Commandments

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Sixth Commandment is very short but very rich in meaning:
"Thou shalt not kill."**

Although of course we understand that this commandment forbids murder, we perhaps don't realize its fuller implications. You see, fundamentally, this commandment tells us that God, who is the giver of life, is the only One who should determine when a life ends. This is particularly important for us to understand in these days of confused and mixed up medical ethics, constant war, violence here at home, domestic violence, etc.

I will say more about "murder" in a moment, but first I want to show how this commandment means that suicide is not permitted, nor is euthanasia of any kind. As Orthodox Christians we are required to leave the dying process in the hands of God, who is Almighty, and Everywhere Present, and Knows All Things. These means that when a family member has begun the dying process we should be consulting with our parish priest about whether or not other medical procedures may be employed or withheld, and not leave this in the hands of medical personnel to decide or recommend for us. I point this out only because it appears that soon we may have in this country what some people are calling "death panels", and which others are downplaying. We won't know which is correct until it happens. Our spiritual father will help the family to discern whether we are merely unnecessarily prolonging a dying process by using what are called "heroic measures," or whether we are in fact actually *hastening* the dying process. Neither is acceptable, according to the theology and spiritual experience of the saints, which surrounds the Sixth Commandment. We may not do anything to hasten death, *nor* need we prolong the dying process. Leaving things in God's hands is always best, because God Himself knows what is best for us!

One of the issues a priest will look at when he comes to the bed of someone who is dying is whether or not this person has completed all of the spiritual work he or she needs to do and whether repentance has been completed so that the dying person is ready to face God and judgment. If these things have not yet happened or been completed, a priest may counsel prolonging life for yet a while, so that the spiritual well-being of the one who is dying can be taken care of.

But as we know, in our culture today we are obsessed with avoiding discomfort, pain, and suffering of any kind. We live for comfort, for ease. We will do *anything* to avoid suffering. We have accepted the secular view that suffering has no value whatsoever and must be eliminated at all cost. This is part of the legacy of ancient paganism, which is on the rise in Western culture. But the Scriptures, the Holy Fathers of the Church, and the lives of the saints, all tell us that the temporary sufferings of this life are often *allowed* by God for our own good, for our purification from sin, and in order to bring us closer to the One Who suffered ineffably for us on His cross of shame and pain. As another has explained, "The path



Entrance of the Theotokos
to the Temple

to Heaven is a narrow and thorny one. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus clearly illustrates the meaning of earthly sufferings. Abraham said to the rich man tormented in hell, *'Son remember that in your lifetime you received many good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things, but now he is comforted and you are tormented'* (Luke 16:19-31). [So] while enduring suffering, one must remember that God is exceedingly merciful. He will never allow one to suffer beyond his strength, and during the most difficult moments, He invariably strengthens and consoles the person who believes in Him."

Now, with regard to murder itself, there are actually three kinds: direct and indirect; and, as well, there is even something we call "spiritual murder." Let me say a few words about each of these. For example, we are guilty of the sin of murder when if we encourage or *allow* someone else to do it. I'm thinking of a case where someone doesn't come to the aid of his neighbor who is being attacked, even though he could help out; or when someone helps another commit murder by his advice or collaboration, or who condones and justifies a killing after the fact. In this respect, abortion is also a form of murder. Several Church laws impose severe penance on women who kill babies in their womb and on those who assist them in this, as well as on the husbands or fathers of the unborn child who connive in this terrible act.

We must always remember that the Gospel states unequivocally: *"Whosoever [even] hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him"* (1 John 3:15). *"Therefore, anyone who harbors feelings of hatred or anger, anyone who wishes evil to another person, slanders, quarrels, or by some other means displays his enmity towards others, violates the Sixth Commandment."* It seems to me, therefore, that at one time or another, and to one degree or another, we have all been murderers, genuine *killers*. As with so many things in the Old Law, our Savior takes the Commandment not to kill to a much higher level. He said that it isn't enough to avoid murdering someone in the flesh, but we must also avoid "spiritual murder", too; He said: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother is in danger of the judgment ... You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:21-40).

Yes, these are hard sayings, brothers and sisters. But as the Lord Himself clearly states, we ignore them at our peril, for if we do not obey, then we will not gain the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of Christianity completely ignores this hard saying, you know...

And, there is still *another* form of "spiritual murder": anyone who scandalizes and tempts someone away from their faith or from virtue is also guilty of murder, as surely as if he had shot that person with a gun! Here what Christ said about this: *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck ... Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to the*

*man by whom the offense comes" (Matthew 18:6-7)! These "little ones" are not just the children, but *all* of our brothers and sisters in Christ.*

As far as the Church's formal or official teaching and practice is concerned, however, killing in self-defense or in a just war is a lesser sin, *but* it should still be confessed, according to the Church Fathers. The Church in general also says that capital punishment is not a sin, for this belongs to the legitimate powers of Caesar to protect the society in which Christians live. Having said this, however, I should add that the Church has always left it up to the individual conscience of each believer as to whether or not to support capital punishment.

So this particular commandment forbids us to take someone's life *or* to spiritually kill another human being. At the same time, the theology surrounding this commandment instructs us to look at inevitable and coming death, whether our own or someone else's, with peace and calm. When an incurable illness brings someone right up to the threshold of death, it isn't necessary to use extreme and heroic measures to prolong his life for a few days or hours more, as I've already said. Rather, this is a tremendous opportunity provide spiritual help to the one who is dying, to enable repentance and reconciliation to be completed. This is also the philosophy of the hospice movement, as well as of the Church.

Finally, we must face the unpleasant and ugly truth that we live in a culture of death, where the harvest of unborn babies stands at more than 4,000 a day—that's one every minute or less--, and where both the very young and the very old are often overlooked, neglected, and unwanted by others; a culture in which waging unjust wars abroad has now become so commonplace that we no longer are particularly troubled by it, where our most popular forms of entertainment are either blood sports or blood films. We are now so desensitized and thick skinned that the Sixth Commandment effectively doesn't even seem to register on the radar screen culture any more. The question which we should ask ourselves today, as Orthodox Christians who claim to follow the Master, Jesus Christ, is whether this commandment registers on our own consciences and consciousness any more.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.