

Catholics have a reputation for not knowing the Bible very well. It's a reputation we've taken centuries to build, and it's one we're not especially fond of. Once a young Catholic woman told me how embarrassed she was that her fiance, who was not a Catholic, knew the Bible so much better than she did. I told her that was probably because as a child she received what was regarded at the time as a "good Catholic education." Catholic schools taught the Catholic laws; learning the Bible was not part of the curriculum. Many of you may even recall being discouraged from reading the Bible because you might give it a private interpretation. One of my co-workers tells me that when she was a child, her family was told that if they dared study the Bible in their home without a priest present, they were committing mortal sin.

Nowadays, of course, we encourage people to come to know the Scriptures as best they can. But even so, the problem of interpreting the Scriptures remains. A roomful of six people can easily yield six different interpretations of the same passage. As happens with many other books and events that happen in life, people's interpretation is colored by the experience they bring.

At the time of Christ things were much the same. Rabbis interpreted the Scriptures for the people. The Scriptures available then were in two groups: the historical books known as the "Torah" and the prophetic books. Jesus called the whole Hebrew Scriptures "the law and the prophets." In today's Gospel, Jesus the rabbi gives his interpretation of what the Scriptures mean.

Jesus goes through several individual points: don't grow angry, be reconciled before offering sacrifice, do not lust, uphold the sanctity of marriage, and don't swear. But to me it's important to look beyond these individual precepts to the general tenor of this speech. Jesus has taken the Torah and made it his own. He has accepted the wonderful rule of life God gave his ancestors and let it breathe with the life of his own experience.

The Catholic Church still teaches many laws. And, for better or for worse, people interpret them in the same way they interpret the Scriptures--according to their own experience. People will screen out some laws and screen in some others. People ignore some laws because they are inconvenient. Sometimes the laws fight against each other and it's difficult to know which one to choose.

But the law, in its best sense, is not a burden to carry, it is an environment in which to live. It is a means by which we ponder the will of God. Jesus' speech today makes it clear that simply keeping the law may not fulfill the will of God. But abandoning the law may not fulfill it either. In either case God may desire something more. Once we make God's will our own, the law is nothing less than the means for the joyful expression of our unity with God.

Our vocation is to love Christ so much that his words become our words. And when we are faced with a conflict in the law, we act from what we have learned about Christ. Then with Jesus we fulfill the law.