

## “Fulfilling the Law”

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(02/13/11 Expanded and revised)

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Today’s Scriptures focus upon the Mosaic law, the sacred tradition of our ancestors. The Book of Sirach, exceedingly popular in early Christian education, noted that “if you choose you can keep the commandments; they will save you (Sirach 15:15).” Psalm 119, our responsorial, is exceptional in the collection of 150 psalms. It is the longest, 176 verses, the longest chapter in the Hebrew Bible. In form, the psalm is like a tapestry, or a large quilt. It consists of an alphabetic acrostic in which each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet begins 8 lines of poetry, a different stanza for each letter. Within each verse, there occurs a synonym for Torah: precept, decree, utterance, word, statute, law. (If you have the text of our responsorial, notice how these words appear in each of the 8 verses.) The point of this elaborate construction is that the psalmist regarded the Mosaic law with extraordinary respect. It reflected not just commandments, what you are to do or not do, but guidance and direction, inspiration for the whole course of life. It embodied the whole way of life of the Hebrew people.

Jesus assured his disciples that he had not come to abolish the law or the prophets. He said he had come to fulfill the way of life of his people. For Jesus, the Mosaic law had an enduring value and his intent was to make it even more significant, to make it larger than life. He said my understanding of the Mosaic law is not to make it easier for you, but to make you love the law, observe the law not out of obedience to external commands, but to embrace its inner ideals: not simply to refrain from what you are not to do, but to go beyond the letter to the heart of the law. Our ancestors were told not to kill; I say you are not even to get angry.

From the outside looking in, the Mosaic law appears to be a set of rules and regulations; from inside looking out, law is a dynamic guide providing direction and purpose. Law is not something outside, but within. Jesus might have said, clothe yourselves with the law, wrap it around you like the quilt composed by the psalmist who stitched together 176 verses in an elaborate pattern celebrating the presence of the law in everyone’s life

In the course of Christian history, the church developed its own Torah, or way of life, incorporating the Mosaic law within Christian Scriptures and developing the pattern of Hebrew worship through Christian Sacraments. We speak of the three “C’s” of Christian life: creed, code, cult -- what we believe, how we behave, and how we worship. This is “organized religion” in a Christian context. It is not just law as precept, but Torah as a way of life.

Today, many are dropping out of organized religion, satisfied with being spiritual without being religious, having their own pattern of belief and conduct and worship rather than following an organized program. They insist that they do not need Torah, a pattern to follow. They can have a relationship with God without participating in “organized religion.”

Being spiritual without having to be religious means being free to choose your own course, set your own standards. You don’t need the Mosaic law or the tradition of the church. Your “religion” is a matter between you and God. While attractive, this stance has a strong element of subjectivism. It means that there is no one to suggest when you might be off track. Despite our best efforts to be spiritual, we all make mistakes. And when we do, it’s helpful to have the wisdom of a religious tradition. Father Isaac Hecker, founder of the Paulists, put it this way. Religion helps you to connect and correct. Spirituality without religion can become a self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community grounded in the law and tradition. Jesus’ words and actions are very important: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Another element within organized religion lies in the interpretation of law itself. Pope Francis repeatedly distinguishes between two ways of thinking which recur throughout the church’s history: casting off and reinstating. The first emphasizes doctrine. What are the rules? Start with the rules. Those who do not fit the rules need to be cast off. Period. Those who have entered into a second marriage are committing adultery. The law makes it clear: “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5: 32).” This way of thinking is impersonal and abstract, universally applicable without considering particular circumstances.

The second is pastoral rather than dogmatic, starting with persons, not rules. How can this person who has failed to keep the rules be reinstated? Francis says: “Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in

the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel ( “THE LOVE OF JOY, No. 299).

Pope Francis says :The church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement....The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all who ask for it with a sincere heart (No. 296.)”

As you may know, a few Cardinals oppose the interpretation of Pope Francis, although the early Fathers of the Church gave credence to forgiveness and reinstatement for the divorced who were repentant and upright in living the gospel.

The Orthodox Church today follows the early Fathers and allows for reconciliation of the divorced.

Remember that the issue facing the Council of Jerusalem was whether to cast off those gentiles unable or unwilling to observe circumcision, or to reinstate them as living members of the Body of Christ without observing the fullness of Jewish tradition. The Council voted in favor of reinstating.

Finally, Pope Francis says: “As for the way of dealing with different “irregular” situations, the Synod Fathers in their world-wide meetings, reached a general consensus, which I support: ‘In considering a pastoral approach toward people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them,’ something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit (No. 297).”

Jesus said “I have come not to abolish the law.” I have come to fulfill the law. In a simplistic way, we can regard the law as absolute. Doctrine trumps compassion. Throughout history, on the contrary, compassion trumps law. Rules are abstract; compassion deals with people. Pope Francis has shown us the way by upholding ancient tradition.