

Be Holy, For I, the Lord, Your God, Am Holy

Biblical Reflection for the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, FEB. 15, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The Scripture readings for today issue three calls to us— to be holy as the Lord our God is holy; to not deceive ourselves with the wisdom of this age; and to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Let us begin our reflections this week by considering the words of the Leviticus reading (19:1-2, 17-18.)

God is the Holy One and the Creator of human life, and the human being is blessed and obliged by God's utter holiness. Therefore every human life is holy, sacrosanct and inviolable. According to Leviticus 19:2 God's holiness constitutes an essential imperative for the moral behavior: "You shall be holy for I am Holy, the Lord your God!" This loaded statement describes best the vocation of every man and woman, and the entire mission of the Church throughout history: a call to holiness.

You shall be holy

Holiness is a truth that pervades the whole of the Old Covenant: God is holy and calls all to holiness. The Mosaic Law exhorted: "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy." Holiness is in God, and only from God can it pass to the crown of God's creation: human beings. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and God's holiness, his 'total otherness' is imprinted on each one of us. Human beings become vehicles and instruments of God's holiness for the world.

This holiness is the fire of God's Word that must be alive and burning within our hearts. It is this fire, this dynamism, that will burn away the evil within us and around us and cause holiness to burst forth, healing and transforming the society and culture surrounding us. Evil is only eradicated by holiness, not by harshness. Holiness introduces into society a seed that heals and transforms.

Holiness is a way of life that involves commitment and activity. It is not a passive endeavor, but rather a continuous choice to deepen one's relationship with God and to then allow this relationship to guide all of one's actions in the world. Holiness requires a radical change in mindset and attitude. The acceptance of the call to holiness places God as our final goal in every aspect of our lives. This fundamental orientation toward God even envelops and sustains our relationship with other human beings. Sustained by a life of virtue and fortified by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, God draws us ever closer to himself and to that day when we shall see Him face to face in heaven and achieve full union with him.

Here and now, we can find holiness in our personal experience of putting forth our best efforts in the work place, patiently raising our children, and building good relationships at home, at school and at work. If we make all of these things a part of our loving response to God, we are on the path of holiness.

Revolution of holiness

The words of Leviticus in today's first reading (19:2) come alive in the saints and blessed of our Catholic tradition. These countless men and women throughout our tradition are the true "revolutionaries of holiness" as Benedict XVI said so beautifully during the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany:

www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_vigil-wyd_en.

"It is the great multitude of the saints -- both known and unknown -- in whose lives the Lord has opened up the Gospel before us and turned over the pages; he has done this throughout history and he still does so today. In their lives, as if in a great picture-book, the riches of the Gospel are revealed. They are the shining path which God himself has traced throughout history and is still tracing today.... The saints, as we said, are the true reformers. Now I want to express this in an even more radical way: Only from the saints, only from God does true revolution come, the definitive way to change the world."

Pastoral planning

In his apostolic letter "Novo Millennio Ineunte" at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II invited all "to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness", to express "the conviction that, since baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity... The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction" (No. 31).

The Church is the "home of holiness" and holiness is our most accurate image, our authentic calling card, and our greatest gift to the world. It describes best who and what we are and strive to be.

True wisdom

In today's second reading (1 Corinthians 3:16-23), St. Paul, in continuing his reproach of the Corinthians for their contentions (1-4), reminds the community that the churches of Christ ought to be kept pure, and humble (16:17). To have a high opinion of our own wisdom, is but to flatter ourselves; and self-flattery is the next step to self-deceit. People are deceived who deem themselves the temples to be temples of the Holy Spirit yet are unconcerned about personal holiness, or the peace and purity of the church.

If the Corinthians were genuinely wise (3:18-20), their perceptions would be reversed, and they would see everything in the world and all those with whom they exist in the Church in their true relations with one another. Paul assigns all the persons involved in the theological universe a position on a scale: God, Christ, Church members, Church leaders. Read from top to bottom, the scale expresses ownership; read from bottom to top, the obligation to serve. This picture should be complemented by similar statements such as those in 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. Christians are holy by profession, and should be pure and clean, both in heart and conversation.

Love your neighbor

As we reflect on today's Gospel passage (Matthew 25:38-48), Jesus in no way teaches us to be passive in the face of physical danger. Jesus teaches that violence can breed violence. And if nonresistance will shame our opponent into peace, then such is the better course.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil." (Matthew 5:38-39). With metaphorical language Jesus teaches us to turn the

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other cheek, to hand over not only the tunic but also the cloak, not to respond with violence to the vexations of others, and above all, "Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow" (5:42). This is a radical exclusion of the law of retaliation in the personal life of Jesus' disciples whatever be the right of society to defend its members from evildoers and to punish those guilty of violating the rights of citizens and of the state itself.

Jesus teaches the ultimate step in the process of bringing to perfection, that in which all the others find their dynamic center: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." (5:43-45). In opposition to the common interpretation of the old law which identified the neighbor with the Israelite, and indeed with the pious Israelite, Jesus set out the authentic interpretation of God's commandment. He added to it the religious dimension of reference to the clement and merciful heavenly Father who does good to all and is therefore the supreme exemplar of universal love.

Jesus concluded, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). He asked of his followers the perfection of love. Love is the synthesis of the new law he brought. This love will enable us to overcome in our relations with others the classical opposition of friend-enemy. It will tend from within hearts to transform into corresponding forms of social, political and even institutionalized solidarity.

The fruit of nonviolence is love

There are lots of mean-spirited people who have never broken the law, but can they truly be models for Christians? There is always the risk of being taken advantage of when we are generous and unselfish. If we open ourselves to love, we may very well get hurt. If we share our material goods, we may very well be used. In no instance are we obligated to get hurt or used; it just happens sometimes. The only way to be fully protected is to be suspicious, stingy, cynical and selfish. But this is certainly inconsistent with love. The fruit of nonviolence is love. This love blossoms everywhere when people meet each other, and everywhere it divulges its divine origins. This love overcomes all opposition. It brings together strangers, overcoming distance. It fills emptiness. It heals the sick. It raises the dead to life.

Let us try to break those patterns within us individually and communally that lead to violence, destruction and lack of love. If violence seems a reasonable option for us, then let us invent a different kind of logic. If violence is a machine, dealing mechanically with people whom we don't like, let us pray for the courage to throw a monkey wrench into it. And if violence is a chain of which we are part, let us be the first link that's broken.

The "dark" passages of the Bible

Continuing our reflection on "Verbum Domini" in light of today's Gospel, let us consider No. 2 of the postsynodal exhortation that reflected on the theme "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church."

"In discussing the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, the Synod also considered those passages in the Bible which, due to the violence and immorality they occasionally contain, prove obscure and difficult. Here it must be remembered first and foremost that biblical revelation is deeply rooted in history. God's plan is manifested progressively and it is accomplished slowly, in successive stages and despite human resistance. God chose a people and patiently worked to guide and educate them. Revelation is suited to the cultural and moral level of distant times and thus describes facts and customs, such as cheating and trickery, and acts of violence and massacre, without explicitly denouncing the immorality of such things. This can be explained by the historical context, yet it can cause the modern reader to be taken aback, especially if he or

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she fails to take account of the many "dark" deeds carried out down the centuries, and also in our own day. In the Old Testament, the preaching of the prophets vigorously challenged every kind of injustice and violence, whether collective or individual, and thus became God's way of training his people in preparation for the Gospel. So it would be a mistake to neglect those passages of Scripture that strike us as problematic. Rather, we should be aware that the correct interpretation of these passages requires a degree of expertise, acquired through a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key "the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery". I encourage scholars and pastors to help all the faithful to approach these passages through an interpretation which enables their meaning to emerge in the light of the mystery of Christ.”"

[The readings for the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time are Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48]

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