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Commentary on the Gospel: Most Important Commandment

Gospel for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mk 12:28b-34*)

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that God is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of

God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Commentary

The Gospel for today's liturgy presents us with a deep dialogue between a scribe – an expert in the Scriptures – and Jesus. The question he addresses to Christ is of great importance, since it deals with the ultimate meaning of the commandments. This man perhaps felt burdened by all the practices he had to fulfill as a member of the Chosen People and wanted to know the reason for so much effort. And we too may want to ask the Master: What is the first of all the commandments?

Jesus' reply is not long in coming, making use of some well-known words of Scripture from

Deuteronomy that every pious Jew prayed at least twice a day: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus uses this prayer, known as the *Shema Israel* (Hebrew for *hear, O Israel*), to show that at the center of Israel’s faith is the reason and ultimate meaning of all the commandments: love for God.

Even though the scribe had only asked for the most important commandment, our Lord also wants to remind him of the second in importance, once again making use of words from Scripture, this time from Leviticus: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (*Lev 19:18*).

Jesus thus reminds us that love for God and neighbor is the heart of our faith and the source from which all the commandments flow. He invites

us to raise our sights and realize that we are called not simply to fulfill specific obligations, but to live with a great and generous love that embraces every corner of our life. As Saint Josemaria said: “Jesus isn’t satisfied with ‘going-halves’: he wants everything” (*The Way*, no. 155).

Therefore all the Commandments have love as their ultimate meaning, the great and intense love that God is asking of us. In other words, the commandments are specific ways of loving God and those around us in a great variety of situations.

Perhaps we can take advantage of this Gospel passage to consider how we are fulfilling the commandments and the duties of Christian life – especially those we find most challenging. And we can ask ourselves if we view these as a burden we need to bear or if, on the

contrary, we are putting into practice what our Lord teaches us today and we see them as specific ways to show our love for God and others in every circumstance.

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