

On Oaths and Swearing

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Oaths With or Without Swearing

Professions of faith (such as the Apostles' Creed), pledges of allegiance, vows (such as vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience), and oaths of fidelity in marriage vows are examples of oaths. And men swear in order to affirm oaths, promises, threats, statements, or testimonies.

An oath can be taken with or without swearing. Catholics are allowed to take an oath for a just cause without swearing. And Catholics are allowed to take an oath for a just cause with swearing if they swear by God and not by anything else. For example,

- Oaths without swearing: "I vow to remain chaste until the day I die." Or "I promise to remain chaste until the day I die." Or "I vow to remain chaste until the day I die, so help me God," which is not swearing but asking God to help you remain chaste.
- Oaths with swearing: "I vow to remain chaste until the day I die, this I swear by God." Or "I swear by God that I vow to remain chaste until the day I die." Or "As God as my witness, I vow to remain chaste until the day I die."

Swearing To or By Something

Swearing *to* someone is not the same as swearing *by* someone or something. To swear to someone is to make a sworn oath or promise to someone but it does not mean that the one who swears is swearing *by* that person, the receiver of the oath. For example, to say "I swear to you, Joe, to pay you back" means you are swearing not by Joe but *to* Joe to pay him back. If you are Catholic, then your swearing redounds to God and thus you are swearing by God to Joe, as if to say "I swear by God to you, Joe, to pay you back." In the following passage God is swearing by Himself to King David:

“Lord, where are thy ancient mercies, according to what thou didst swear to David in thy truth?” (Ps. 88:50)

It cannot be said that God is swearing by David since David is not greater than God:

“For men swear by one greater than themselves, and an oath for confirmation is the end of all their controversy.” (Heb. 6:16)

In the following passage, Abraham’s servant swore *by* God *to* Abraham:

“Now Abraham was old and advanced in age, and the Lord had blessed him in all things. And he said to the elder servant of his house, who was ruler over all he had: Put thy hand under my thigh, that I may make thee swear by the Lord the God of heaven and earth that thou take not a wife for my son of the daughters of the Chanaanites, among whom I dwell... The servant therefore put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his lord and swore to him upon this word.” (Gen. 24:1-3, 9)

Hence when it is said that the servant “swore to him [Abraham],” it means that the sworn oath was made to Abraham but the servant swore “by the Lord the God of heaven and earth.”

And Rahab had the two Israelite spies swear to her by God:

“Now therefore swear ye to me by the Lord, that as I have shewn mercy to you, so you also will shew mercy to my father’s house.” (Jos. 2:12)

Hence when God’s chosen people swear to someone, even if they do not mention “by God,” they are swearing by God to the person. For example,

“Jacob said: Swear therefore to me. Esau swore to him, and sold his first birthright.” (Gen. 25:33)

God and His Chosen People Take Oaths and Swear

God and His chosen people take oaths and swear. Hence taking oaths and swearing are not intrinsically evil. However, according to my opinion, God’s chosen people are forbidden to swear by anything other than by God. Swearing by God includes swearing by the Bible or the Holy Eucharist because the Bible is the living Word of God and the Holy Eucharist is God Himself, Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine.

Some of the Church Fathers before the 5th century held the opinion that Christians are allowed to take oaths and swear by God but not by anything other than God, which is what I believe to be the correct opinion. Some held the opinion that Christians are allowed to take oaths and swear by creatures, things less than God, that are not intrinsically evil. And some held the opinion that Christians are not allowed to take oaths or swear at all. From the 5th century forward, the opinion that dominated was that Christians can take oaths and swear by God only. Because the Church Fathers are not unanimous regarding taking oaths and swearing, this dispute needs to be infallibly settled by an infallible papal decree, by the solemn magisterium. From the information I have, no such infallible decree exists, keeping in mind that there have been no popes since 1130 (from the time of apostate Antipope Innocent II). But I believe the evidence overwhelmingly defends the opinion that Catholics can take oaths and swear by God only and thus not by anything else. Hence what follows is my opinion, which was also held by some Church Fathers.

God swore by His own self

If all swearing were evil and thus sinful, then God sinned for swearing by His own self:

“By my own self have I sworn, saith the Lord: because thou hast done this thing and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake.” (Gen. 22:16)

“For God making promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom he might swear, swore by himself.” (Heb. 6:13)

“But if you will not hearken to these words: I swear by myself, saith the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.” (Jer. 22:5)

And if all swearing were evil and thus sinful, then God’s chosen people sinned when they swore by God. When God’s chosen people swear, they must only swear by God. If they swear by anything less than God, then they put that thing over God and make an idol of it.

During the Old Testament era God’s chosen people took oaths and swore by God

“At the same time Abimelech and Phicol, the general of his army, said to Abraham: God is with thee in all that thou dost. Swear therefore by God that thou wilt not hurt me, nor my posterity, nor my stock: but according to the kindness that I have done to thee, thou shalt do to me, and to the land wherein thou hast lived a stranger. And Abraham said: I will swear.” (Gen. 21:22-24)

“Now Abraham was old and advanced in age, and the Lord had blessed him in all things. And he said to the elder servant of his house, who was ruler over all he had: Put thy hand under my thigh, that I may make thee swear by the Lord the God of heaven and earth that thou take not a wife for my son of the daughters of the Chanaanites, among whom I dwell... The servant therefore put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his lord and swore to him upon this word.” (Gen. 24:1-3, 9)

“Take heed diligently lest thou forget the Lord, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God and shalt serve him only, and thou shalt swear by his name.” (Deut. 6:13)

Catholic Commentary on Deut. 6:13: “**Swear:** To swear by any other is to acknowledge him in some sort for a god.”

“If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return to me: if thou wilt take away thy stumblingblocks out of my sight, thou shalt not be moved. And thou shalt swear: As the Lord liveth, in truth and in judgment and in justice: and the Gentiles shall bless him and shall praise him.” (Jer. 4:1-2)

God’s chosen people must swear by God only. If they swear by something less than God that is not intrinsically evil, then they commit a fault or a venial sin. However, if they swear by a false god, false religion, or some other intrinsically evil thing, then they commit a mortal sin against the faith and are hypocrites:

“And I will stretch out my hand upon Juda and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and I will destroy out of this place the remnant of Baal and the names of the wardens of the temples with the priests, and them that worship the host of heaven upon the tops of houses, and them that adore and swear by the Lord and swear by Melchom.” (Soph. 1:4-5)

Catholic Commentary on Soph. 1:5: “**Swear by:** Those who join idols with God do not worship Him indeed. Swearing was an act of religion (Mt. 5:33) and God will

not allow His glory to be given to another, such as by swearing to anything but God. Such lame worship or divided hearts He rejects.”

During the New Testament era God’s chosen people take oaths and swear by God

Catholics, such as St. Paul, swear by God for just causes in order to affirm oaths, promises, threats, statements, or testimonies:

St. Paul: “Now the things which I write to you, behold, before God, I lie not.” (Gal. 1:20)

St. Paul: “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever, knoweth that I lie not.” (2 Cor. 11:31)

St. Paul: “For God is my witness, whom I serve in my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make a commemoration of you.” (Rom. 1:9)

Apostles and other Church Fathers: *Apostolic Constitutions*, 1st to 4th centuries: “Thou shalt not forswear thyself; for it is said, ‘Thou shalt not swear at all.’ (Mt. 5:34) But if that cannot be avoided, thou shalt swear truly; for ‘everyone that swears by Him shall be commended.’”¹

The Fourth Council of Carthage in 398 excommunicated Catholics who swore by creatures and thus not by God if they did not repent of their fault or venial sin:

Fourth Council of Carthage, 398: “Canon 61. Those of the clergy who swear by creatures must be most severely reprimanded. If they persist in the fault, they shall be excommunicated.”

However, if so-called Catholics swear by a false god, false religions, or some other intrinsically evil thing, then they commit a mortal sin against the faith and are automatically excommunicated.

Catholics who swear by God but swear falsely commit the mortal sin of lying and the mortal sin of sacrilege for dragging God into their lie:

Didascalia, 1st to 3rd centuries: “Thou shalt never swear falsely; but if thou swearest, swear truly.”²

Hence Catholics can swear but must swear by God and swear truly. Even though the following quote is invalid because Innocent III was an apostate antipope, it nevertheless teaches the opinion that Catholics can take oaths and swear:

Apostate Antipope Innocent III, *Eius Exemplo*, 1208: “Nor do We condemn an oath; on the contrary, we believe with a pure heart that with truth and judgment and justice it is permissible to swear.” (D. 420)

If Innocent III were a pope, then this decree would have been infallible because it is part of a profession of faith—the *Profession of Faith Prescribed for Durand of Osca and His Waldensian Companions*.

¹ b. 7, c. 3.

² c. 35, vii. 3.

“Swear Not At All,” in Context (Mt. 5:33-37, Ja. 5:12)

Therefore, however a Catholic interprets Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:33-37 and St. James’ words in James 5:12, he must not believe that taking oaths and swearing is intrinsically evil or that God and His chosen people never took oaths and swore. And, according to my opinion, these verses must not be interpreted to mean that Catholics cannot under any circumstances take oaths and swear³:

“Again you have heard that it was said to them of old, Thou shalt not forswear thyself: but thou shalt perform thy oaths to the Lord. But I say to you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God: Nor by the earth, for it is his footstool: nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king: Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your speech be yea, yea: no, no: and that which is over and above these is of evil.”
(Mt. 5:33-37)

“But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by any other oath. But let your speech be yea, yea: no, no: that you fall not under judgment.” (Ja. 5:12)

When Jesus says “not to swear at all,” He means by anything less than God. This is proved by what follows this statement in which He says that Catholics must not swear by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, or by their own heads, all of which are not God. By all of these things, Catholics must not swear at all. Isaias says that when God’s chosen people swear on earth, they are not to swear by the earth but by God:

“In which he that is blessed upon the earth, shall be blessed in God, amen: and he that sweareth in the earth, shall swear by God, amen.” (Isa. 65:16)

A Catholic who swears by anything less than God puts that thing over God and makes it an idol. An example of swearing by God and of swearing by something less than God is as follows:

- Oath with a good swear: “I swear by God that I vow to remain chaste until the day I die.” Or “I swear to remain chaste until the day I die.” God is implied in this case.
- Oath with a forbidden swear: “I swear by Abbot Benedict that I vow to remain chaste until the day I die.” Or “I swear by myself (by my head) to remain chaste until the day I die.”

When a Catholic swears by something less than God, that thing does not have the power and grace to make the Catholic keep his vow or to discover his hidden lies and hidden sins if he breaks the vow. For example, a Catholic who says “I swear by myself (by my head) to remain chaste until the day I die” does not have the power to make himself chaste and to keep himself chaste, only God does. That is why Jesus said, “Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.” (Mt. 5:36) How, then, can a Catholic, by himself and thus without God’s help, make himself chaste and remain chaste. It is as if Jesus said, “Do not swear by thy own self (thy own head) to remain chaste, for it is not within your power alone to be chaste

³ Some of the Church Fathers taught that God’s chosen people during the Old Testament era could take oaths and swear but not God’s chosen people (Catholics) under the New Testament era.

and remain chaste. For if I do not give you grace and other helps, you cannot be chaste or remain chaste.”

“And as I knew that I could not otherwise be continent, except God gave it, and this also was a point of wisdom, to know whose gift it was.” (Wis. 8:21)

For example, a Catholic who says “I swear by Abbot Benedict to remain chaste until the day I die” attributes to the abbot the power that only God has because the abbot does not have the power to make the Catholic chaste and to remain chaste. And he does not have the power to know if the Catholic broke his vow by committing a secret sin against chastity in his heart or by deed. But God does!

Therefore, Jesus teaches that when it comes to swearing by anything but God, do not swear at all but “Let your speech be yea, yea: no, no: and that which is over and above these is of evil.” St. James says the same thing:

“But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by any other oath. But let your speech be yea, yea: no, no: that you fall not under judgment.” (Ja. 5:12)

Note that St. James does not say that Catholics cannot take an oath but that they cannot take an oath in which they swear by heaven or earth; that is, by anything less than God. Catholics, then, do evil and thus commit a fault or a sin if they swear by anything less than God instead of just simply saying “yes” or “no.” Hence Catholics who take an oath and swear by heaven or by earth or by anything less than God fall under judgment and commit a fault or a sin. If they swear by a false god, false religion, or some other intrinsically evil thing, then they commit a mortal sin against the faith and are automatically excommunicated and thus no longer Catholic. If they swear by something that is less than God but is not intrinsically evil (such as swearing by themselves), then they commit a fault or a venial sin; and if they do not repent, then they are guilty of mortal sin and must be excommunicated:

Fourth Council of Carthage, 398: “Canon 61. Those of the clergy who swear by creatures must be most severely reprimanded. If they persist in the fault, they shall be excommunicated.”

Swearing, then, by God and not by creatures is good provided it is rare and the cause is just and serious:

Apostles and other Church Fathers: *Apostolic Constitutions*, 1st to 4th centuries:
“Thou shalt not forswear thyself; for it is said, ‘Thou shalt not swear at all.’ (Mt. 5:34) But if that cannot be avoided, thou shalt swear truly; for ‘everyone that swears by Him shall be commended.’”⁴

But swearing by God often, rashly, unjustly, falsely, or frivolously is evil and thus sinful:

“A man that sweareth much shall be filled with iniquity, and a scourge shall not depart from his house. And if he make it void, his sin shall be upon him; and if he dissemble it, he offendeth double. And if he swear in vain, he shall not be justified: for his house shall be filled with his punishment.” (Eccus. 23:12-14)

“Thou shalt not swear falsely by my name, nor profane the name of thy God. I am the Lord.” (Lev. 19:12)

⁴ b. 7, c. 3.

“And he said to me: This is the curse that goeth forth over the face of the earth...to the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name: and it shall remain in the midst of his house, and shall consume it, with the timber thereof and the stones thereof.” (Zach. 5:3-4)

“And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his friend; and love not a false oath, for all these are the things that I hate, saith the Lord.” (Zach. 8:17)

Didascalia, 1st to 3rd centuries: “Keep far from false swearing, wherein is no profit.”⁵

Apostles and other Church Fathers: *Apostolic Constitutions*, 1st to 4th centuries: “Thou shalt swear truly; for ‘everyone that swears by Him shall be commended.’”⁶

Matthew 23:16-22 on swearing, in context

In the following passage, it seems that Jesus allows His chosen people to swear by gold, the altar, the temple, and heaven, which He forbids in Matthew 5:33-37:

“Woe to you, blind guides, that say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but he that shall swear by the gold of the temple is a debtor. Ye foolish and blind; for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gift that is upon it, is a debtor. Ye blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? He therefore that sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things that are upon it: And whosoever shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth in it: And he that sweareth by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.” (Mt. 23:16-22)

Jesus is not condoning the Pharisees’ swearing by the gold, the altar, the temple, or heaven, as He forbids this in Matthew 5:33-37 and other places in the Bible in which He commands that His chosen people must only swear by Him and thus not by anything else. The point Jesus is making in this passage is to expose and condemn the hypocrisy, greed, and thievery of these Pharisees who held God’s chosen people bound to sworn oaths that enriched them but did not hold them bound to sworn oaths that did not enrich them, even if these sworn oaths were made by holier things, such as by the altar, the temple, or heaven as compared to gold.

The same applies to Jesus’ example about the steward who stole from his master in which Jesus commends the steward’s zeal but does not condone his sin. (Lk. 16:1-9) Jesus is shaming his chosen people by saying that evildoers are more diligent and zealous in doing evil than his chosen people are in doing good. Likewise, Jesus is not condoning the Pharisees’ swearing by these things that are less than God, which is a fault or a sin; rather, His intention is to expose and condemn the greed, thievery, and hypocrisy of these Pharisees:

Catholic Commentary on Mt. 23:16: “**Swear by the gold:** Avarice seems to have been the chief motive of the Pharisees in teaching this doctrine. To understand this obscure place, we may take notice that a good part of what was offered on the altar and given to the treasury of the temple fell to the share of the Jewish priests; and therefore it was not their interest to have such promises or oaths dispensed with. This made them teach the people that if anyone had made a promissory oath or vow to give their money or goods to the temple or to the altar itself, as it is said (ver. 18),

⁵ c. 9.

⁶ b. 7, c. 3.

such oaths or promises were not obligatory or might easily be dispensed with. But if anyone had sworn or vowed to give anything to the treasury of the temple, or join it to the offerings to be made on the altar, then such oaths and promises which turned to their profit were by all means to be kept.”

Even though these Pharisees committed a fault or a sin by swearing by these holy things, Jesus teaches that they were still bound to their sworn oaths, as these holy things redound to Him:

“And he that sweareth by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.” (Mt. 23:22)

Hence in context, even though they sinfully swore by heaven, they were still bound to the sworn oath because heaven redounds to God.

Oaths That Are Null and Void

Oaths in which men swear by a false god, false religion, or some other intrinsically evil thing are null and void. For example, if a pagan says “I swear by the goddess Vesta to remain a virgin,” this oath is null and void because it was sworn by a false goddess.

Oaths in which men promise to do something sinful are null and void. And if they swear by God in these oaths, they commit a mortal sin of sacrilege. For example, if a Catholic says “I swear by God that I will rape that girl,” the oath is null and void. And he commits a mortal sin of rape in his heart, a mortal sin for taking an oath to do so, and a mortal sin of sacrilege for swearing by God and thus attempting to drag God into his mortal sin.

However, good oaths in which men swear by things less than God that are not intrinsically evil are valid and hence must be kept, even though, according to my opinion, they commit a fault or venial sin because they did not swear by God.

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