

The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
<i>Response</i>	Thou art a hiding place for me, thou preservest me from trouble; thou dost encompass me with deliverance.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“A great prophet has arisen among us, God has visited his people!”
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:40-45

The sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B takes us to 1 Corinthians 10 with one of the shortest excerpts from Paul’s letter to the Church at Corinth. But as usual, just because it’s short doesn’t mean it’s inconsequential. So in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, the reading for today says this:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.¹

Okay, so what’s going on here? There are two aspects of Paul’s teaching here that I want to highlight: the dispute over food and drink, and then the whole question of imitating Paul. Where does he get off saying that? So let’s start with the food or drink, because that’s the background.

If you read through 1 Corinthians 10 as a whole—in other words, if you back up to verse 1 and you read through the entire chapter—you’ll see that one of the conflicts that lie behind the chapter is the question of eating food that has been

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

sacrificed to idols. Now in order to get that context clear, it's important to recall once again that Corinth is a Greek city, predominantly inhabited by pagans, by Gentiles...and that one of the ways ancient pagan temple cults worked is that certain foods, certain animals, that would be sacrificed or consecrated in part to this or that god or goddess in the various temples throughout the city...some of that meat would then make its way to the marketplace and be sold for people to consume.

So in other words, the grocery—the markets for food and drink—were tied up with the temple cult and the religious services of the various pagan deities in the city. So one of the things...one of the early pastoral problems that Christians dealt with in the early Church is whether a baptized Christian—think here of a Gentile who's now become a believer in Christ—should continue to purchase and eat meat that was sold at the marketplace, which may or may not have been sacrificed to Zeus or Apollo or Aphrodite...or you know, one of these different deities. And if in purchasing such meat and eating such meat, it would be in some way remotely participating or approximately participating in the pagan temple cults.

In other words, would they be supporters of idolatry if they ate food that was sacrificed to idols that they had purchased in the temple markets? So Paul has a whole discussion of this in chapter 10, starting in verse 18. And he says this...I'll just give you a little bit of background here. Again, this isn't in the lectionary for today, but it's important to know it. He says:

Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Alright, so pause here. Notice...Paul's first point is, if you're a baptized Christian, you cannot go to the temple cult and actually drink the offerings, drink the cup of demons. Because with pagan sacrifice...they're not just sacrificing to imaginary

gods and goddesses. They're actual real, malevolent forces behind those deities. So with the pagan sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons. And you can't drink the cup of the Lord—meaning the Eucharistic chalice, the cup of the Blood of Christ—and drink the cup of a demon as well. You can't participate in both. If you do, you'll provoke the Lord to jealousy.

Alright, so on the one hand, there's no going to the temple cults, just like there's no going to the brothels in 1 Corinthians 6. On the other hand, when it comes to food that had been sacrificed to the deities but now was being sold in the market, Paul shifts his tune. Listen to this, verse 23:

“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For “the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.” If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

So pause there. Notice...what is Paul saying? You can't drink the cup of demons. You can't go to the temple cult and participate in the sacrifices. But when it comes to food offered in the marketplace, eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any problems about conscience. And if you have a pagan relative who invites you to their house, and they set something before you, don't raise any questions about it on the ground of conscience, because all the animals actually belong to God. Even a deer or bull or goat that might have been consecrated to some demon actually belongs to God—the meat that's sold in the market.

However, now Paul shifts in the other direction, verse 28:

(But if some one says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then out of consideration for the man who informed you, and for conscience' sake—I mean his conscience, not yours—do not eat it.) For why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

So...

...and now we get to the verse that we had for the reading for today:

...whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

So pause there. Notice...Paul has a complicated...it's a nuanced but it's a reasonable pastoral strategy. When it comes to certain activities of approximate participation in the temple cult—or direct participation, I should say, in the temple cult—can't do it. When it comes to remote participation through eating food that has been in the meat market, he says don't raise any questions about it. You're free to eat it.

However, if you're at someone's house and they bring to your attention that it was offered to some god, you should refrain from eating it, not because there's anything intrinsically wrong with it but because you might scandalize that person in them thinking that you support the offering of sacrifices to these pagan deities. And he says:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

...and do it with thanksgiving. And then that's the context when he says:

Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do...

So Paul has this fascinating pastoral strategy. There are certain things that he would allow for himself on the surface, intrinsically. He doesn't think there is anything intrinsically wrong with eating the meat that was sacrificed to this or that deity in the marketplace, especially if you don't know exactly its origins, where it came from. However, if you might put a stumbling block in front of someone else, if you might cause scandal, you should always try to avoid giving offense.

So notice how nuanced already Paul's pastoral strategy is as he's dealing with these very practical issues in the early Church that consisted of so many converts from

Gentile paganism. And I think this is actually a great chapter that helps remind us that yes, Paul is the apostle. Yes, Paul is arguably the greatest theologian in the history of the Church. But ultimately too, Paul is a pastor. He writes pastoral theology. He's writing as a pastor to this Church. He's trying to shepherd this Church through its pastoral, practical problems, issues, controversies, and moral decisions of how to make judgments and discern right and wrong in daily life in Corinth.

So it's a fascinating window on the early Church, and I think it has all kinds of implications for us in the modern world as we try to navigate living in secular society, which is in some ways neo-pagan at times...and how to navigate our being *in* that society but not *of* that society—participating in the market and in the economies of a secular society without, at the same time, scandalizing people or also being overly scrupulous, as Paul mentions here. So that's the first part.

The second part—the one that really staggers me every time I read it—are those words:

Be imitators of me... (1 Corinthians 11:1a)

You think about Paul writing the letter to Corinth. He could have just said: “Imitate Christ.” But he didn't just say “imitate Christ.” He said:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Now the Greek word for imitator, *mimētēs*—we get the English word “mimic” from that. So Paul here is saying to mimic him, to live like he lives. He's just explained to you how he navigates the moral issue of meat in the pagan markets, and now he's calling you to imitate him, to be an imitator of him as he imitates Christ.

And that might sound really, really audacious. But what's fascinating about Paul's exhortation here is that it is theologically and ecclesiologically absolutely not audacious at all. Because if Paul is a Christian, a *christianos*—although he doesn't call himself that, but it's used in Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament. If he is

an anointed one, then it's fitting that not only would he imitate Christ but that others would imitate him. If he's living out the call—the anointing—of the Gospel, then it's fitting for him to speak to his spiritual children as an apostle and tell them to imitate *him*.

And by the way, that's how he sees himself. The Corinthians aren't just the congregation that he's writing to; they're his children. So if you look in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15, Paul says:

I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

So notice, that puts into context why Paul is telling them first to imitate him. Because he is their spiritual father in Christ. And anyone who has kids knows that for better or for worse, kids imitate their parents. Kids mimic how you speak, what you say, how you act. They mimic your virtues, and they mimic your vices. And it's often very clear which vices they get from which parents. Anyway, nevermind...I'm not going to go down that road. Anyway...

But Paul here, as a spiritual father, is calling the Christians in Corinth to imitate him, because they're his children. They're his beloved children. But Paul doesn't stop with himself. He says:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

And this, of course, makes us think of the classic 15th century work of Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. And it's a very popular book—one of the bestselling spiritual works of all time. And Paul's statement here almost makes me want to write a book called *The Imitation of Paul*, because what's fascinating is that if you read through the letters of Paul, and you look at the life of Paul (especially in the Acts of the Apostles), what you'll realize here is that what Paul is saying here about his own imitation of Christ is profoundly true in so many ways.

So I put together a chart here just for you to look at it. I just want to show you in the Acts of the Apostles—this is just a few. But look at some of the examples here of the parallels between the life of Christ and the life of Paul, between the Gospel of Luke and then the book of Acts. So just a few examples...

First, in the Gospel of Luke in the life of Jesus, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with a high fever...in Luke chapter 4. If you look at the life of Paul in the book of Acts, Paul heals Publius' father, who was sick with a fever and dysentery...in Acts 28.

Number two, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus laid His hands on the sick whenever He wanted to heal them...in Luke chapter 4. Likewise, in Acts 28, when Paul heals people, he does it by laying his hands on a sick man.

Number three, when Jesus begins to travel throughout Galilee in Luke chapter 4, it says that He healed many with diseases in the territory of Galilee. Well, in the book of Acts, it says that Paul healed many with diseases on the island of Malta.

Number four, at the time of His passion, Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin and struck in the presence of the high priest...in Luke 22. Likewise, when Paul is arrested in Acts 22, he is brought before the Sanhedrin and struck in the presence of the high priest.

And then finally, of course, Jesus at the end of his life is accused by the Sanhedrin before the procurator Pontius Pilate—the Roman procurator in Luke 23. And Paul, in the book of Acts 24, is accused by the Sanhedrin before the Roman procurator Antonius Felix, who is procurator at his time.

So what's going on here? Now, because Luke is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, these are not coincidences. What Luke is doing here is that he's highlighting the historical parallels between the life of Christ in the Gospel and the life of Paul in the book of Acts. Because what he's showing you is that the apostles' lives are nothing other than a recapitulation of the life of Christ. Christ is not just metaphorically or spiritually living in Paul, living in Peter—and I can

show you a bunch of lists of similar parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Peter, but we're not talking about him right now.

It's not just that Jesus is spiritually living in Paul. He's actually living out the mysteries of His life through the apostles and through the Church...which makes sense because what does Paul say? What is the Church? It is the mystical Body of Christ. So it's fitting that the Church would continue to live out in itself through its apostles and evangelists some of the mysteries of Christ's own life that we see witness to in the Gospel. So when Paul says:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

He's telling the truth. His life was a reflection, a *mimesis* (the Greek word), an imitation, of Jesus Himself. And so I would close here in that regard with a couple of insights from the living tradition. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, one of my favorite paragraphs in the *Catechism*—one of the most moving paragraphs—is where the *Catechism* talks about the imitation of Christ. And it gives a quote from St. John Eudes here, who is a little known saint but a very powerful and poignant quotation. This is what the *Catechism* says about this whole idea of imitating Christ. Listen to this:

Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us. “By his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.” We are called only to become one with him, for he enables us as the members of his Body to share in what he lived for us in his flesh as our model...

And then it quotes St. John Eudes, where he says:

“We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church... For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue

them in us and in his whole Church. This is his plan for fulfilling his mysteries in us.”²

Now I don't know about you, but I don't usually think of my life as an imitation of Christ in that way. Or if I do think of my life as an imitation of Christ, I think of it as me primarily striving to be more like Jesus. And that's true, and that's what Paul is describing, and that's what Christians are called to. But what we often forget is that through the grace of Baptism, it's not just us imitating Christ, striving to live like Christ. It's also Christ living His mysteries in us.

So did the Holy Spirit descend upon Christ at His Baptism? Yeah. So what happens when we're baptized? The same mystery. Is Christ revealed as a beloved Son of God? Yes. Well, what happened at your Baptism? The Father spoke over you: “This is my beloved son; this is my beloved daughter.” You became a child of God in Christ. Does Christ bear witness to the Father? Does He bear witness to the Good News of salvation? Yes. So what should you be doing in your life? Being a witness to the Father's love, being a witness to the Gospel.

Does Christ avoid suffering during His life? No. He goes to the cross. He takes up the cross every single day, and He unites suffering to love in order to make it redemptive. So as a Christian, should I expect that I'm going to suffer? Well, yeah. If Christ is living in me, then I'm not just going to live out the Joyful Mysteries or the Glorious Mysteries of the resurrection. I should also expect to live out the Sorrowful Mysteries all through our lives. Our lives are effectively—each individual Christian's life—is effectively a *mimesis* of Christ's (an imitation), but also a mystical union with Christ...a living out of Christ in us, where we're being gradually, day by day, conformed to Christ, conformed to the image of the Son as Paul says elsewhere in Romans 8.

In fact, this is really beautiful. In Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation—this is one of my favorite documents of his—*On the Call to Holiness in Today's World, Gaudete et Exsultate*, it's on the universal call to holiness. In this document, in paragraph 20, Francis boils it down to this whole notion, and he says:

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 521, quoting St. John Eudes (emphasis added)

At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life.³

That's it. You want to be holy? Then allow Christ to live out His mysteries—joy, sorrow, suffering, glory—in you. Now you might be thinking, “Well, Dr. Pitre, how do I do that practically?” Let me give you one last quote here.

So this is a prayer from St. John Gabriel Perboyre. Now you might think, “Who is that?” He's not a very famous saint. He was a 19th century Vincentian priest who was a missionary to China. And he was also a martyr. So he was a martyr in China in the 19th century, and he actually died by crucifixion on a Friday afternoon. His *mimesis*, his imitation of Christ, was to that degree...that he not only suffered, bore witness to the Gospel, suffered, was persecuted, and martyred even by crucifixion, but that he did so on the same day that His Lord was crucified.

And he composed a prayer that I would highly encourage you to memorize and to pray. And this prayer quotes St. Paul at the end. No coincidence there. But I'll just end by reading it to you. St. John Gabriel Perboyre:

O my Divine Saviour,
Transform me into Yourself.
May my hands be the hands of Jesus.
May my tongue be the tongue of Jesus.
Grant that every faculty of my body
May serve only to glorify You.
Above all,
Transform my soul and all its powers
So that my memory, will and affection
May be the memory, will and affections
Of Jesus.
I pray You
To destroy in me

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete ex Exsultate* no. 20

All that is not of You.
Grant that I may live
But in You, by You and for You,
So that I may truly say,
With St. Paul,
“I live - now not I -
But Christ lives in me”.