

FROM THE LAW OF SINAI TO THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 48 & 49

LIFE IS INDELIBLY MARKED BY A TRUTH OF ITS OWN. BY ACCEPTING God's gift, man is obliged to maintain life in this truth which is essential to it. To detach oneself from this truth is to condemn oneself to meaninglessness and unhappiness, and possibly to become a threat to the existence of others, since the barriers guaranteeing respect for life and the defense of life, in every circumstance, have been broken down.

The truth of life is revealed by God's commandment. The word of the Lord shows concretely the course which life must follow if it is to respect its own truth and to preserve its own dignity. The protection of life is not only ensured by the specific commandment "You shall not kill" (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17); the entire Law of the Lord serves to protect life, because it reveals that truth in which life finds its full meaning...

This explains why it is so hard to remain faithful to the commandment "You shall not kill" when the other "words of life" (cf. Acts 7:38) with which this commandment is bound up are not observed. Detached from this wider framework, the commandment is destined to become nothing more than an obligation imposed from without, and very soon we begin to look for its limits and try to find mitigating factors and exceptions. Only when people are open to the fullness of the truth about God, man and history will the words "You shall not kill" shine forth once more as a good for man in himself and in his relations with others. In such a perspective we can grasp the full truth of the passage of the Book of Deuteronomy which Jesus repeats in reply to the first temptation: "Man does not live by bread alone, but...by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:3; cf. Mt 4:4).

It is by listening to the word of the Lord that we are able to live in dignity and justice. It is by observing the Law of God that we are able to bring forth fruits of life and happiness: "All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die" (Bar 4:1).

The history of Israel shows how difficult it is to remain faithful to the Law of life which God has inscribed in human hearts and which he gave on Sinai to the people of

the Covenant. When the people look for ways of living which ignore God's plan, it is the Prophets in particular who forcefully remind them that the Lord alone is the authentic source of life... "They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (Amos 2:7); "they have filled this place with the blood of innocents" (Jer 19:4)...

But while the Prophets condemn offenses against life, they are concerned above all to awaken hope for a new principle of life, capable of bringing about a renewed relationship with God and with others, and of opening up new and extraordinary possibilities for understanding and carrying out all the demands inherent in the Gospel of life. This will only be possible thanks to the gift of God who purifies and renews: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek 36:25-26; cf. Jer 31:34). This "new heart" will make it possible to appreciate and achieve the deepest and most authentic meaning of life: namely, that of being a gift which is fully realized in the giving of self. This is the splendid message about the value of life which comes to us from the figure of the Servant of the Lord: "When he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his life...he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied" (Is 53:10, 11).

It is in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth that the Law is fulfilled and that a new heart is given through his Spirit. Jesus does not deny the Law but brings it to fulfillment (cf. Mt 5:17): the Law and the Prophets are summed up in the golden rule of mutual love (cf. Mt 7:12). In Jesus the Law becomes once and for all the "gospel," the good news of God's lordship over the world, which brings all life back to its roots and its original purpose. This is the New Law, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2), and its fundamental expression, following the example of the Lord who gave his life for his friends (cf. Jn 15:13), is the gift of self in love for one's brothers and sisters: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn 3:14).

This is the law of freedom, joy and blessedness. ■



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): "...[it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!"