

SWEAR TO GOD

THE PROMISE AND POWER OF THE SACRAMENTS



SCOTT HAHN

Author of LORD, HAVE MERCY and THE LAMB'S SUPPER

Taking God at His Word

To understand the oaths of our ancestors, we need to unlearn the common usage of the word today. Modern people tend to treat the words "oath," "vow," and "promise" as virtually synonymous. They're not.

When I make a promise, I give my word, my name, my signature. People sometimes seal promises with the phrase "on my honor," meaning that they offer their own reputation as surety; they risk their own standing in the community. If they prove to be lying or derelict in their duty, their name is devalued, and perhaps their family's name, as well.

A vow is more weighty than an ordinary promise, because it is a promise made directly to God. When we make a vow, we give *God* our word.

When people swear an oath, however, they place much more at stake. An oath is "the invocation of *God's name* as a witness to truth" (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 1199.1). An oath is based upon a promise; but people who swear an oath seal their promise with the words "by God," or "in God's name," "so help me, God," or something similar. When God's name is used in an oath, He becomes an active partner in the transaction. Those who swear place not their own honor at risk, but God's honor. The *Catechism* puts it well: "When it is truthful and legitimate, an oath highlights the relationship of human speech with

SCOTT HAHN

God's truth. A false oath calls on God to be witness to a lie" (CCC, n. 2151).

To swear falsely is to commit a most serious sin, and to do it, explicitly, in God's name. False oaths trigger the most dire consequences. Even in secular legal systems, perjury under oath is punished severely. God is no less exacting. We read in the prophet Ezekiel: "Because he despised the oath and broke the covenant, . . . he shall not escape. Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely My oath which he despised, and My covenant which he broke, I will requite upon his head" (Ezek 17:18–19).

This manner of judgment is built into the ancient understanding of oaths. For our ancestors, every oath carried both blessings and curses—blessings upon the fulfillment of the oath, but curses if it were broken. God made this clear in the classic formulation of His covenant with Israel: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to Him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers" (Dt 30:19–20).

Whoever takes up this covenant must take the oath, its form, its terms, and its consequences. Here God plainly states both the blessings and the curses.

Not always, however, were the ancient oaths made verbally explicit. Sometimes the oath and its consequences

were symbolized by a wordless, physical sign, an *oath-in-action*, as when Israelites circumcised their sons.

A Cut of the Action

The act of sacrifice could mean many things to the people we meet in the Bible. It was a recognition of God's sovereignty over creation: "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1). Man acknowledged this fact by giving back to God what is ultimately His.

A sacrifice could also be an act of thanksgiving. Creation is given to man as a gift, but what return can man make to God (see Ps 116:12)? We can only give back what we ourselves have received.

Sacrifice could also serve as an outward sign of sorrow for one's sins. The person offering sacrifice recognized that his sins deserved death; he offered the animal's life in place of his own.

But, most important, sacrifice signified the sealing of a covenant. The Lord said: "Gather to Me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with Me by sacrifice" (Ps 50:5).

When offered in the context of a covenant oath, a sacrifice implied something truly ominous. Consider Abraham's sacrifice to God in Genesis 15. God tells Abraham, "Bring Me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (v. 9). Abraham obeys and brings the animals forward; then, without a word of explanation, he proceeds to