

Pope Addresses Sin of Adultery

Following is the address given by Pope John Paul II to the General Audience in St. Peter's Square, Aug. 13.

Christ's affirmation made during the Sermon on the Mount regarding adultery and "desire," which he calls "adultery of the heart," must be analyzed from the beginning. Christ says: "You have understood that it was said: Thou shalt not commit adultery



(Mt 5:27). He has in mind God's commandment, the sixth in the Decalogue, included in the so-called second Table of the Law which Moses received from God-Jahweh.

First of all, let's place ourselves in the situation of the audience present during the Sermon on the Mount, those who actually heard the words of Christ. They are sons and daughters of the Chosen People — people who had received the "Law" from God-Jahweh himself. These people had also received the "Prophets" who, time and time again throughout the centuries, had reproved the people's behaviour regarding this very commandment, and the way in which it was continually broken. Christ also speaks of similar transgressions. But he speaks more precisely about a certain human interpretation of the Law, which negates and does away with the correct meaning of right and wrong as specified by the will of the Divine Legislator. The Law is in fact, above all, a means — an indispensable means if "justice is to abound" (Mt 5:20). Christ desires such justice to be "superior to that of the Scribes and Pharisees." He does not accept the interpretation which through the centuries they gave to the authentic content of the Law, inasmuch as such content, or rather the purpose and will of the Legislator, were subjected in a certain way to the varied weaknesses and limits of human willpower deriving precisely from the threefold concupiscence. This was a casuistic interpretation which was superimposed on the original version of right and wrong connected with the Law of the Decalogue. If Christ tends to transform the ethos, he does so mainly to recover the fundamental clarity of the interpretation: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). Fulfillment is conditioned by a correct understanding, and this is applied, among others, also to the commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Those who follow the history of the Chosen People from the time of Abraham in the pages of the Old Testament, will find many facts which bear witness as to how this commandment was put into practice, and as a result of such practice, how the casuistic interpretation of the Law developed. First of all, it is well known that the history of the Old Testament is the scene for the systematic defection from monogamy, which fact must have a fundamental significance in our understanding of the prohibition: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Especially at the time of the Patriarchs, the abandonment of monogamy was dictated by the desire for offspring, a very numerous offspring. This desire was so profound, and procreation as the essential end of marriage was so evident, that wives who loved their husbands but were not able to give them children, on their own initiative asked their husbands who loved them, if they could carry "on their own knees," or welcome; his children born of another woman; for example, those of the serving woman, the slave. Such was the case of Sarah regarding Abraham or the case of Rachel and Jacob. These two narratives reflect the moral atmosphere in which the Israelite ethos was prepared to receive the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and how such a commandment was applied in the most ancient tradition of this people. The authority of the Patriarchs was in fact the highest in Israel and had a religious character. It was strictly bound to the Covenant and to the Promise.

The commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" did not change this tradition. Everything points to the fact that its further development was not limited by the motives (however exceptional) which had guided the behaviour of Abraham and Sarah, or of Jacob and Rachel. If we take as an example the most renowned Israelites after Moses, the Kings of Israel, David and Solomon, the description of their lives shows the establishing of real polygamy, which was undoubtedly for reasons of concupiscence.

In the history of David who also had other wives, we are struck not only by the fact that he had taken the wife of one of his subjects, but also by the fact that

he was clearly aware of having committed adultery. This fact, as well as the repentance of the King, is described in a detailed and evocative way. Adultery is understood as meaning only the possession of another man's wife, but it is not considered to be the possession of other women as wives together with the first one. All Old Testament tradition indicates that the real need for monogamy as an essential and indispensable implication of the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" never reached the conscience and the ethos of the following generations of the Chosen People.

Against this background one must also understand all the efforts which aim at putting the specific content of the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" within the framework of the promulgated laws. It is confirmed by the books of the Bible in which we find the Old Testament legislation fully recorded as a whole. If we take into consideration the letter of such legislation, we find that it takes a determined and open stand against adultery, using radical means, including the death penalty. It does so however, by effectively supporting polygamy, even fully legalizing it, at least indirectly. Therefore adultery was opposed only within special limits and within the sphere of definitive premises which make up the essential form of the Old Testament ethos. Adultery is understood above all (and maybe exclusively) as the violation of man's right of possession regarding each woman who may be his own legal wife (usually, one among many). On the contrary, adultery is not understood as it appears from the point of view of monogamy as established by the Creator. We know now that Christ referred to the "beginning" precisely in regard to his argument (Mt 19:8).

Furthermore, the occasion in which Christ takes the side of the woman caught in adultery and defends her from being stoned to death is most significant. He says to the accusers: "Whoever of you is without sin, let him throw the first stone" (Jn 8:7). When they put down the stones and go away he says to the woman: "Go, and from now on, sin no more" (Jn 8:11). Therefore Christ clearly identifies adultery with sin. On the other hand when he turns to those who wanted to stone the adulteress, he doesn't refer to the precepts of Israel's Law but exclusively to conscience. The discernment between right and wrong engraved on the human conscience can show itself to be deeper and more correct than the content of a norm.

As we have seen, the history of God's People in the Old Testament (which we have tried to illustrate through only a few examples), takes place mainly outside the normative content contained in God's commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." It went along, so to speak, side by side with it. Christ wants to straighten out these errors, and thus we have his words spoken during the Sermon on the Mount.

Business in Diocese

Milton Stewart, Chief Council for advocacy at the Small Business Administration, will speak as part of the 25th anniversary celebration of the Small Business Administration of Rochester at a dinner meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 10, at the Hospitality House in Penfield.

Stewart is a lawyer and past president of the National Small Business Association and the National Association of Small Business Investment Companies. He has also headed his own Small Business Investment Firm and has been a director and or counsel to numerous companies and several Small Business Venture Capital groups.

Stewart was instrumental in arranging the recent White House conference on small business. In his current position, he acts as an ombudsman for small business as a whole, helping small businesses use benefits of the federal government and cut through red tape.

The dinner meeting will begin with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres at 5:30 p.m. and dinner and program at 6:45 p.m.

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