THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 2026

In today's first reading, a lesson from chapter 22 of Exodus, we hear a little bit of the first, very short law code that Moses, on divine authority, gave to the band of refugee ex slaves that were the seed of the nation of Israel. Later on, the books of the "Torah" show laws made for a more developed society, but the very short law code in chapters 22 and 23 of Exodus reflect an extremely simple society. There are no laws about kings or priests, about temples or palaces. Those come later. In chapters 22 and 23 of Exodus we have laws appropriate for a very simple ancient society with only two social classes, a free majority and small minority of slaves (that even ex slaves had slaves, by the way, shows how deeply ingrained slavery was in the ancient world).

Now, this very ancient law code makes an appeal to something that, like God Himself, is ever ancient and ever new. It makes an appeal to compassion, on the basis of which the Lord Jesus in today's Gospel passage declares that all law has its roots and fulfillment in "Charity", the holy love that comes from God and leads back to God. Charity, partly expressed by law, is even better expressed by a holy sacrifice and sacred meal. Thus, in chapter 24 of Exodus, after the people have pledged to obey the sacred law, animals are offered up in sacrifice to God, the people are sprinkled with the blood of that covenant sacrifice, and they share together some of the meat of the sacrificed animals (there were "burnt offerings", entirely consumed by fire on the altar of sacrifice, but also "peace offerings", mostly consumed by the people participating in the sacrifice).

We are doing something rather similar today. First, we hear about God's sacred law of Charity, and pledge to follow it. Then, we participate in the unbloody representation of the One Perfect Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, sprinkled sacramentally by the Blood of the Lamb, we share in the mystical Flesh and Blood of the Lord Jesus, the Bread of Life and the Wine of Salvation.

The very ancient law code in chapters 22 and 23 of Exodus, Israel's first, is worth looking at. The superficial reader is likely to be struck by how similar it is to other ancient law codes, including its matter of fact acceptance of slavery. The deeper reader is struck by how different it is from other ancient law codes, even in regard to slavery. It provides sanctions against the abuse of slaves, it provides some protection to female slaves against sexual exploitation, and, most importantly, it places a time limit of six years for how long a fellow Hebrew can be a slave. The Lord, through His prophets, worked with Israel like a good teacher. They were not yet ready for something so ordinary as slavery to be abolished, but they were ready to hear God's command that even slaves were to be treated with compassion. Already, God's people were slowly being taught that all law is ultimately about Charity.

I remarked on how very brief this first written law code of Israel's was. Later in the Bible, law codes would be longer, but still quite short by today's standards. This brevity says something about how Biblical law works, in contrast to modern American civil and criminal law.

Modern American civil and criminal law, despite having their origins in the "Common Law" of Medieval England, are basically statutory; that is, they are basically about applying as precisely as possible the written word of formal legislation, statutes of ever increasing length and complexity. Statues are characterized by ever increasing length and complexity because legislatures and Congress increasingly want to cover every conceivable circumstance with

maximum legal precision. This simply is not how Biblical law works. Biblical law states some pretty general rules, and then assumes that application to particular situations will be guided by unwritten traditions and common sense on the part of the judge (Exodus 18 gives a teaching about the high importance of judges and the need to be careful in choosing them). The written text is the foundation for all circumstances, but it does not even try to anticipate all circumstances. In Biblical Law, the written text establishes the mandatory basic principles, and entrusts application of those principles to common sense guided by Tradition. This is true of the New Testament as well as the Old.

So, in making your moral decisions, take the Bible very seriously, but don't expect the Bible to tell you exactly what to do. The written words of the Bible are not optional. They provide the mandatory basic principles for Christian behavior. How to apply those basic principles in particular circumstances depends on the Church's unwritten Tradition (and it is mostly unwritten - I hate the tendency to reduce the rich concept of Tradition to a set of dry legal style documents) and your common sense. Read the Bible, learn how Catholics have traditionally been expected to act, and then use the brains God gave you. The old slogan "Sola Scriptura" (Scripture Alone) has never been accurate, or even very scriptural. Biblical Law assumes that judgement will be on the basis of a written text that establishes general principles, in accordance with a living Tradition, and with the use of common sense. In making your moral decisions, start with the Bible, observe the way of life of faithful Catholics, and after that use your head.

Biblical Law doesn't stand by itself. It is completed by a sacrifice and then a feast. The simple, pre Golden Calf law code that Moses gives in Exodus 22-23 is followed by a solemn sacrifice. Since the People of Israel haven't yet committed the apostasy of the Golden Calf, every son of Israel is a priest, and therefore the sacrifice is offered by "young men of the sons of Israel." Moses then sprinkles the people with the blood of the sacrifice, and, finally, everyone feasts.

It should be like that for you. Don't make your moral decisions apart from the Sacrifice of the Mass and the feast of Holy Communion. Ever since His Supper before His Passion, Jesus has been our Priest. His Passion is not repeated, but in the Holy Mass the Lord Jesus works through His priestly people, with a unique and essential role for the ordained Presbyters of the Apostolic Ministry, to make His Sacrifice really present in their assembly. As we proclaim the Lord's Death, the power of His Sacrificial Death becomes present to us, for the forgiveness of sins. As we proclaim the Lord's Death, we wash our robes and make them white in the Blood of the Lamb. Then, we eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of the Lamb of God, eating and drinking unto Eternal Life.

For the Lamb that was slain and now lives forever tells us that whoever eats His Flesh and drinks His Blood shall live forever.

Amen.