

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014

The readings of this Sunday talk about Christian Ethics. They show that the foundation of Christian Ethics is the law of love. They remind us that, because God is love, we have to imitate him in our own actions.

The first reading of Leviticus describes God's recommendation to Moses about the obligation made to the Israelites to imitate his holiness. It describes also what they have to avoid in order to resemble God, namely hatred, revenge and bearing a grudge. It, finally, recalls the importance of loving their neighbors as they do themselves.

What is behind this text is the conviction that the relation to God founds the uniqueness of Christian ethics. Another idea is the truth that, because children tend to reproduce the behavior of their parents, the Israelites have to imitate God in their conduct. The last idea is related to the importance of the Law of the love of God and neighbors that has to be the backbone of Christian conduct.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus is giving the principles of Christian ethics to his disciples. First of all, Jesus recalls the teaching relative to the law of proportionality that required a proportionate punishment equivalent to the committed fault. Unlike the outcome of that law, he recommends no resistance to the evil doer. In order to apply that principle to the lived reality, he evokes the case of a strike on the left cheek by inviting his disciples to turn even the right one as well. He also exhorts them to be generous and to give without counting or hesitating.

After that, Jesus refers to the teaching of the ancestors that recommended to love the neighbors and to hate the enemies by inviting his disciples to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors. Then, he gives the reason why they have to behave that way by referring to God, the Father, who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good alike, and lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust alike.

Finally, Jesus invites his disciples to be perfect as their Father is perfect. That is why he exhorts them to behave differently than the pagans who retaliate and avenge.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about Christian Ethics. In fact, each society has its laws and rules which define what is good to do and what is bad to avoid. Those rules and laws are primarily written in the human conscience so that, each by following his conscience, can act morally in a responsible way.

That is why in every society in the world by following human conscience, people can determine the right from the wrong, the good from the bad and to act accordingly. This reference to human conscience helps understand what we call natural law, meaning that it belongs to human nature to come up to distinguish the right from the wrong.

The reason why societies have come to the idea of regulating the moral behavior of its citizens was to avoid that each one, following his emotion and passion, becomes the measure of justice. Because, in truth, if each person has to do justice himself anytime there is a conflict, it is easy to give in to vengeance and retaliation.

In order to prevent vengeance and retaliation, Israel, like the societies of their time, has come up with the law of proportionality. That Law stipulated that the punishment to be given in case of bad behavior should be proportionate to the committed fault. That

explains the maxim “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth”. In truth, that principle, instead of establishing true justice was, in fact, a type of permitted revenge. Because if one who broke the leg of another has to have his own leg broken, what kind of justice is it?

It is here that today’s Gospel enters into action. For Jesus, indeed, the human conscience cannot be the exclusive foundation of moral law, but rather God. Because God is forgiveness and mercy, those who believe in him have to play the card of no-resistance, no-revenge, and no-retaliation with regard to those who harm them.

Moreover, with God being love par excellence, those who believe in him have to imitate him in his perfection in whatever they do. That is why he insists on loving the enemies and praying for the persecutors.

Is this request of Jesus unrealistic? In order to enter the vision of Jesus, we need to distinguish what we call filial love from marital love. Filial love is that which exists between children and their parents, and the marital love is what exists between the spouses. The feeling that drives the filial love is affection. It is deeply rooted in the human heart so that no one can help loving his own children. The feeling that drives the marital love is passion. It is rooted in the human heart to the point that no one can help falling in love.

When Jesus talks about the love of enemies, it is not filial or marital love. Unlike those, the love of enemies is an act of the will. One needs a little bit of goodwill in order for it to happen. One has to bring in not only one’s heart, but also one’s head, so that it might be conquered over the natural instinct of resentment against the enemies.

The interesting question to raise here would be that of knowing why we should love our enemies and pray for our persecutors? First of all, there is the example of God himself. He does not make a distinction between the criminal and the innocent. He makes the sun rise on the bad and the good alike. He causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust. In that sense, those who believe in him should behave like him and imitate him.

Second, there is the problem of the truth about ourselves. In fact, as human beings, we all make mistakes toward others and, even, we sin against God. However, we all want people to understand us and God to grant us his forgiveness. If that is the case, we should do the same thing with our enemies.

Third, there is the problem of the difference between us and the pagans. As Jesus said, people should look at our deeds and glorify God. If our deeds cannot be different from those of pagans, then, there is a problem with our faith. That is why Jesus wants us to be different and act differently.

Let us ask Jesus to let us understand that we are the temple of God. And for that reason, let us imitate him by loving our enemies. God bless you all.

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3: 16-23; Matthew 5: 38-48



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