

SUNDAY: LENT III - B

John Paul II Pastoral Centre

3 March 2018

Dear Deacon Hilmar, Sister John Mary, and brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

Before commenting on the First Reading, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Deacon Hilmar Pabel and Sister John Mary for organizing this Lenten Day of Reflection on “Interior Freedom: Our Desire, Our Need.” I am sure that you have learned a lot today and that you are going home with a fresh appreciation of what is entailed in being a disciple of Jesus.

And I especially wish to commend the superb work being accomplished, albeit very gently, by the ministries of Courage and Encourage which Deacon Hilmar is guiding. These ministries are essential ones in the life of our Church, and I am grateful to all of you for your participation.

Today’s First Reading, which tells of the giving of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments to Moses in the covenant relationship God established with the People of Israel, gives us the occasion to look at the role of God’s law in our Christian life. The Commandments express God’s covenantal love for us, first shown in creation, revealed here on Sinai and fulfilled by the blood of Christ.

Do we think of God’s “law” the way we do civil law? Is God like a policeman ready to trap us for our violations and then punish us? Are God’s laws only like traffic signs – their being red or green is

totally arbitrary? Some people do think that God's laws come merely from his will – as if God could have decided that adultery, theft or taking human life were “ok.”

On the contrary, the Ten Commandments are clear that expressions of the “natural moral law”; that is, that law bestowed on every person created in the “image and likeness” of God. The Decalogue is a reinforces the expression of the law “written in our hearts” from creation. That is why Decalogue goes beyond Judeo-Christian tradition and forms part of the moral discourse of all humanity: “From the beginning, God rooted the principles of the natural law in the human heart. It was enough for him to recall them. This he did in the Decalogue” (Irenaeus, Adv H, 4.5.1).

But other questions also arise. For those who live in the Spirit and in the freedom of God why is law still around? Just to test us? Above all, since our God has revealed himself as the God of love, how does that mesh with Jesus' insistence that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (cf. Mt 5:17)?

Primacy of Christ as Saviour

Right at the outset, it is necessary to recall that Jesus is primarily our Redeemer and Saviour, and only secondarily a moral teacher: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that those who believe in him may not perish, but may have life everlasting” (Jn 3:16). Let's never forget this.

The Christian life, therefore, is not primarily the following of a moral code, but living as “adopted sons and daughters” (Gal 4:6-7) of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit. As Pope Benedict once reminded us on this score: “Christianity is not a type of moralism, simply a system of ethics. It . . . is first and foremost a gift: God gives himself to us – he does not give something, but himself.”¹

To all those who think that Christianity is simply a collection of commandments and prohibitions, we must say loudly and clearly, “you are wrong; you’ve missed the point.” We need to free ourselves – and perhaps those around us – from the widespread mistaken view that Christianity, with its commandments, whether from the Decalogue as in today’s Reading or from the Sermon on the Mount, sets too many obstacles on the path to a happy life. On the contrary, Christian faith and its ethics do not stifle us but make us truly free.

But how we live out who we have become by Baptism— “children of God” – is also crucial if we are to be faithful disciples. Remember what Jesus once told the rich young man: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17).

Law as a Gift of God’s Love

But how are they to be understood today?

¹ Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass of the Lord’s Supper (20 March 2008).

The Pharisees at the time considered the Mosaic Law to be the summary of all wisdom, a complete and sure guide of right conduct, an assurance of having a right relationship with God. Just follow them, and all will be well!

This value attributed to following the Law is precisely what Jesus did *not* accept, as is evident from his own non-observance of the Sabbath rules and those surrounding ritual cleanliness. Yet, he asserts that he did not want to annul that Law with its Commandments but bring it to final perfection.

What, then, in light of Christ, do the Ten Commandments demand of us? They are, we can say, not a series of “noes” but a great “yes” to love and to life. The Decalogue is meant to clarify the commandment of love: to love, as Jesus loved us (cf. Jn 13:34): unconditionally, sacrificially, obediently. They are the rules of love; they indicate the way of love; and “they explain how really to love and how to find the right route.”²

Observance of the Commandments is essential to our spiritual well-being if we are to live in love, to distinguish clearly between good and evil, and to build a life plan that is solid and enduring. That’s why it is so important to know the Commandments, since they are the foundation of a conscience formed according to God’s law,

² Benedict XVI, Address to the Youth of Rome and Lazio (25 March 2010).

and not according to mere personal whim or social pressures.

Needless to say, the very idea of “commandments” that are rooted in God – who knows what is good for us and what will bring us happiness and fulfillment – goes against the grain of many. Today’s world commonly advocates a freedom detached from objective norms, and encourages people to refuse to place limits on their immediate desires.

But this is not the way to true freedom. It leads people to become enslaved to themselves, and to idols like power, money and unbridled pleasure. It stifles their inborn vocation to love.

God gives us the commandments because he wants to teach us true freedom. He knows that this is the way to establish peace and harmony among peoples, to build a world of justice and fraternity, to experience the gift of true interior freedom. When we put the commandments into practice, we find the way to freedom and authentic love. The commandments do not place limits on happiness, but rather show us how to find it.³

The commandments teach us that there are some specific norms which have universal applicability: for example, “never directly kill the innocent” or “never commit adultery.” These commands are always binding on everyone and admit no “reason” for ever violating

³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Message on the Occasion of the 25th World Youth Day (28 March 2010), 6.

them. Certain actions are intrinsically evil and thus can never be permitted.

It's so important to understand that God's commands are not arbitrary traffic rules, which are one way today and can be changed tomorrow. Rather, they guide us to make the right choices, the choices that are truly good for us since their fulfillment leads us to freedom and happiness.

The Ten Commandments direct our lives to fulfillment. I do not create my own morality apart from God; it is not something we make up as we go along. Unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we do not decide that which is good or evil but we receive and discover this in the depths of a conscience formed in light of the teaching of Jesus and how that teaching has been conveyed in the community of faith down through the ages.

“Living one's personal faith as a love-relationship with Christ also means being ready to renounce everything that constitutes a denial of his love. That is why Jesus said to the Apostles: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments (Jn 14:15). But what are Christ's commandments? . . . Jesus showed us with a new clarity the unifying centre of the divine laws revealed on Sinai, namely love of God and love of neighbour: ‘To love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's

neighbour as oneself' (Mk 12:33).”⁴

Conclusion

The Ten Commandments and the Church's moral teaching are liberating gifts. Though admittedly they are sometimes difficult to fulfill, they do not come to us from the outside, as rules arbitrarily imposed by an implacable divine will, but as markers that directs our path on the way of what is most truly human, of what will authentically fulfill us and give us a share in the “fullness of life” that Jesus came to bring (cf. Jn 10:10).

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⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily, Warsaw (26 May 2006).