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Prayer, education needed in wake of Norway killings

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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Lawrence E. Frizzell

In the Roman canon or first Eucharistic prayer, the Church links her offering of Christ's sacrifice with "the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchisedek." As in all our liturgical texts, this list should be subject for prolonged reflection-- first, because these gifts from ancient times constitute a type and foreshadowing of Christ's self-giving and secondly, because the biblical passages and their personages instruct us concerning our own worship. On the Second Sunday of Lent we look at Abraham.

The Church professes that all who believe in Christ, Abraham's children according to faith, are included in the same patriarch's call... (Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* #4).

The universal dimensions of Abram's call are clear from the initial promise that "all the families of the earth shall find blessing in you" (Genesis 12:3). Later his name is changed to Abraham, interpreted to mean "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:4-5). His faith is evident from his obedient response to the divine call and his hope that indeed God would give him offspring. "Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

In the biblical tradition the virtue of faith has several dimensions: as a divine gift, faith is a vision of all reality in relation to its divine purpose; as a human response it is the acceptance of this new insight in a ratification or confirmation made by a resounding 'amen. This act of faith (*'emunah* in Hebrew) must mature through a life-time of faithfulness. On the most profound level faith is an aspect of the new life offered by God, a communion that introduces the believer into intimacy with the divine order. Faith (*fides*) always provides the basis for confidence, the ongoing experience of being with God that is a facet of hope, and obedience, the listening attitude of an attentive servant.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance... By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son... (Heb 11:8,17).

"The sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith" is described in Genesis 22:1-18, one of the most puzzling passages in the Bible. According to ancient Jewish commentators, it is the tenth and final test of Abraham's obedience; however, it is called "the binding of Isaac" because both father and son make an act of faith and obedience that provides the merit upon which Israel's sacrificial worship was founded. Indeed the Chronicler identified the Temple mount to be Mount Moriah, where God provided the ram as a substitute for Isaac (2 Chr 3:1).

The Canaanites among whom Abraham sojourned practiced human sacrifice. Does this passage teach that God rejects this aberration? Does it stress the point that, at times, faith may make demands that seem to be contrary to human reason? Does the narrative teach that, for a profound appreciation of life's gifts, a person must come perilously close to losing what is most precious? Each of these questions may contain part of the lesson in this challenge to Abraham's faith. We too need to learn the value of symbolic expressions of human devotion and obedience. We must realize that faith sometimes moves us so far beyond the light of human understanding that we stand in darkness, relying only on God's presence to resolve the particular dilemma. Finally, the fragility of natural gifts (such as health or eyesight) and of human relationships should lead us to recognize the grace-filled and gracious dimension to every aspect of human life.

The reference to the sacrifice of Abraham in the memorial of the Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus points to the link between Isaac and Christ. Long before the Church Fathers remarked on the common theme of the victim bearing the wood for the sacrifice on the mount, St. Paul drew the parallel between Isaac and Jesus as the only son, the child of promise. "God did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all..." (Rom 8:32). The life of Isaac was spared and he became a pledge of the resurrection for the Jewish people. The human life of Jesus seemed to be lost, but his faithful obedience became the basis for Christian hope in the situations of futility that would stagger those without faith.