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Teaching the F A I T H

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The Two Greatest Commandments

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January 27, 2019 – Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Nehemiah 8.2-4a, 5-6, 8-10;
1 Corinthians 12.12-30; Luke 1. 1-4, 4.14-21

The readings today beautifully remind us of the two great commandments – to love God and to love our neighbor.

First, of course, we must never forget that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, the Logos of John’s Gospel. But why was it necessary for the Word to become incarnate, to dwell among us? Because people’s hearts were so hardened that their eyes could not see, nor their ears hear, God’s word as it was proclaimed in the Old Testament.

The Law and Salvation

Because of original sin, the people of the Old Testament were unable to follow the Lord faithfully. They needed the written word – the Law – so that they could properly align their actions with it. The Law served the people, in a sense, as it offered a clear path to salvation.

Thus, in the first reading, we find Ezra proclaiming the Law to the people of Israel after they had returned from captivity in Babylon. The people had a deep love and reverence for God, but they knew they were too weak to follow God on their own; they needed help. The Law was the help they needed. It told them how to live. When they heard the words of the Law read aloud by Ezra, they wept for their sinfulness as they realized their own failure to follow it, their failure to live as God wished them to live.

But Ezra would not let them weep. The fact that God loved them enough to give them the Law was a cause for great rejoicing: “Do not be sad. Do not weep. Go, eat rich food and drink sweet drinks.”

Likewise, the psalm today proclaims: “The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul; the decree of the Lord is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple.” The faithful people receive all they need from the Lord: listen, learn, and live.

But Ezra reminds the people also, amidst their own rejoicing, to “allot portions for those who have nothing.” In other words, while we worship the Lord, the first commandment, we must also remember our neighbor, the second.

The Unity of the Body of Christ

This insight is deepened in the reading from Corinthians, which beautifully develops the metaphor of the body to illustrate the unity of all the baptized:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized in one body. . . . If one part suffers, all parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share the joy. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.

So all believers, while retaining their individual identities, together comprise the body of Christ here on earth. As parts of the body, believers are not jealous of one another – imagine how odd and disordered it would be for the hand to be “jealous” of the eye, or the foot of the heart! It would be nonsensical. Likewise, an inner harmony unites the faithful.

But notice that this harmony necessitates that “if one part suffers, all parts suffer.” The hand cannot be indifferent, so to speak, to the fate of the foot. Just so, a Christian cannot be indifferent to the fate of other Christians.

Sadly, this has often not been the case. American Christians have often been indifferent, perhaps through ignorance, to the fate of persecuted Christians around the globe. Hopefully, events like the [*Night of Witness*](#), a vespers liturgy for martyrs that was observed last November 28, will help us all to see that when “one part suffers, all parts suffer.”

Our obligations extend not just to Christians, of course, but to all people, even those not part of the body. In his first encyclical, *Redemptoris missio*, Pope Saint John Paul II spoke of the importance of “human rights” and of the international documents intended to recognize and secure them.

By human rights, John Paul II did not mean the fashions of the age, or anyone’s politically correct “wish list.” Rather, he meant those rights rooted in the inviolable dignity of the human person. Recognition of this dignity is essential to the Catholic faith: God created each person individually for ultimate union with him. Christ told us to take this “good news” to everyone, to present to all this invitation to eternal life. We honor each person as God honors them. We are called to love them as God loves them. We are called to help them in the name of the Lord.

Jesus’ Challenge

When Jesus stood before the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, just as Ezra stood before the people centuries earlier, he read the Law, the Word, to them. But, much more, he authoritatively commented upon it: “Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This stupendous claim – that Jesus fulfilled in his person the Word, the Law, of God, that he was the incarnate Word – should startle us today, much as it startled the Jews to whom Jesus spoke.

Jesus is not merely the Law, or the written word of God – as holy as these are – he is the author of the Law. Startled and sobered, we should attend closely to what Jesus said: He has come “to bring glad tidings to the poor” and to set the captives free.

Of course, we know that scripture has several levels of meaning, and one of those is spiritual. So, on one level, this is an exhortation to those who are imprisoned by their own slavish desires, and to those who are oppressed by their poverty, to hear the good news that God loves them and to believe in his Son.

On another level, these words are a literal challenge to those who are not in prison or who are not poor to help those who are, to set aside a “portion” of the “rich food” and “sweet drinks” for them.

You might be surprised to learn that slavery – chattel slavery, the buying and selling of human beings – existed in Africa as recently as ten years ago. In Sudan, one of the largest countries on earth, where Christianity was originally established in the first centuries by disciples of the Apostles who sailed down the Nile to do so, the government empowered private militias to enslave the non-Muslim people of the south. Slavery was an instrument of policy, designed to break the will of the people of the south.

But Christians in America heard of this through the efforts of Catholic churchmen in Sudan, and they responded. They raised money to fly in relief supplies; they prayed; they spread the word; they took political action, lobbying elected representatives to use U.S. political might to respond to this crisis. And – thanks be to God – they succeeded. Today if you look at a map you will see not one Sudan, but two, the second called South Sudan. That nation did not exist ten years ago. There was no place on a map where you could find it. It was created as a result of the political process initiated by American Catholics and others.

True, South Sudan is not a paradise; it has plenty of problems. But slavery there is ended. The American Catholics who responded to the plight of the enslaved in Sudan truly, literally, “set the captives free.” They heard the voice of Jesus and responded. They recognized they were joined in one body with the southern Sudanese. In Paul’s words, the heart was not indifferent to the hand.

All of us can learn from their effort. We are all called by Jesus. We are called to recognize the human rights of all people. As Christians, we have, additionally, a special obligation to help fellow believers who suffer in the name of the Lord. Loving God “with all our hearts,” we can respond, through our prayer and through our actions, to the plight of the persecuted and of the captives, and thereby fulfill the second commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

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For Further Reading

- [*Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##781-810*](#)
- *St. Cyprian of Carthage, “[The Unity of the Catholic Church](#)”*
- *St. John Paul II, [Redemptoris missio](#)*
- *Cardinal Peter Turkson, “[The Catholic Church and Human Rights](#)”*

In Short . . .

- *The people of Israel received the Law and wept for their sinfulness, but the fact that God loved them enough to give them the Law was cause for great rejoicing.*
- *An inner harmony unites the faithful, but this harmony necessitates that “if one part suffers, all parts suffer.”*
- *Our obligations extend not just to Christians, but to all people.*
- *“Human rights” does not mean the fashions of the age, or anyone’s politically correct “wish list,” but rather those rights rooted in the inviolable dignity of the human person.*
- *We are called by Jesus to recognize the human rights of all people, and as Christians we have a special obligation to help fellow believers who suffer in the name of the Lord.*