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## Generational Responsibility

### *The Fifth Word*

“Honor your father and your mother . . .”

Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16<sup>1</sup>

Related texts: Mark 3:31–35; Luke 9:57–62 (Matthew 8:18–22)

#### EXODUS 20:12

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

#### DEUTERONOMY 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, *as the LORD your God commanded you*, so that your days may be long and *that it may go well with you* in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

### THEOLOGICAL COMMENTS

**L**IKE THE PREVIOUS COMMANDMENT this word is also given special prominence in the decalogue:

- Some commence the ethical part of the decalogue with this word,<sup>2</sup> while others see it as the last word of the first part.<sup>3</sup> For the latter speaks the fact that all the “words” so far specifically mention the “LORD.” On the other hand, honoring one’s parents is clearly an ethical exhortation.

1. In the texts the differences between the two versions are marked with italics.

2. For instance Schmidt, *Die Zehn Gebote*, 97.

3. For instance Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 313.

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- In contrast to the other commandments—except the second one—it contains a special promise: “that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”
- Together with the sabbath commandment, but in contrast to Exodus 21:15 and 17 (“Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death”; “whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death”), the fifth commandment is formulated positively. Thereby its meaning is intensified and widened. Not punishment but promise is the underlying melody. It is a good thing to honor father and mother.
- It deals with an issue that has a high profile in the Hebrew Bible. How should the older members of the family or clan be treated when they are no longer useful and productive?<sup>4</sup>

At issue therefore is care for the aged and the implied responsibility between the generations. The fate of old people has been a social challenge at all times. This was especially so in times of economic hardship. It was known in the ancient world that parents were driven away from home. They could be maltreated (cursed, beaten, robbed, oppressed) and they could certainly become a burden when they were no longer productive. Such antagonism need not be rooted in ill-will. We know of hard times in the ancient world when drought, poverty and war threatened the life of the tribal families. Parents had to sell their children into slavery and they themselves became serfs (Neh 5). When parents became old, it was expected that their sons would take care of them. But when there was no food to feed the children, it was understandable that animosity was turned against those who were no longer productive. Nevertheless, ethics starts at the point of pain! There comes the time when the dignity and freedom of the parents depended on the morality of the sons to provide shelter, food, clothing and a dignified funeral.

To “*honor*” is more than to “obey” or “love.” It includes the dimension of “respect,” “prize highly,” “glorify,” “exalt.” In Psalm 86:9 the same word is used for “honoring” God. Honoring transcends the emotional element of love. It includes the structural dimension of care, recognizing the contribution that parents have made in the generational chain. To honor implies

4. Relevant texts include the following: Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18–21; 27:16; Prov 1:8; 15:5; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22; 28:24; 30:11, 17; Ezek 22:7; Mic 7:6; Mal 1:6; Sir 3:1–16; and in the New Testament the so-called household codes: Eph 6:1–4; Col 3:20–21.

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the respect, the hard work, the self-discipline, the creativity to protect the dignity of parents until the end of their lives.

*“Your days may be long”*—not only refers to chronological length, but to the welfare of senior citizens in a society where God is honored.

As we think of its relevance for today, we need to be aware of the following issues:

1. It is difficult to relate this commandment to our situation. It was originally conceived for extended families and clans, while most of us live in nuclear families; and the nuclear family has fallen on hard times. On the one hand, human rights instruments proclaim the nuclear family as the basic unit of society, on the other hand the divorce rate and family violence are increasing. The nuclear family seems to be falling apart. The question remains however: what do we do with our “parents” when they can no longer produce and look after themselves?
2. In our response we need to distinguish between the personal-ethical level at which we show respect and compassion for our parents, and the social-ethical level at which a society needs to provide social security like pensions, aged care hostels, hospices and medical care for its senior citizens.
3. This word raises the whole question of authority and responsibility, which has become a real problem today. The commandment suggests that God’s covenant relationship with its reciprocal responsibility is echoed in the relationship between parents and children. But such reciprocal responsibility is questioned by many people today.
4. How can rights and responsibility be lived in a culture of freedom? Human rights emphasize the inherent dignity of people whose rights need to be protected against the arbitrary invasion of their privacy by authoritarian structures such as patriarchy, state and church. Nevertheless, freedom must also be protected against individualism and selfishness—“I want what I want, and I want it now.” It is important to understand that rights entail responsibility for the welfare of the whole group.
5. A controversial issue today is euthanasia. We feel a natural sympathy when people with incurable diseases, with enormous pain and with no apparent quality of life want to end their life. At the same time, the dignity of old people is at stake in a culture that is driven by social Darwinism, economic rationalism and a profit-oriented economy. In our society (and

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in our hearts, because it is very difficult not to internalize the ethos of our society) everything carries a dollar sign. We are defined not by who we are, but by what we can do and achieve and contribute. But what happens when we can no longer achieve and contribute? Having internalized the social Darwinism of our society, we often feel worthless. Whatever promises euthanasia may contain for old people, we must resist any and every attempt to make old people feel worthless and with such feeling driven towards ending their lives.

6. There is such a thing as generational selfishness. The ethos that we create will determine the context in which our children and grandchildren will live. A culture of freedom includes inter-generational generosity, compassion and care.
7. The quality of the moral ethos of a nation shows itself in how it treats its most vulnerable members.

### MESSAGE

#### *The Inter-generational Chain*

All of us have parents. Many have children. We live in the flow of time with those who have been before us and those who come after us. Five generations can be present at any one time. All want to live. All have rights. Can these generations relate to each other constructively? Can they be aware of each other and learn from each other? Does our responsibility include responsibility for generations yet to come? Or must we believe those who speak not only of the clash of civilizations but of generational warfare?<sup>5</sup> In most Western countries too few people are being born to maintain the population balance and to pay the pensions for their parents and grandparents. At the same time, these same populations are hesitant to integrate foreigners into their social and economic networks. Here a mix is brewing that can easily explode into social conflicts. In addition, the life of future generations is threatened by global warming. The film narrated by Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has in a methodical but dramatic way described what will happen if we don't find ways to deal with climate change.

5. The reference is to Huntington's influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Generational conflict is described in Schirrmacher's *Das Methusalem-Komplott*.

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The “fifth word” addresses a basic challenge of life. Just as the “fourth word” speaks to our existence in time, so the fifth commandment speaks to our existence in the chain of generations. Both our existence in time and our place in the ongoing human story belong to the basic facts of life. It is therefore not surprising that the Hebrew Bible links this word with the sabbath commandment and with God’s passion for freedom: “You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:3).

### *The Addressees*

In Ephesians 6:1–3 the commandment to “honor your father and your mother” is addressed to children. That is not the case in the decalogue. There it is addressed to adults, primarily to the man who is the head of the family. That may be disappointing to parents who often long for a bit of help as we enter the competition between the generations. What parent has not experienced the problem of authority? What parent would not enjoy the security of a given authority, installed by God, when they enter the struggle with their teenagers? Why should parents be worse off than bishops in the church, ministers of governments, and managers in business, who most of the time do not have to rest on their inherent personal authenticity, but who enjoy the privilege of a given authority that comes with the “office” they occupy? Parents often feel weak and frustrated and tired and helpless. Why should they not long for a little help from above or beyond?

The plea of parents is legitimate, of course. The breakdown of authority and the lack of respect for the elderly is certainly a major factor in the disintegration of our families and our society. Nevertheless, this commandment is not directed to children, but to adults. It is not part of a philosophy of bringing up children, but it addresses a social concern related to life, duty and respect for aging parents. Many parents have made an invaluable contribution to their immediate family and to society as a whole. I know parents in different cultures who have worked hard to provide for their family, who were there when their children fell ill or got in trouble with the law, who willingly made great sacrifices to provide for their children. But parents get old. What happens to them when they can no longer provide and produce? When leadership changes to dependency?

This issue has a personal-ethical and a social-ethical dimension. My children have a slogan on their window: “Be nice to your kids. They’ll

choose your nursing home.” On a personal level we honor our parents by respecting them as bearers of tradition. Every generation must face the challenges of life anew. But a generation that ignores the wisdom and errors, achievements and failures of its predecessors is ill-prepared to face the future. Would the revolutions of Germany’s youth in the 1960s and of America’s youth in the 1970s have happened if their parents had talked about their war experiences and the associated horror and guilt and doubts? There is a creative tension between the generations. It happens all too often that parents impose their own problems or failed ambitions on their children and thus rob them of their own experience with freedom and responsibility. As children respect their parents, so parents must also be willing to let their children go and find their own way. In that sense what we read in the Epistle to the Ephesians can be applied generally: “Children . . . ‘Honor your father and mother’ . . . And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:1–3).

Besides this personal dimension there is also a social-ethical dimension. Love and respect must also be addressed and applied to social structures in which people are protected when they grow old. Western societies are challenged to provide for their senior citizens by providing an adequate pension scheme, adequate medical care, senior citizen facilities, hospices, and a social ethos in which old people are not devalued in their dignity. We honor our mothers and fathers by allowing them to grow old with dignity and respect.

### “Ageism”

Ageism, like racism, sexism, and slavery, is an ugly word. But it describes a reality that will intensify in the years ahead. It means discrimination against old people—the parent generation. The actress Doris Roberts of *Everybody Loves Raymond* fame spoke in 2002 to the United States Senate Special Aging Committee: Image of Aging in Media and Marketing.<sup>6</sup> The following is an excerpt of what she said:

I’m in my seventies, at the peak of my career, at the height of my earned income and tax contribution. . . . Yet society considers me discard-able, my opinions irrelevant, my needs comical and my tastes not worth attention in the marketplace. My peers and I are

6. Doris Roberts, “Statement to US Senate.”

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portrayed as dependent, helpless, unproductive and demanding rather than deserving. . . . I'm here to urge you to address the devastation, cost and loss that we as a nation suffer because of age discrimination. . . . younger and younger actresses are visiting the plastic surgeon. Actresses in their twenties are getting Botox injections to prevent wrinkles from forming. Women start getting tummy tucks and facelifts in their thirties to forestall the day when the phone stops ringing. When a woman hits the age of forty Hollywood executives think she's too old.

Mr. Chairman, I address you today as a person young in spirit, full of life and energy and eager to stay engaged in the world and fight ageism, the last bastion of bigotry. Its no different from sexism, racism or religious discrimination. It is a tyranny that suppresses us all at any stage and serves no one. As my late husband the writer William Goyen said, when we see infirm people, handicapped or older people, turn away from them and we take away their light. Popular culture has taken away our light. I'm here to urge you to bring it back.

It is obvious. Old people have become a problem—at least in Western societies. On the one hand they remind us incessantly that we shall all have to die. There will be no exception. The culture tries to repress that fact by glorifying youth, beauty and glamour. On the other hand, old people have become a threat. We live longer and have fewer children. The demography is clear and brutal. The old/young ratio will increase more and more in favor of the old. There will be more and more old people. They are a burden on the health and social security systems. They take our hospital beds and we have to build more and more senior citizen homes, hostels and hospices.

Old people hear and see and feel all this and internalize it. They lose their self-esteem, their self-confidence, their identity and pride. Subconsciously they begin to feel guilty for being alive.

A culture of freedom will not discard or devalue old people. Rather it will seek for and find ways to appreciate and utilize their knowledge, wisdom and competence. One of my professors once told me that in academia there should be a rule that no one should publish anything before turning fifty years of age. Konrad Adenauer was 73 years of age when he became the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and he remained in that position until he was 87 years of age. Ian Paisley became the First Minister of Ireland at the age of 81. There are artists and poets who have produced their best work after the age of sixty or even seventy. There is no

reason for old people to hide. They are important players in a culture of freedom. They must assert their place, and a mature society will grant it to them. The commandment says not only to honor your father and mother, but it also contains the promise “that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

### *Euthanasia*

The above brings us directly to one of the most debated moral issues of our time, the problem of euthanasia. “Euthanasia” derives from the Greek and means “good death.” Originally it had the purpose of making the dying of a person as comfortable as possible. In our society the hospice movement, palliative care, and the use of modern technology and modern medicines allow most people to die with dignity, surrounded by care, and with as little pain as possible. In most countries it is permitted to decline unwanted medical treatment and refuse “being hooked up to machines.” With *active* euthanasia it is different. Active euthanasia (also called “mercy killing”) is the intentional termination of a person’s life to end their suffering. Many countries struggle with that issue. In Oregon (USA), the Netherlands, and Belgium active euthanasia is legal. Other countries, like Switzerland, experiment with a middle way whereby active euthanasia is forbidden while “assisted suicide” or “assisted death” is legal.

In an ideal world, many of us may like to have a doctor like Dr. Max Schur. Max Schur had become Sigmund Freud’s personal physician in 1929. Freud had cancer in his mouth and nose. When they met, Freud said to his doctor: “Promise me: when the time comes, you won’t let them torment me unnecessarily.” Schur promised, and they shook hands on it. The time came ten years later, shortly after Freud had moved from Vienna to London. An operation had weakened him. He was over 80 years of age. “Schur, you remember our ‘contract’ not to leave me in the lurch when the time comes. Now it is nothing but torture and makes no sense.” Freud asked Schur to “talk it over with Anna (his beloved daughter and carer), and if she thinks it’s right, then make an end of it.” Peter Gay in his Freud biography describes the final phase: “On September 21, Schur injected Freud with three centigrams of morphine—the normal dose for sedation was two centigrams—and Freud sank into a peaceful sleep. Schur repeated the injection, when he became restless, and administered a final one the next day,



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September 22. Freud lapsed into a coma from which he did not awake. He died at three in the morning, September 23, 1939.”<sup>7</sup>

But we don’t live in an ideal world. It is distasteful but true that materialism, consumerism, and greed can lower the moral barrier, especially when people may profit from the early death of a person. In a culture that tends to evaluate people by their ability to produce and consume, old and sick people often feel sidelined. If you add rising hospital costs, lack of sufficient hospital beds and aged care places, then old people readily feel that they are no longer of use to society and therefore are no longer worthy and wanted.

A society that rewards achievement and glorifies youth and health needs to be extra-sensitive toward old people. They have made their contribution, and now they must be made to feel that they can sit back with a good conscience. My primary reason for opposing euthanasia is the suspicion that in our success-oriented culture, with our pension funds running dry, and with the claim that the present working generation can no longer shoulder the needs of the previous generation, an ethos is wide-spread in which older people are made to feel superfluous and expendable—and when the older people themselves internalize that thinking, then euthanasia may become an attractive option.

What needs to be done, however, is to improve palliative care. Given the fact that we all have to die, we now have the know-how to make death, at least the physical side of it, relatively comfortable. It belongs among my most sacred moments to sit with my mother during the last few days and hours and minutes of her life. Holding the hand of a woman who had lived a hard but meaningful life, who had finished the course and was now ready to go, was a great and rare privilege.

### *The Family*

Although the family is not addressed as such in this commandment, it provides the background for generational responsibility and is an invaluable institution in a culture of freedom. *The International Bill of Human Rights* recognizes the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society” which “is entitled to protection by society and the State.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless,

7. Cited from Gay, *Freud*, 629–51.

8. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, §16:3; *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, §10; *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, §23.

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in many countries the institution of the family has fallen on hard times. Divorce rates are rising. Family violence, even child-abuse is not uncommon. Many teenagers in their most formative years do not experience the family as a safe space. But despite these negatives the family is an important institution for a culture of freedom. At best, the family is the space where unconditional love and trust is experienced, selfless sacrifice is practiced and where people accept responsibility for each other. This provides the context in which maturing children experience meaning, discipline and freedom.

Families are different in different cultures, and the institution is subject to constant change. In many countries the man is no longer the patriarch who provides income and security, while his wife manages the affairs at home. Children no longer blindly obey their parents. Hierarchy is being replaced by partnership. Women have become an important part of the work force, men are learning to accept responsibility at home, and children are protected “from economic and social exploitation.”<sup>9</sup> Yet despite all the changes, the family remains the irreplaceable environment for children and their growth to maturity. So far no alternative has evolved. In a functioning family children acquire a basic trust and confidence that will be the foundation for a meaningful and successful life.

But great challenges remain. Men and women find it exceedingly difficult to be successful both at home and in their profession. Women who thrive and succeed in the professional world often discover too late that they really wanted to have the experience of motherhood. A growing individualism, increasing material expectation and a basic mistrust of intimate and lasting relationships continue to challenge functioning and successful family life. But the fact remains that so far we have not developed a better institution in which love can be guarded and in which children can be introduced to a culture of freedom.

### *Responsible Freedom*

Being woven into the chain of generations, we realize that there is not only a selfishness of individuals. There is also a selfishness of generations. If our generation brutalizes people and nature, will our children and grandchildren not have to curse us? We have heard of the German children who criticized their fathers who fought in World War II. We have heard of the

9. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, §10:3.

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American sons and daughters who could not understand how Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Vietnam could have happened. We have heard the cries and seen the scars of the children of Chernobyl.

I would like to quote here from a significant book of our time. Hans Jonas, in *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, reformulates Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative for our time:

“Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life,” or expressed negatively: “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive for the future possibility of such life,” or simply: “Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth,” or, again turned positive: “In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will.”<sup>10</sup>

“Honoring” our mother and father protests against the selfishness of a generation. Life is more than share-value and possessing the latest gadgets. It includes respect for the wisdom of the elders. Even if our fathers and mothers have not been the best, we are still called to occupy our place in the ongoing process of human life. The verb “to honor” therefore suggests we responsibly use the freedom that God has given to us. It does not say that we are “to obey our parents unquestioningly” or that we are “to fear” or even “to worship” our parents. We are to give them the respect arising from the fact that without them we would not be here, and we are now responsible for the quality of life that we pass on to the next generation.

### *A “Disobedient” Son*

The Jesus story includes episodes of being disobedient to his parents and of a seemingly harsh disregard for his natural family. In apparent indifference to his human mother and brothers Jesus said: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3:31–35). He forbade a potential follower to fulfill his human duty of laying his father to rest (Luke 9:59–60), and he said such strong words as: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Can such stark pronouncements be inter-related with the word to honor father and mother, and how can we relate these demands to our faith in Jesus?

10. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 11.

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The Gospel of Luke (2:41–51) tells the story of his parents taking Jesus on a long journey to the Passover feast in Jerusalem. They traveled in a larger group, and they remained some days in Jerusalem before they commenced their return journey home. Suddenly, the parents miss Jesus. But they suspect that he is with friends and relatives and will probably turn up when they take up camp for the night. But he did not turn up. They had to return to Jerusalem and seek him. “After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). “Son,” his mother laments, “why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety” (Luke 2:48). But Jesus speaks about another parent, another authority in his life: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” They did not understand his reply, but “his mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51).

This story illustrates a fundamental problem in the chain of generations. The young Jesus does not simply adopt the faith of his parents, and he does not use the word “God” to justify established customs, norms and values. He wants to find out for himself what “God” means. He goes to the center of his religion, the temple. And there he discovers that faith in God can entail a struggle with established tradition. To really honor mother and father may in certain situations mean not to fulfill their wishes and expectations. Honoring one’s parents is therefore also a challenge to the parents. When children are young they need to learn and obey certain rules. They need to learn not to run on to a busy street, not to play with matches, and not to ill treat cats and dogs and birds. But such rules are transitions to maturity. As children become mature, parents must allow them to discover and exercise their own freedom and discipline.

Jesus had heard the story of faith from his parents, but now, as he is becoming an adult, the story gains its own momentum. Every person must accept responsibility for what he or she has heard and understood. Jesus honors his father and mother by letting their story rule his life, even when they don’t understand. He honors them, against their understanding, by letting God be God in his life. The “fifth word” does not cancel the first and second commandment but implements them as they relate to our place in the flux of generations.

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On the surface Jesus disobeyed his parents. But in a deeper sense he was true to what he had learned from them. How often would he have heard from his parents that God incites ultimate commitment?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD *alone*. You shall love the LORD your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. *Recite them to your children* and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9, emphases mine)

Jesus lived in a patriarchal world with clear delineations of authority and power. Into that world, dominated by hierarchy and power, Jesus opens up a new vision by introducing the value of familial responsibility among the generations. Not hierarchy, but partnership among adults in a community of equals. The authority of the parent is not absolute. There comes the time when sons and daughters become adults themselves and as such must accept responsibility for their own lives. For the believer this responsibility includes the distinction between loyalty to God and respect for one's parents. There need not be a conflict. But if there is a conflict then the adult son and daughter may in good conscience disagree with their parents. How many parents have spoken of God and God's ways at home, but when their children took them at their word, they were puzzled, or even turned away in disappointment and anger.

This inter-generational tension stands behind Jesus' stark critique of cultural norms. When a potential follower wanted to fulfill his national, social and religious duty toward his parents first—"Lord, first let me go and bury my father"—Jesus replied: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:59–60; Matt 8:21–22). Also the strong words in Luke 14:26 come to mind: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." These saying do not mean that Jesus intentionally disrespects families and family customs. They want to emphasize that there is a difference between obedience to God and family loyalty, between ultimate and penultimate commitments.<sup>11</sup> Jesus

11. See the discussion of ultimate and penultimate commitments in ch. 3.

questions the ultimate authority of the patriarch. There are limits, even to the authority of parents. There comes the time in each parent's life where they must "let their children go" and trust that they will now shape their own life in personal responsibility.

This commandment promises that if we follow the call of God in our lives, then we shall "live long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you." In that sense Jesus is the model son because he obeys God. And his mother is the model parent because although she does not quite understand, she remains open to the mysterious ways of God in her life and in the life of her son.

### *Conclusion*

We live in a broken world. Parents and children are often at war with each other; child abuse is the order of the day; parents die as forgotten people; the traditional family does not seem to work, and yet there are no promising alternatives; authority structures are eroding. Perhaps the word to "honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you" can remind us that a living faith in God and respect and care for each other carries within itself the promise of the surprise and blessing of God.

Let not our freedom degenerate into individualism and selfishness. Let us, ever again, turn to Jesus Christ in faith and let that faith nourish our freedom. Then the promise at the end of the Hebrew Bible will be fulfilled: God "will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents" (Mal 4:6).