Election: Challenge Rather Than Privilege

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How do we look upon the many nations and peoples that share our world? Is there a sense of excessive competitiveness as we consider the limited resources which must be shared with many? Or do we express good will toward all, accompanied by a willingness to set aside personal goods and goals so that others may have sufficient to survive?

The Second Vatican Council sought to place such questions in the context of a vision for all humanity derived from the Sacred Scriptures.

All peoples constitute a single community and have a single origin... One also is their final goal: God. His providence, manifestations of goodness and saving design extend to all human beings in preparation for the day when the elect will be united in the Holy City ablaze with God's splendor, where nations will walk in his light. (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions #1)

Faith in God as Creator includes a doctrine that all people are made in the divine image and have the same purpose of serving the divine plan which culminates in an eternal destiny. But the gift of free will, the call to activate a response to the divine image, involves the risk of failure. People are in danger of choosing wrong goals and wrong means as they pursue a search for happiness. Not all who are called to the exalted destiny will respond worthily. "The elect will be united in the Holy City..." Who will be included among the elect?

Just as some people hoard material goods so that they may enjoy special benefits not available to all, so in Judaism and Christianity, there has often been a tendency to claim exclusive rights to spiritual blessings deriving from intimacy with God. This is ironic, because sharing God's gifts never leaves one with less. The teachers of Israel often emphasized that Abraham's call was to become "the father of many nations" (Gn 17:4), so that all the families of the earth be blessed in his name (Gn 12:3).

The last section of the prophet Isaiah, deriving from the period after the Babylonian Exile, points to the gathering of people from many nations to witness God's glory (manifest presence). The chosen people among the nations will be God's instrument in their education. Together they will form a pilgrim community moving toward Jerusalem, the Holy City. "Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem... In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying: 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zec 8:22-23).
The Good News brought by Jesus emphasized the universal scope of the salvation he offered. At the same time, each person must make a commitment to persevere in following God's will. Jesus thus removed any excuse for complacency because salvation depends not merely on belonging to God's people but in responding to the gift of faith with deeds of service. At the time of Jesus, teachers like John the Baptist criticized those who bragged about being descendants of Abraham. "God is able from these stones (abhanim) to raise up children (banim) to Abraham" (Lk 3:8). People were challenged to turn their lives so that they would accept the divine right order for human life. Repentance for past pride and sins should lead to righteousness and justice in daily life (3:10-14). A century after Jesus Rabbi Akiba would proclaim the fundamental unity of humanity and the unique privilege of Israel as follows: "Blessed are human beings because they are created in the image of God...; blessed are the children of Israel because they are called the children of God...” (Mishnah Abhot 3:18).

The great privilege of election is our knowledge of God's mysteries and the divine plan for humanity. This should stimulate Jews and Christians to a degree of excellence in God's service and to a happiness that would inspire others to ask for God's gifts. "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zec 8:23).

A cheap reliance on God's mercy is criticized by Jesus. Those who go through life without exploring the potential of serving God will be surprised at Last Judgment! Belonging to God's people is no guarantee that a person will succeed in the "game" of life. The tables may be upset because "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord (Is 55:6). Jesus declared that a great reversal of human standards would take place. "Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last" (Lk 13:30).