

Fr Albert  
Shamon



Word for Sunday

**Religion Comes From the Heart**

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 12:20-33. (R1) Jer. 31:31-34. (R2) Hebr. 5:7-9.

According to Harvard educational psychologist Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg, moral growth is from the outside of man to the inside; that is, a man grows morally when the reasons for his behavior are determined less and less by motives from outside himself and more and more by motives from within himself. The child, for instance, does things because of his parents. The early adolescent, because of peer group pressure. The late adolescent, because it is the law. And the adult, because he wants to for reasons of his own.

God expected a similar moral growth of His people in His covenants with them. His first covenant after sin, with Noah, asked but little, for the race was in its childhood. God asked man to conform to only two laws; don't murder; don't be immoral! Like wayward children, man failed God in even so little. And after man had returned the world to the original chaos or babel, God started over again with Abraham. The race being a bit older, God demanded a loftier

morality: one based on faith, an inner principle. Abraham was faithful, so hundreds of years later, God renewed His covenant with the adolescent race through Moses. This time God asked for a still higher morality, one based on both law and faith: a faith-life lived according to the Ten Commandments.

But here again, man failed God. Man began to do what so many of us tend to do; namely, try to reduce religion and goodness to keeping laws. Laws are made to promote harmonious living in society. They do not touch motives. The law says simply, "Do this or don't do this!" It is unconcerned with the why of, or the motive behind, the action done.

God's concern, on the contrary, is precisely with motives. He does not want our actions so much as our hearts. He cares less what we do than with why we do what we do. Not the mountains we move, but the motives that impel us to move them — this is what counts with God.

In the time of Jeremiah, religion was all on the outside. Morality had degenerated into external observances only. Every day in Jerusalem priests offered innumerable sacrifices to God. Every week thousands of pilgrims streamed to the

city to worship God in song, sacrifice and prayer. The whole life of the nation revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem. And yet — all was not well: the heart of the people was far from God. Landowners gobbled up poor men's property. Widows were left to fend for themselves. Judges took bribes. Jeremiah, like Isaiah before him, cried out in effect: "This people honors me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." He saw Jews carrying the Law on their foreheads, sewn in their headresses. But not in their hearts. Then Jeremiah made a great discovery: **man couldn't serve God from the heart unless God put love in his heart.** Thus he foretold that God would one day do just that, make a New Covenant with man: "I will place my law in them and write it upon their hearts."

To establish this Covenant, to produce this fruit, Jesus, the grain of wheat, died. Then, lifted up to the right hand of the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit who

began to pour love into the hearts of men, drawing them to God from within.

So many Catholics go to Sunday Mass, but feel no closer to God as a result. They pray often, receive the sacraments, and still don't feel any nearer to God. Where are they going wrong? Maybe they are trying to do too much on their own, reducing religion to things, instead of to loving — a loving, not based on their own efforts, but on the Spirit of God within them.

**Southern Tier Young Adults Set Meeting**

Elmira — A group of interested people from parishes in the Southern Tier have been meeting and planning activities for Young Adult Ministry.

The ministry, aimed at those 18-35, will sponsor its first activity, a Trivial Pursuit Night, 7:30 p.m., Sunday, March 24 at Ss. Peter and Paul.

**Kodak Donates To Nazareth**

Nazareth College has received \$50,000 from Eastman Kodak for scholarship aid to undergraduates participating in the Kodak Scholars Program and for general operating expenses, according to Dr. Rose Marie Benson, president.

Kodak developed the scholars' program to recognize and support academic excellence at public and private colleges and universities. Kodak Scholars receive merit scholarships covering 75 percent of the college's tuition cost.

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Father Bruce Ritter

**A Hurting, Crucified Street Kid**

The human race has always liked parties more than penance. I mean, everybody likes a Mardi Gras. Nobody likes Lent very much. Lent is harder to understand and even

harder to live with.

When I was a kid, Lent meant giving up something: candy, movies, our dessert. Or, on a more positive side, Lent meant doing something extra: like helping your Mother do the dishes without complaining, or taking out the garbage.

Adults had harder things to do: like losing weight or giving up smoking... or drinking... (When I was 10, I was always disappointed that I didn't drink or smoke because I didn't have anything important to give up).

*"To a street kid like Randy, Lent didn't make any sense at all."*

For a kid, Lent was like getting ready for Christmas -- being good so you wouldn't get any coal in your stocking, or so that God wouldn't get mad at you. For adults it was like another chance to make your New Year's resolutions all over again -- only this time, because you were doing it for God, your chances of keeping them were better.

To a street kid like Randy, Lent didn't make any sense at all. "You want me to give up something, Bruce?" He said that incredulously, almost with a sense of shock and outrage. "I have a lot of getting to do. I ain't never had anything yet."

Good Friday was even less comprehensible. "If he died for us -- as you say -- that was long ago and I don't believe it. He never did anything like that for me. Nobody did. Nobody does anything just to be good. You guys don't. You're getting something out of it. It makes you feel good

Father Bruce Ritter, OFM Conv., is the founder and President of Covenant House, which operates crisis centers for homeless and runaway boys and girls all over the country

to help me. That's your thing, man. Don't lay your trip on me. You need me, man! I don't need you." The boy was 16. A street kid.

Not all our kids have suffered that much, have such an active disbelief burned into them. Most are capable -- and cautiously anxious -- to believe in good people making good things happen to them.

A girl said to me once: "Why do you run this place? You must be very rich?" I said, No. I was always broke and we did it because of God and we cared about her and would probably love her if she stayed around.

A boy, a street kid, a hustler, said to me: "Bruce, give me \$10,000. You must be a millionaire to run this place." I just laughed and said I didn't have any money and he asked me where I got it and I said I asked people for it.

He laughed and said unbelievably: "What do you say?" I said, well if you had money and I asked you for some of it to help a bunch of really good kids who had no place to stay, wouldn't you give it? And he said "Yes," and started to cry. I think because it had been a long time since someone had called him good.

Our kids are beautiful. Most wouldn't like to hear me call them that. They would snort unbelievably and say we were crazy or weird, and why did we think that. And that it just wasn't true, because that would mean that we loved them and there is no way they can believe that. No way!

Those of us, who are believers, for whom our act of faith has conjoined our time and history with the Lord's, the world is a different place of love and grace. The logic and meaning imposed on our life by the death of Jesus are inescapable: He died for all of us because he loved us, not because we were worthy of it or deserved it.

*"... we can never find the answer to why we do what we do anywhere else."*

Ever since Good Friday, the only allowable reason for us to do good to anyone -- the only reason that makes any sense -- is because we love them. Not because they are good. Not because they deserve it. But because they need

it. Because they will never learn that they are beautiful unless we love them.

Because Randy, still only 16, hurting and crucified, can never believe Jesus loves him unless we do.

Maybe Lent is hard to live with because it goes so far beyond giving up cake and candy and cigarettes and losing weight... Even beyond the extra prayers and meditations...

Maybe we find Lent so hard because we know, in our heart of hearts, that we can never find the answer to why we do what we do anywhere else.

A hurting, crucified street kid, and that hurting crucified man on the cross ask the same question -- just their language is different. Do you love me?...

We have to say yes to both to say yes to either.

Pray for us. We pray for you all the time.

Yes, I'd like to show my love for hurting street kids like Randy. Enclosed is my contribution of: \$\_\_\_\_\_

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