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April 28, 2013

Covenant, Eucharist and Commandment of Love

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This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Acts 14:21-27; Ps 148:8-13; Rv 21:1-5; Jn 13:31-35

COVENANT, EUCHARIST AND COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

If Christians are asked to describe their faith in simple terms, most would emphasize charity or love as the heart of Jesus' teaching. Some might contrast the love of Christian practice against a legalistic attitude that they associate with the Old Testament and Judaism. Tragically, for many centuries Christian preaching and other teaching has often tended to pit the "Law of love" exemplified by Jesus against the "Law of fear" that some think permeates the Old Testament. How many people who refer to the twofold law of love for God and neighbor in Jesus' teaching (Mt 22:34-40) realize that the Lord is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18? In recent decades Christian teachers have made valiant efforts to correct stereotypes about the Jewish people and their Torah ("instruction" or Law). We now appreciate that stressing the *continuity* of the heavenly Father's plan does not lessen our gratitude for the unique work and message of Jesus. We recognize that awe ("fear") of God's marvelous presence and creative power and grateful love for divine gifts permeate the message of both Testaments.

The experience of God's presence in history from the call of Abraham and Sarah was described in terms of *covenant*, a bond uniting people to God in an intimacy of acknowledged blessings and service. How can human beings serve God? By following the divine commandments throughout the pilgrimage of life. "Walk before me and be perfect!" (Gn 17:1) was the challenge for Abraham. Later, all Israel would be called to imitate God: "Be holy, as I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lv 19:2). Many commandments relating to specific practices are provided with a motive, either reflecting God's mercy towards creatures or doing to others what we would appreciate if we were in their shoes (see Mt 7:12).

After the destruction of Jerusalem the prophets offered hope for the surviving community; the vision concerning the future was called a new covenant for all twelve tribes by Jeremiah (31:31). "I will place my Torah within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people" (31:33). Like the covenant of Mount Sinai, this new bond with God and each other is bilateral, with obligations on the part of God and the community. Because the Sinai covenant governed a political society, the laws were written on stone and parchment for all to consult and for judges to use in court. During the purifying experience of the Exile (586-538 B.C.), when people were under the civil and criminal law of Babylon, the prophets developed a deeper understanding of conscience and the Torah was seen, above all, as a spiritual principle guiding the faithful. The reciprocal formula of the relationship between God and the people referred back to the time of Moses (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12) and to the promised new covenant (see Ez 36:28; Zech 8:7-8).

Although the Fourth Gospel does not use the term "covenant," the reality of that relationship is

expressed in the many reciprocal formulae found first in the Eucharistic discourse (Jn 6:56) and then in the Good Shepherd passage (10:14) and in the Last Supper discourse (15:4-10). The heavenly Father's love is the pattern for Jesus' love of his disciples; their response must be modeled on the loving obedience of Jesus. "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love" (16:10). How can Jesus call the Christian community to imitate the dynamic love within the very mystery of divine Unity? The relation between Father and Son constitutes a valid model for those created in the divine image (see Gn 1:26-28) because "they are in us", as Jesus explained in the high priestly prayer (Jn 17:21). "If someone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home in him" (14:23). The phrase "keep my word" describes the challenge of faith, whereas "keep my commandments" refers to love and its obligations.

The use of the reciprocal formula in Jesus' discourses (Jn 6:56 and 15:4-10) show that the Eucharist is the highest experience of the New Covenant for the Christian Church (see Mt 26:26-29). Quite naturally the new commandment is taught at this time, when the disciples begin to appreciate the mission of the Master. The challenge is to make mutual love the basis of living the New Covenant. Reciprocal acts of forgiveness, patience, kindness and generosity will manifest God's love to the world (see 17:20-21). Imitation of the way Jesus manifested divine charity is the ideal for all Christians. "Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other" (13:34; see 15:9-10). The sacrificial nature of Christ's love requires a lifetime of reflective appreciation and an unending challenge to all Christians. "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate" (Lk 6:36; see Mt 5:48). On the cross Jesus revealed new dimensions of the inner mystery of God, with unlimited ways of answering the call to live the basic commandment of imitating the divine Model.