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**From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, S.T.L., S.S.L., D.Phil.**

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# Understanding the Covenant, Hour of Jesus

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## Understanding the Covenant, hour of Jesus

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## **Third Sunday of Lent**

Sunday Readings for March 11, 2012 for Cycle B:

Ex 20:1-17; Ps 19; 1 Cor 1:18-25; Jn 2:13-22

### **UNDERSTANDING THE COVENANT, HOUR OF JESUS**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

Through the season of Lent the Church points constantly to the "hour" of Jesus, to the Paschal Mystery of his death-and-resurrection. The purpose of this pedagogy is to enable us to grasp more fully the meaning of our baptism and the new life with God that this sacrament brings. At the same time, we learn that God's gifts of forgiveness and new life in Christ are offered most generously, extending the Covenant made with Israel's patriarchs to the entire human race.

In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race, by a special dispensation the God of supreme love chose for himself a people to whom he might entrust his promises. First he entered into a covenant with Abraham and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (Vatican Council II, *Divine Revelation* #14).

The gift of the Covenant, a bond of special intimacy with God, is the foundation for all else in the life of patriarchs and matriarchs and later in the molding of their descendants into a nation in God's service. "If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant...you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

How does Israel keep the covenant? By adhering to the Torah, the instruction of God, which includes the commandments but also inspires the faithful through narratives and poetry to imitation of the God they come to know through the unfolding of the divine plan for human salvation. The Decalogue (Ten Words) shows how the commandments govern all human relationships, ordering the human community to peace with God, neighbor, self and nature.

The faithful constitute a "kingdom of priests", so Israel centered its community life on the tabernacle in the desert and, much later, on the Temple in Jerusalem. There God revealed the divine will to his people; the commandments were interpreted and applied to daily life by successive generations of priests and other teachers. Sacrificial offerings were purchased by pilgrims and the men had to pay the annual poll tax (a half-shekel) in the ancient Hebrew coinage that had no image on it. Coins from the homelands of pilgrims were exchanged in the Temple's outer courts and animals were provided for those who wanted to offer sacrifice. Thus the dealers that Jesus drove away had a legitimate function there. Then why did he do it? There must be a serious reason rooted in the teachings of Jesus. The last words of the prophet Zechariah foretold a time when all things would be holy and capable of being offered to God. "On that day there shall no longer be any Canaanite (merchant) in the House of the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 14:12). Jesus was providing a sign to Israel's leaders that the kingdom was coming, that God's reign would be manifested in a new way. But, quite rightly in the context of their responsibility for right order in the Temple and community, the priestly authorities asked Jesus to show his credentials.

"Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up!" (John 2:19). As in other parts of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus's words would be understood fully only in the light of his Death-and-Resurrection. Christian faith in the identity of Jesus found profound expression in John's prologue. "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us and we saw his glory..." (1:14). We Christians recognize that Jesus has revealed the Father in a surprising, new way ("Glory" designating the manifest presence of God). After perceiving that the body of Jesus is God's *Temple*, we begin to understand that this is the place of the perfect sacrifice. The Lamb of God (1:29) is also the high priest, because Jesus laid down his life for his sheep (10:11), offering himself freely.

Just as John described the unity of priest, victim and place of sacrifice (see 10:36, alluding to the consecration of Jesus as altar), so he stressed that the persecution, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus constitute a single event, his "hour" (2:4; 13:1). Jesus will be "lifted up" (3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32-33) in the humiliation of the cross and in the exaltation of the resurrection- ascension. Thus his obedience to the Father's will (4:34; 6:38) fulfills the divine commandment (12:49-50) and initiates the new Covenant wherein all human beings will be drawn to Jesus (12:32) and into intimacy with the Father. "To those who accepted him, he gave the power to become children of God..." (1:12). He challenged them to keep the new commandment of mutual love in imitation of him (13:34-35; 15:12).

But the Gospel according to John never used the term "covenant"! Nevertheless, his presentation of Jesus' teaching repeatedly employs reciprocal clauses and phrases that are reminiscent of covenant language. "I will be their God and they shall be my people" is the biblical formula describing the mutual exchange of the covenant (see Lev 26:12; Jer 31:33; Eze 36:28). The first instance of this language in John is most appropriately in the Eucharistic discourse. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56). By association with the "hour" of Jesus we are drawn into union with the Father and this covenantal bond is nurtured by the marvelous Paschal gift that perdures throughout the pilgrimage of humanity toward the heavenly Jerusalem and its Temple.