



“Holiness is not a privilege of a few but the obligation of all.” (St. Teresa of Calcutta)

The scripture readings of Seventh Sunday in Ordinary time invite us to be holy. We Christians are expected to be holy and we are meant to become holy people of God. The very first reason why we are called to be holy is because the book of Leviticus (19.1) says “Be Holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy.” God’s holiness consists in unconditional love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. The psalm (103) says, “the Lord is merciful and gracious.” Throughout the salvation history we find and know that God manifests His holiness through His unconditional love for the people of Israel even though they were unfaithful to the covenant God had made with them. The additional reason to be holy is because St. Paul says (1Cor 3.16) “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” God created us out of dust and breathed His Spirit into us. So, we come from the Holy One and we are to keep ourselves holy. We are the dwelling place of God, when this dwelling place indulges in worldliness and evil works then we are far from being the dwelling place of God.

Jesus in the Gospel (Mt 5.38-48) confirms, corrects and expands the Ten Commandments and shows us that we can live and manifest our holiness only through love. Therefore, in the kingdom of Jesus, love is the only rule that He invites his citizens to follow. Jesus condemns the law of restricted retaliation (An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth) which Moses had passed on to Israel and in its place, Jesus gives His new law of love (Love your enemies), grace, forgiveness, reconciliation leading to redemption but never retaliation. For Jesus, retaliation or even limited vengeance has no place in the Christian life, even though graceful acceptance of an offence requires great strength and grace of God. Love one’s neighbor and forgive one’s enemies is the call by Jesus, that means what makes Christian different is the grace with which they treat others with loving kindness and mercy, even if they do not deserve it. We are commanded to love our enemies as Jesus loves us, not because our enemies deserve our love but because Jesus loves them so much that He died for them as He did for us. He said hanging on the cross “Father

forgive them for they know not what they do (Lk 23.34).” So, it’s a call to love and never retaliation.

The priest, in his Sunday sermon, used “Forgive your enemies” as his subject. After a long sermon, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies. About half held up their hands. Not satisfied, he preached for another twenty minutes and repeated his question. This time he received a response of about 80 percent. Still unsatisfied, he preached another ten minutes and repeated his question. With all thoughts now on Sunday dinner, all responded, except one elderly lady in the back. “Mrs. Jones, why are you not willing to forgive your enemies?” asked the priest. She said, “I don’t have any.” The priest said, “Mrs. Jones that is very unusual. How old are you?” “Ninety-three” replied Mrs. Jones. “Mrs. Jones, please come down in front and tell the parishioners how a person can live to be ninety-three and not have an enemy in the world” requested the priest. Mrs. Jones said, ***“It’s easy, I just outlived my enemies.”***

We are called most importantly to **outdo** others or enemies in *love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness* and *generosity*. And we never know we may even outlive our enemies. When we rise above the other in these areas, one day reconciliation will be possible that will lead the way to redemption. Jesus outdid His enemies and others who crucified Him by loving and forgiving them, He took the path of love, and He followed the rule of love. Love is the only rule we follow...and Jesus is urging us to this, not retaliation but reconciliation which is possible through love.

As we enter the season of Lent (the season of grace), we are invited to return to our holiness as we were created in the beginning of creation. This is an open invitation for all of us, “Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relents from punishing (Joel 2.13).” And in order to help us return to God and our holiness, the season of Lent provides us with three spiritual weapons namely *prayer, almsgiving* and *fasting*. Scriptures and the Church Fathers insist above all on three forms which express conversion in relation *to oneself, to God, and to others*. Alongside the radical purification brought about by Baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: effort at reconciliation with one's neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbor, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity which covers a multitude of sin. So, are we willing to outdo others in love and live in holiness?