Driving can be an exercise in devotion

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CENTER VALLEY - Patriotic parades, flags unfurled, fireworks lighting up the night sky - with many means we celebrate the Fourth of July. But nothing signals independence like an open-top sports car tooling along the highway. Though ordinarily a routine event, getting behind the wheel and going somewhere may be the most common and prevalent form of exercising our freedom.

Last month the Vatican issued “Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Road,” which included a list of ten commandments for drivers. Most reactions included a hearty chuckle; with this news, cartoonists and satirists had fresh fodder for their commentaries. The thought that the Church would pontificate about how we should drive seemed incongruous, a strange juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular. And, as anyone who has lived in Rome knows, there’s really only one rule: whoever hits the horn first has the right of way!

Yet the phenomenon being addressed gives us pause for reflection, particularly as we celebrate our independence. Freedom exercised in the movement of peoples within and between countries represents a growing global concern and, thus, something of interest and importance for the Church. At issue is not cars or trains (the document says nothing of air travel), but the fact of human mobility and its significance for people along the way. (Other chapters in the text address the problems of those whose lives are connected with the streets: prostitutes, abandoned children, and the homeless.) What the Church seeks to affirm is that “travel is not only a physical change of place; it also possesses a spiritual dimension, that is, a relationality among persons.”

Consider that in the USA, 200 million people are licensed to drive. On the 5.7 million miles of paved roads that crisscross our national landscape, about 7 million accidents occur on a yearly basis, involving some 3.5 million injuries. In 2005 alone, more than 43,440 persons suffered roadway fatalities (the equivalent of 7 percent of the current population of the Lehigh Valley). No wonder, then, that the first of the
so-called commandments is “you shall not kill” and the last states that we should “feel responsible toward others.”

Beyond the staggering statistics, however, the Church’s teaching attunes us to a reality to which we are accustomed but about which we do not give much consideration. The sheer amount of time we spend in a car renders this activity a significant element of our adult lives. As such, driving serves as an influential context for our growth as persons and for integrating ourselves into society.

With so much of our lives lived “on the road,” opportunities abound for virtue and for vice, between which the path to maturity is trod. Actions along the way mold our lives, for better or worse. There we can practice socialization, sometimes positively, in the cordial communications among passengers, and sometimes negatively, in the raging reactions with which we greet those who cut us off. There, when things go awry and accidents happen, we can develop habits of prudence and courtesy, or we can become increasingly impatient and ill-tempered. There, too, we can enjoy the experience of divinely created beauty all around us, though drivers should remember to keep their eyes on the road.

This kind of teaching reflects a significant understanding of how faith and culture interact. Admittedly, church parking lots can, themselves, be the site of driving debacles necessitating the practice of charity! But promoting a link between spirituality and our common means of mobility is just another way of saying that faith can and should have an impact in every area of our lives. Rather than separate religion and the rest of life, this new teaching seeks to connect them. As St. Francis de Sales once taught, all people have the ability to become holy - to be “devout” in his French terminology” - by “doing the ordinary things extraordinarily well” for love of God.

Though new in form, the “commandments” for drivers need not be dismissed as additional laws imposed by an authoritarian church. They simply adapt what should be good, common sense for all persons seeking to coexist and thrive in today’s highly mobile society. Besides, our world has enough trouble keeping to the original Ten.

A pioneering spirit has always suffused our national independence. In the twenty-first century, vehicular technology makes this freedom even easier to realize, with new sights (video screens), new sounds (satellite radio), and new directions (GPS navigation). Now we have sensible guidelines to aid all of us who travel along the road toward a more humane life.