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YOU HAVE MADE A COVENANT WITH GOD AND WITH THE PEOPLE OF NEW YORK

JOHN CARDINAL O'CONNOR*

The annual Mass of the Holy Name Society for the New York Police Department reminds us of the thanks we owe to the Police Department. I wish to express my gratitude in particular to the police officers who are assigned to St. Patrick's Cathedral. It is a wonderful gift, since we have so many thousands of visitors who come here every day. It is critically important that we have that kind of security, and that the visitors feel safe here. We recognize the sacrifice required.

The other day I was walking along the street alone. A young man came up to me. He stopped me and said, "You are Cardinal O'Connor." I admitted to the offense. He said, "What an honor to meet you," which is always a wonderful start. We shook hands and he said, "I am a Catholic, not a very good one. I love the Church, but I do not keep the rules, but my mother does." I was grateful for that. Then he said to me, "Is it still proper to kiss your ring?" I said, "If ring kissing is your thing, go right ahead."

We parted friends, but I thought about that a good bit. "I love the Church, but I am not a very good Catholic. I do not keep the rules." This was paralleled by a little exchange that I engaged in this past week with a television interviewer in which the interviewer asked me, "Is it difficult to keep the rules?" I

* This article is derived with minor changes from a homily given by His Eminence, the Archbishop of New York, at Sunday Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, on March 16, 1997. The original text of the homily was published in *CATHOLIC NEW YORK*, March 20, 1997. The Mass was in honor of the Holy Name Society of the New York City Police Department. Particularly honored was Chief Detective Kelleher, who received the award which the Holy Name Society gives annually to a police officer.

said, "Yes, it is. It can be very difficult." Fortunately God gives us the grace, God gives us the sacraments, God gives us the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Without these it would be infinitely difficult, if not impossible. But it is difficult for all of us. It is difficult for priests. It is difficult for bishops.

The more I reflected on this, the more it struck me that this young man, this television interviewer and many other people think predominantly of the "rules" of the Catholic Church. There are not really a great number of rules of the Catholic Church which bind us in conscience very seriously. What many think of as the "rules" of the Church are Divine Law, or what we call the Natural Moral Law written by Almighty God in the individual human heart. That is what makes the difference. These are not simply rules that are devised by human beings, or merely a list of regulations which are required if you want to be in good standing. We believe that the overwhelming number of things, the "rules," that we teach are derived from Divine Law or rooted in Natural Moral Law.¹

The first reading today, from the *Book of Jeremiah*,² has been called the most important reading, indeed the key reading, in the Old Testament. It is the longest passage that is quoted in the New Testament, found in the *Letter to the Hebrews*. These words are the words that are used in the Mass every day. When we say over a cup of wine "This is my Blood of the new and everlasting covenant," these are the words that our Lord used at the Last Supper, and which are rooted in this Old Testament reading of *Jeremiah*. This sentence from *Jeremiah* is particularly important: "[T]his is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people."³

This covenant, this pact, this commitment on the part of Almighty God has as its objective to make it possible for us to live together in harmony, in peace, in justice, in charity, to make social life possible, to make economic life possible, international

¹ See JOHN PAUL II, *THE GOSPEL OF LIFE* 131-32 (1995) (discussing the Catholic teaching that human law is derived from eternal law).

² *Jeremiah* 31:31-34. (New American).

³ *Id.* at 31-33; see also *Hebrews* 8:10 ("[T]his is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people.").

life possible—all under this divine covenant written into our hearts. Even without being told, there are so many things that a properly formed conscience recognizes as absolutely imperative simply if we are going to live as intelligent human persons. This is crucial to remember. It all has to be subordinate to the Divine Will, otherwise there is chaos. Every human law must, in some way at least, implicitly reflect the Divine Law, or at least not be in contradiction with the Divine Law. If not, we end up in chaos because it contradicts our human nature, since the law is written in the human heart.

Why am I speaking of this at some length here? Simply because it is the Scripture of the day? In part, but dominantly because we honor you, the men and women of the New York City Police Department. It seems to me that we could not have chosen a text more suited to a Mass honoring you. Why is this?

THE LIBERATING ROLE OF HUMAN AND DIVINE LAW IN SOCIETY

Law, human and divine, binds every one of us; not one of us is exempt. Why then speak explicitly to police officers and others in the Police Department about that which is universally binding? Knowing that I was preparing to be with you today, one of my very close associates said to me: “Why will you talk differently to police officers from the way you would talk to everyone at the 10:15 Mass in the cathedral? They are the same as we are. They have the same problems, the same anxieties. They have to worry about paying mortgages. They have the same financial problems, perhaps marriage problems, perhaps romantic problems, perhaps health problems. Certainly they have to worry about the rearing of their children. They are ordinary human beings. So why would you talk differently to them in any way?”

I agreed that, with great respect, you are ordinary human beings. At least I think you are ordinary human beings. But there is a tremendous difference: you are required not simply to keep the law, as the rest of us are, but to *enforce* the law. We need you desperately. We need you not only for your efficiency, but also for your integrity.

The Holy Name Society does not give its annual award to a police officer simply because of his or her efficiency, as much as this is admired and needed. It is integrity that must prevail. It is integrity that the people can trust. There is no contradiction

between these two virtues—and both *are* virtues. We need your efficiency, but we also need your integrity to make daily life in our society possible. What would we do without you? Some of us can forget that. Some of us just take you for granted. Perhaps some of you can forget how vitally society needs you, not simply your presence, not simply your uniform or your plainclothes, not simply the particular position in which you find yourself, but above all your integrity, your “trustability,” if I may use that word. You are what makes it possible for us to walk with a degree of freedom throughout this city and its environs. You are indispensable to the ordinary, orderly, harmonious way of life. It is important that you remember this.

Law does not restrict merely. It does that, but law also liberates. Certainly this is true of Divine Law and of all human law which appropriately reflects Divine Law.⁴ It does not merely restrict, it liberates, it frees. So, for example, I am told by the Divine Commandment, “You shall not steal.” That restricts me, but it frees all of you. You do not have to worry about your property if I keep the commandment. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” This restricts me to tell the truth, not to lie about anyone. But it frees you knowing that there will be no lies told about you, no problems created for you by false witness. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” This restricts the individual, wife or husband, but lets others walk in freedom. “You shall not kill.” This restricts me, I may not kill anyone. But what freedom it gives to others, how it liberates others! “Honor your father and your mother.” What respect this is intended to generate for all lawful authority which truly frees us. To be a law enforcer, therefore, and I say this very sincerely, is to be a liberator.

We all know of the tremendous reduction in crime here in New York City.⁵ I know that figures can be juggled. I know that various people may want to take credit for things for which they do not deserve credit; that is not for me to judge. We do know

⁴ See JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, at 132 (discussing the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas on law). Aquinas stated that “human law has the nature of law in so far as it partakes of right reason; and it is clear that, in this respect, it is derived from the eternal law.” THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA* I-II, Q. 93, Art. 3 (Fathers of the English Province trans., Benziger Bros., Inc. 1947).

⁵ See, e.g., *Crime Rate Falls Again in N.Y.C.*, THE RECORD (New Jersey), Nov. 24, 1997, at A4 (reporting that New York City’s crime rate plunged at a rate of two and one half times the national average in the first six months of 1997).

that without our police force we would not have this reduction in crime. We would have a proliferation, a radical increase in crime.

The reduction in crime has meant a liberation for New York City.⁶ You see far more tourists walking freely now. You see people getting on the subway with less sense of fear than they had before. As a matter of fact, we see a building boom in this city, this city which just a few years ago was threatened with abandonment.⁷ Many corporations were threatening to leave, not simply because of taxes or finances, but out of fear. This is an excellent example of how you who enforce the law are liberators.

It is always a divine act that you enforce the law? Is every law a divine law, a sacred law? Hardly. But you make it possible for people to live in the harmony that Almighty God intended when you do enforce the law, when you do carry out the thousand and one duties that may be yours every day, seemingly trivial or prosaic duties or very profound or very dramatic duties. Many of your duties are the kinds that do not get headlines but are just as important as the kinds that do, once again, because they make it possible for human beings to breathe free, to live as God intended us to live.

All covenants are binding by an oath, with God as their witness. God gave two covenants that He speaks about in *Jeremiah*⁸: the old covenant which was carved in stone, the Ten Commandments, and now, not a change, but those Ten Commandments carved in the human heart. God swears to this, that if we keep those commandments He will keep us. He will hold us in the hollow of His hand. You have made a covenant, you who are police officers. You have made a covenant with Almighty God and with the people of New York. You have taken a very sacred oath. It is a very grave oath. It is an oath never to be forgotten. It is an oath that we can never permit to be corrupted. This is why we need your integrity.

It is not always easy to keep that oath, is it? You are not only police officers; the overwhelming number of you here are

⁶ See John Marks et al., *New York New York: The Big Apple Comes Roaring Back—and Other Cities Wonder How It Was Done*, U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, Sept. 29, 1997, at 52.

⁷ See *id.*

⁸ *Jeremiah* 31:31-34.

Catholic police officers. You need help. You need the sacraments. You need this Mass, but you need the Sacrifice of the Mass on a regular basis. It is not something you can casually skip. You need the Sacrament of Penance. I have to go to confession regularly. I need the sacraments. All of us need the sacraments. I am not out there pounding a beat or walking the streets as you are. I am not subject to the kinds of temptations or pressures to which many of you may be subject. God requires that you keep your path, but God gives you the means to do it—the Sacrifice of the Mass, the sacraments, the whole reality of the Church. Even then it is not always easy to put the Divine Law first no matter what the circumstances.

It wasn't even easy for Christ. We are told, for instance, in the *Letter to the Hebrews*: "In the days when ... [Christ] was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to [God] who was able to save him from death."⁹

Christ had come to suffer and die, but now when the time comes blood is pouring from His body like sweat and He cries out in protest, "Don't let this happen to Me. Take this chalice of suffering away from Me. But nevertheless not My will but Thine be done."¹⁰ This is what the police officer must say confronted with pressures, confronted with temptations. It is not always easy to put the Divine Will first, to put what you know God wants and demands first. In the final analysis you may suffer but you have to say, as I have to say, "not my will but Thine be done."¹¹

We do not always succeed. We slip and fall. You slip and fall. I slip and fall many, many times a day. We all need this prayer from the 51st Psalm:

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe
out my offense.

Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

....

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.

Cast me not out from your presence,
and your holy spirit take not from me.

⁹ *Hebrews* 5:7.

¹⁰ See *Matthew* 26:36-46; *Mark* 14:32-42; *Luke* 22:39-46.

¹¹ *Luke* 22:42.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.

I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners shall return to you.¹²

This is the perfect prayer for the police officer.

Finally, it is not irreverent to say that your lives in so many ways parallel today's Gospel. What does our Lord say?

I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.¹³

That is the man, the woman, prepared to risk his or her life, prepared to lay down his or her life for others. That person will see an eternal reward. This is what you do, and I say this with deepest sincerity, every day of your lives. Think of it that way, that you are uniting yourselves each day with the sacrifice of our Divine Lord. Christ laid down His life in order that we might live.

You lay down your lives every day. You risk your lives, the overwhelming majority of you, every day in order that we might live in peace, in freedom, without fear, as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. For all of this that you do, all of us here are so deeply grateful. Because of the kinds of people you are, regardless of human weakness, regardless of flaws, regardless of the occasional scandal, I personally am proud to carry with me the shield of the police force of the City of New York marked with the crest and the word "chaplain." To the degree that I can serve any of you who serve God's people so unconditionally I feel deeply honored. All of us here now, I know, want to ask Almighty God to bless you and to thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

¹² *Psalms* 51:3-4, 12-15.

¹³ *John* 12:24-25.

