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Laws and the Spirit of Service

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Laws and the Spirit of Service

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Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 14, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Dt 30:10-14; Ps 69:14, 17, 30-37; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10:25-37

Laws and the Spirit of Service

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The Uniform Commercial Code or any other legislative text used to guide life in the United States makes the Law of Moses look simple. People in business and the professions acknowledge the necessity of precise legislation for civil society, yet some of these same individuals will rail against the commandments or the Code of Canon Law. The laws in the Pentateuch governed the political and social orders in ancient Israel, just as the Code provides the foundation for Catholics to know their rights and obligations. The Book of Deuteronomy and the prophets emphasized that the commandments also obliged in conscience. Each person should respond to the laws with all his or her heart, soul and strength (see Dt 6:5; 30:10).

Legislating is by nature conservative and, over the centuries, each law requires an oral interpretation to apply the given norm equitably to situations that may be quite different from the period in which the principles were enunciated. God provided Israel's leaders with the right and the insight to interpret the commandments. Did God raise up prophets to go to the heavens (on top of Mount Sinai) or across the sea (like Jonah) to receive the divine message (see Romans 10:5-10)? No, over the centuries Israel's teachers argued that the Torah ("instruction" or Law of God) is accessible to all Israel. "The commandment is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out" (Dt 30:14).

During the late Second Temple period the Torah was studied intensely by the leaders of the Jewish people and by pious groups. The laws were the foundation for society and for the moral life; therefore they provided the key to eternal happiness, ordering one's relationship with God, neighbor and the world. The scholar who asked Jesus about gaining eternal life was asked to consult the Torah. He quoted the same fundamental texts (Dt 6:5 and Lv 19:18) as Jesus (see Mt 22:34-40) for coordinating one's life by the love of God and neighbor.

Every word of a law is important, so people debated about the meaning of "neighbor"; some limited the term to "fellow countryman" (see Mt 5:43) but Jesus emphasized that the term is all-inclusive because the word translated "neighbor" might have different vowels to mean "one who does evil to you". "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you..." (Lk 6:27-31).

What happens when an obligation toward God and a social responsibility are in conflict? This question is part of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the good Samaritan. Priests and Levites were obliged to maintain a state of ritual purity, especially in the time of Temple service and its immediate aftermath. Touching a dead body defiled a person for a week (Nm 19:14-16), so they would keep their distance, leaving the sacred duty of burial to the laity.

The parable of the good Samaritan offers Jesus' answer to the question of conflict between laws and also defines "neighbor" to include enemies. The story makes the point that the two ranks of clergy at that time deemed service of God to take priority over concern for neighbor. Probably the lay audience would sense that Jesus taught differently. Surely the third person to come by would be a layman! But Jesus chooses a Samaritan to be the hero. Samaritans and Jews had been at enmity for generations and were not expected to be civil to each other (see Lk 9:51-56; Jn 4:9). Not only would the listeners be challenged to understand that "neighbor" is equated to "fellow human being" but they would recognize the Samaritan to be a model of compassion. Jesus taught that the various facets of love are central to the commandment to imitate God (Lv 19:2; see Lk 6:36). The Samaritans adhered to the Torah of Moses and Jesus described the extent to which love impels the believer. The Jewish daily prayerbook makes the same point as part of the preparation for morning prayer.

These are the things for which no limit is prescribed: the leaving of the corner of a field for the gleaner, the offering of first fruits (in the Temple), the practice of lovingkindness and the study of the Torah (*Mishnah Peah* 1:1)

Jesus has brought the beauty and the challenge of the Father's Word into the lives of millions over the centuries. The magnificent hymn in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians points to Jesus as the visible image of God. Having the efficacy of his reconciliation as the foundation for our lives, we ask for the strength to become instruments of his love. In the service of neighbor the faithful offer worship to the heavenly Father as a continuation of Christ's Eucharist and sacrifice for the true peace so desperately needed in our world.