

The Meaning of the People of God

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Just before the Hebrews crossed the Jordan River to begin life in the Promised Land, Moses presented them with the two ways in which their lives could go. As the prophet of God, Moses tells the People of God: “I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your children may live with blessings on the land.” Of course, what God is offering his people is the way of life, by following God’s commandments, or the way of death, by choosing self over God.

For most of its existence, the Church has interpreted this choice as an individual choice. That is, the Church has focused its attention on individual salvation: Each of you, save your soul! Sometimes it was: Save your soul by saving the souls of others!

Ultimately, of course, no society can be at peace unless every individual has found peace in himself/herself. Ultimately, the well-being of the People of God depends on individual salvation. But that is not to say that the *goal* of the Christian life is simply individual salvation. No, what God offered his people through Moses and the *Torah* was a peaceful society—a perfected way of living as a society, not simply as individuals.

It was a turning point in the recognition that individual salvation was not the issue when the bishops of Vatican II began *Lumen Gentium* with a discussion of the People of God rather than of the Church hierarchy. The hierarchy proclaims itself to be the ministers of God’s grace through the sacraments in order to bring individuals through the morass of sin to salvation and eternal life. However, by emphasizing that the Church is primarily the People of God, the Fathers of Vatican II threw light on the authentic Divine plan for humanity, that we might live in a graced peace—that the Church is not a process by which individuals achieve eternal life so much as that it is a society—a community—in which the perfect life is practiced, is lived.

That is what Moses was saying: When you occupy the land, you can live a life of harmony, peace, goodness, and justice—or you can live a life of selfishness, abuse of others, and strife. The choice is yours. To live a life of peace, everyone (there’s the crux) must simply follow God’s commands—love God, love one another. That is, live with respect for one another, help one another, place one another before oneself.

This is to say that social harmony depends on justice for all. The *Torah* expresses the terms of that justice—that each person, from lowly to mighty, must be given what is rightfully his as a human being, respect for his life, for his home and property, for his livelihood, for his well-being; and that every person must give this justice to every other. The creation, including human nature, is built around this principle of justice. Justice is woven into the fabric of the universe. There is no peace, no successful living, without social cooperation, without justice for every person.

Of course, that perfect justice is impossible for humans to attain on our own. It is, and must be, a work of the grace of God. St. Paul makes that clear.

So, God has created a universe in which it is possible for all people to live in harmony, joy, and peace by loving God, accepting his grace, and taking care of one another, placing others before self. But if the Law is not loved and heeded in its spirit, in its formative influence on us (this is Jesus' message), then life—social life—corrupts into selfishness and violence.

Of course, the latter way—of selfishness and violence— has always been chosen by human societies. So the People of God are a remnant, a society within the larger society—a society in which the perfect life may be practiced and kept safe, a life animated by the grace of God coming to the people through the sacraments.

Martyrs are a sad testament to this fact—that the larger society has chosen the way of greed and violence. We honor martyrs as heroes, or “super-people” who stayed the course even in persecution. There is no denying this. But what martyrs essentially represent is the failure of the larger society—the abasement of human life, and also of the perfect plan of God for us—in favor of unsatisfied greed and twisted violence.

In God's perfect society, of course, there would be no martyrs because there would be no one to kill them. Sadly, the world chooses the way of the tenant farmers who kill the representatives of the landlord in Jesus' story.

These same Vatican Council fathers also restored the order of permanent deacons, explicitly with the intention that the deacons should turn the attention of the People of God toward justice for the marginalized and oppressed—in the Church community, in particular—so that universal justice might be striven for—and achieved. In this way, the perfected life of grace might be lived among the People of God.

And so, it is for the Church—for us, the Body of Christ, the faithful People of God— to cast sin away from ourselves—to reject deviation from the plan of God and denial of God's grace—and to strive to live the perfected life of grace which Jesus taught us by word and example.

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