

Humanae Vitae Part I

The Catholic Review

The longest of the 150 Psalms in the Bible is Psalm 119. It is in praise of God's law. Virtually every other verse mentions the law or its equivalent: covenant, precept, statute, decree, ordinance, and commandment. The Jewish believer saw the law, known as Mosaic law since Christian and Hebrew tradition ascribe it to Moses, as God's great gift and blessing to them. In pondering and meditating on the law, one glimpsed the face of God and was transformed into a virtuous heart. He rejoiced in the law of God.

The psalmist understood that without the law, he would perish, lose direction, for the law is God's wisdom, a lamp lighting his way. He prays for discernment to know and appreciate more fully the law of God, and thus he ponders it day and night. He sheds streams of tears because so many disobey the law of God.

As we look at the Old Testament today, the 613 precepts of Mosaic law seem quite burdensome in dictating every facet of Jewish life. Unfortunately, many in our society see any law as burdensome; the American legal system is home to thousands of lawyers, more than any other country. In fact, we frequently see our American legal system overloaded by individuals who have broken the law, seeking to escape from under its burden.

But our Old Testament ancestors rejoiced, exalted in the Law of God, burdensome though it could seem. A good visual: picture King David dancing and leaping for joy before the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments, as it returned from Philistine captivity. Dancing in the street for the gift of the law!

Not so in these parts!

Most in our culture, including Catholics, see laws as threatening their freedom, limiting rightful options, interfering with their privacy. No dancing in the street here!

Our theology on the other hand, sees man wounded by sin and in need of salvation. Divine help comes to us in Christ through the law that guides us and the grace that sustains us.

There are different levels of the law for Christian. There is the divine law – the Ten Commandments and their application through a Church’s Magisterium guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. There is Church law, also known also Canon law, a fence guarding the divine law and pointing the way to its effective fulfillment. Canon 1247, for example stresses the sanctity of the Lord’s Day and the privileged mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice when it directs, “On Sunday and the holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.” How nice it would be if we all didn’t need the law, but knowing human nature as we do, we should rejoice in it, be grateful for the reminder it serves.

The need for a moral code to help save us from ourselves has been portrayed in literature and art since at least the time of the fall of Adam and Eve. C.S. Lewis is recognized along with G. K. Chesterton, as one of the greatest Christian apologists of modern times. The Screwtape Letters is a series of letters from Screwtape, the devil, to his representative in hell, Wormwood, seeking ways to draw Christians into the devil’s flock.

Screwtape is a genius of a psychologist. He speaks of Peaks and Troughs in the human psyche, what we would call highs and lows. The best time to attack a Christian is during the Troughs and this, especially in cases of lustful, sexual temptations. He admits to Wormwood that all pleasure, in its full and healthy state comes from God, “the Enemy.” So Satan’s best attack is at Trough-time. Then, he says, we are in the least position “to take the pleasure which our Enemy has produced (the joy of sex rightly ordered), at times or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden.... To get man’s soul and give him nothing in return” is the ultimate goal of Screwtape and Wormwood.

Chesterton said it differently in insisting on the absolute need for the Church’s precepts in respect to the proper function of sex in marriage: “The moment sex ceases to be a servant, it becomes a tyrant. There is something dangerous and disproportionate in its place in human nature, for whatever reason, and it does really

need a special justification and dedication.”

Look about – teenage pregnancies, abortion, divorce, AIDS, infidelity – the list is endless. How obvious is the need for divine counsel, supernatural law pointing us to God’s plan for sex, marriage and family. And how many churches are daring to offer that plan unambiguously, unapologetically? Shouldn’t Catholics be grateful for the one Church that does, regardless of substantial, if not overwhelming secular rejection?

More, next week.