

Is taking the Lord's Name in vain still a big deal?

Well, that depends. Is God still a big deal? If He isn't, then don't worry about it, but if He is, then there is a certain degree of reverence that we owe Him. But this can be a really foreign concept for us for at least two reasons. As a culture, we have lost our natural sense of reverence in general, and a sense of reverence for God's Name in particular. We tend to honor people the less reverent they can be. You have most likely heard of comedies or comedians described as "irreverently funny". I have had many conversations with people who were intent on convincing me that some joke making fun of Christ or the Catholic Church was actually "really funny", and I would realize it if only I wasn't so uptight (Ha! Me? Uptight?). It seems that the more something is revered, the greater the reward for making fun of it. [Maybe this is an American thing. Maybe it comes from our national identity as people who are "beholden to no one". I don't know. All I know is that we don't know what real reverence is. We either think it is "stick-in-the-mud-ness" or we think of people who would take it upon themselves to blow someone up for an irreverent remark (or cartoon). But reverence is simply realizing that there are greater things than me. It is realizing that the higher things aren't meant for you and I to be looked down upon, but to make us look up and see what is really there.]

We have also lost the sense of the power of God's Name. And not just the "power", but the fact that God's Name is sacred. I want to state that again: God's Name is sacred. Try this: imagine that you are God and you are going to reveal to people the things they need to do and the things they need to avoid in order to live really well. Only you limit yourself to ten things (we'll call them "commandments"). What would they be? Clearly, they would be pretty important. Don't kill. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. "You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain." Huh? How does that fit?

Try again. Imagine you are God (still) and you are going to teach your disciples how to pray. Fast forward to the second line, "Hallowed be thy name". It is right up there again! Maybe we should pay attention to that. The Catechism talks about the ways in which we can take the Lord's name in vain. This includes both false oaths and oaths made lightly, perjury, magical use of the divine name, and blasphemy.

Blasphemy?! People still use that word? Yup. Basically, blasphemy is "uttering against God - inwardly or outwardly - words of hatred, reproach, or defiance; in speaking ill of God; in failing in respect toward him in one's speech; in misusing God's name. ... The prohibition of blasphemy extends to language against Christ's Church, the saints, and sacred things." (CCC 2148). It is also blasphemy to do evil using God or religion as one's rationale.

I want to focus in on something important here. It is something that a person can hear virtually everywhere we go. When we are talking about the "Lord's Name", we are dealing directly with the names God has revealed as His very own "personal" names. This refer most clearly to the sacred YHWH and the holy Name of Jesus Christ. But blasphemy also includes "speaking ill of God" and "language against...sacred things".

What about common phrases we hear all the time like, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph”, or “Oh my G-d”? This means that the phrase we hear so often, “Oh my G-d” is blasphemy as well. Did we catch that? Not only is damning someone in God’s name blasphemous, but so is the common “Oh my G-d”.

The Catechism goes on to say that “Blasphemy is contrary to the respect due God and his holy name. It is in itself a grave sin” (CCC 2148). Remember how serious grave sin is? That means that if I know this is grave and I freely choose to do it, this is at the level where it can kill the life of grace in my soul. Kind of a big deal!

If a person finds that they have made this sin a regular part of their everyday speech they may get discouraged because they will be running to Confession every time they stub their toe, get nervous, are exasperated, or win the lottery. For this kind of person, OMG is still objectively wrong, but it may not necessarily be a mortal sin (but start fighting it, man!) If you are honestly trying to root this grave evil out of your speech, it will happen through God’s grace. In the meantime, don’t give up. God loves you...that’s why He told you His Name: “God confides his name to those who believe in him; he reveals himself to them in his personal mystery. The gift of a name belongs to the order of trust and intimacy. “The Lord’s name is holy.” For this reason man must not abuse it. He must keep it in mind in silent, loving adoration. He will not introduce it into his own speech except to bless, praise, and glorify it.”