



## “WE WORSHIP THEE, O LORD” TRUTHS FROM THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

**I**n any personal Bible reading or group Bible study, it might seem understandable why the Book of Leviticus would get little, if any attention. It rarely gets proclaimed in the Liturgy. After all, what have all these minutiae on Jewish animal slaughter, ritual purity and otherwise dry legislative texts got to do with us “modern” Catholics and our current Eucharistic “celebrations”? More than meets the eye; hence this newsletter issue.

Leviticus reminds us of the centrality of the worship of God in our lives: both as individuals and as a Church. Do we really know what WORSHIP (not “celebration”) is? Just WHAT is worship? What — and most importantly, **WHO** — is it about? How you answer these will determine the particular form that worship takes. Do we use a sacred language, or the common everyday language? Do we all face towards Almighty God together, or

do we look at each other? Is there a specified ritual or do we embrace spontaneity? The list can go on.

Noted Catholic author and liturgist Dr. Peter Kwasniewski tells us that, while today Leviticus gets scant attention, the Church Fathers gave it much attention: *“The Fathers of the Church read this book with considerable interest and even excitement, for what they found in it was a tightly interlocked set of symbols pointing ahead to the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the unblemished victim, on the Cross. This was the inner meaning of the external ceremonies covered in Leviticus.”*

So let us first look at the structure of Leviticus and then what truths can be gleaned from it. Leviticus rests smack in the middle of the Pentateuch between Exodus and Numbers. As Dr. Kwasniewski continues, *“Its central position is deliberate and symbolic. Since God created man to be a royal priest*

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*who offers up the universe to its Creator in praise and thanksgiving, and since Israel was created to be a royal priestly people through whom this original plan would be restored, it makes sense that the “how-to” manual of worship would be at the very center of the law.”*

Leviticus might be called an example of “Creator’s Rights.” Almighty God created us, gave us our immortal souls and continues to sustain us. As part of His Covenant, He revealed to us how we should live and how we should worship Him. Leviticus reminds us that we are creatures. We individually or collectively are not God. All of this constitutes the ultimate end for which He created us: to be with Him forever in Heaven. Leviticus is the first roadmap. As Catholic scholar and apologist, Dr. Peter Kreeft states, Leviticus tells us that, *“God’s loving care of His people reaches down into even the tiny details of their lives. Nothing is too small to be an occasion for his care or our obedience.”*

Law is good. It is not ‘repressive’ of good, but only of evil. God is the author of law and good order, not of confusion. He gives us law out of love for us, for our instruction, discipline and protection.

The key word and idea in the book of Leviticus is **holiness** — a word which occurs over eighty times! The key text is 11:45: *“I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”* That gives us our essential motive for sanctity.

Most important of all, Leviticus foreshadows Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews interprets these laws messianically and symbolically. Hebrews should be read together with Leviticus as companion books.

Many notable Catholic scripture scholars believe that originally God had intended the first-born son of each family to be His priests. Then Israel com-

mitted its “original sin:” The apostasy of the Golden Calf. God’s response to this took the form of making several changes in the law that had been given up to that point. After the apostasy, God transfers the priesthood exclusively to the tribe of Levi, such that Levites substitute for the firstborn sons. Moreover, while God had earlier intended a renewed intimacy between Himself and each Israelite, he now exalts Moses as mediator between God and a sinful people, in this way foreshadowing the greater Law-giver and Mediator who was to come: His Son, Jesus Christ.



So Almighty God first establishes rites to be followed when offering sacrifices. Then, on a higher level, those having to do with the ordination of the priests whose task it would be to offer these sacrifices. Higher still come the rules that show priests and people how to be “pure,” that is, to be worthy to take part in worship. Finally, at the very top, the rules about divine worship, the rules about “holiness,” which is what Leviticus covers.

Leviticus also reminds us that our Faith consists in an important holy triad: the *lex credenda* (the law of belief), the *lex orandi* (the law or how we pray based on the previous) and the *lex vivendi* the law of living, “holiness,” which flows from the other two. Observe these, and you have a holy Church. Sever any of these and you have chaos.

From Leviticus we can see the importance of these truths for us today. First, there is a definite way of worshiping God that He introduces as pleasing to Him. God is not to be worshipped haphazardly, according to our whims, feelings, and preferences.

Second, there are definite ministers who must be qualified for, consecrated for, and involved in such worship. Not just anyone can take it upon himself to stride up to the altar and act as a priest; a divine mandate is required along with an ordination of

the priest. This sacred ministry does not proceed from Baptism, although obviously the sacred minister must be baptized. God's choosing of the men of the tribe of Levi continues in the New Testament with Our Lord Jesus Christ choosing men to be His Apostles who then chose their successors: bishops, priests and deacons through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Catholic priesthood comes directly from Jesus Christ, not from the community.

Third, those who are to take part in worship, whether as offering or as receiving, must be pure since the ultimate goal is to become holy as God is holy. There is such a thing as being spiritually unprepared for worship, and we have to make a conscious effort to prepare ourselves so that our participation will not be in vain, or worse, sacrilegious.

In summary, Leviticus reminds us of our ultimate vocation: to be holy as God is holy. Hence God tells us how we are to worship Him and how we must live in order to be holy. This puts into sharper focus

the question of deliberate, persistent public sin, and those who can receive Holy Communion. Neither the Tent of the Meeting where the Ark of the Covenant resided, nor the churches of the early Church had "EVERYBODY IS WELCOME" signs outside. God's holiness demanded a commitment to holiness. If we have not strived for this, then the Sacrament of Penance constitutes the perfect remedy along with a firm purpose to change and live according to the demands of Gospel holiness.

That's quite a bit from what appear to be boring rules and regulations in Leviticus. But then, God's ways are not our own. Dr. Peter Kreeft tells us that the way to combat this world-wide apostasy is simply sanctity. May Leviticus prompt us towards it.



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