

Study 35: Leviticus – Key Elements

Background. Concluding our study of the book of *Exodus*, we find Israel established in a covenant relationship with God. They have not only survived the external, human crisis resulting from their release from Egyptian captivity, but have also overcome the internal crisis surrounding the Covenant itself. The rupture and apostasy of the people has been healed and replaced by renewal. The people accept, at least for the present, that they have been released from slavery to man so that they can serve God, for only here can real freedom be found. This, in truth, represents another of the great divine paradoxes: only by accepting a life of service, of “slavery” to God, are we truly free. We find this fact emphasized centuries later by St. Paul when he instructs the Romans:

“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, although you were once slaves of sin, you have become obedient from the heart to the pattern of teaching to which you were entrusted. Freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your nature. For just as you presented the parts of your bodies as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness for lawlessness, so now present them as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. But what profit did you get then from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit that you have leads to sanctification, and its end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” [Rom 6:15-23]

The apostasy of the people has been overcome by chastisement and renewal, and the blessing of the firstborn and the priestly office are now transferred to the Levites:

“Today you are installed as priests for the LORD, for you went against your own sons and brothers, to bring a blessing upon yourselves this day” [Ex 32:29].

At Sinai, the Ark, the Tent of Meeting, and the Tabernacle are constructed according to God’s very specific instructions. Although veiled, the Lord God is present among His people. And *Exodus* ends with this revelation of God’s Presence:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle... The cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire in the cloud at night, in the sight of the whole house of Israel in all the stages of their journey” [Ex 40:34,38].

We depart *Exodus* with a sense of calm as the people celebrate the feasts and bring their sacrifices to the priests who will carry out their religious duties at the altar and in the Tent.

Turning from the book of *Exodus*, we encounter the book of *Leviticus*, the shortest and central book of the *Pentateuch*. *Leviticus* is the *Septuagint*’s Greek name for the book, a

name that means “relating (or pertaining) to the Levites,” even though the Levites are by no means the book’s central topic. In Hebrew *Leviticus* is more popularly called by its first word, *wayyiqra*, meaning, “And He called.” More formally, *Leviticus* is known among the Jews as *torat kohanim*, which means “law (or instructions) for the priests,” a title that perhaps more clearly defines *Leviticus* as a prescription for the proper worship of the God of Israel. And yet, even this title is misleading since only some of the laws enumerated in *Leviticus* are addressed solely to the priests. In truth, as a direct result of the Sinai Covenant, *Leviticus* is directed to *all* of Israel, priests and people, and offers a wide range of laws and prescriptions relating to ritual and ethical behavior. *Leviticus*, then, makes some serious demands on Israel, calling them to respond to the Lord God in both their worship and their lives.

Most people today find *Leviticus* a bit of a challenge, not only because of its seemingly dry presentation of laws and prescriptions, but also because its content is so foreign to our modern concerns, sensibilities, and way of life. Because its contents and focus are both culturally and temporally disconnected from today’s world, modern readers tend to give *Leviticus* short shrift. Instead of reading and studying the book itself, most Christians simply consult commentaries or brief overviews of the book.

In our sessions we will study *Leviticus* in some detail, but we probably won’t examine every verse, every law, or every priestly regulation and duty. I intend to focus on several key themes that will help us understand Jewish worship and identity. *Leviticus* also foreshadows the new law introduced by Jesus Christ, addressed throughout the New Testament, and taught by the Church He founded.

Overview. As mentioned above, Israel’s apostasy surrounding the golden calf event demanded a thorough renewal, one in which priestly responsibility was assigned to the Aaronic priesthood and the Levites. Now only Moses will speak directly with God. Moses will then share God’s will with Aaron and the Levites who, in turn, will instruct the people. With God now present in the Tabernacle, *Leviticus* instructs priests and people how they are to worship the Lord God and make atonement for their sinfulness.

Leviticus can be divided into several fairly well-defined sections:

1. The Priestly Code [Lv 1-16]
 - a. Sacrifices, offerings and ritual instructions for the people (Israel) [Lv 1-5]
 - b. Ritual Instructions for the priests [Lv 6-7]
 - c. Priestly Ordination [Lv 8-10]
 - d. Laws of Ritual Purity [Lv 11-16]
2. The Holiness Code [Lv 17-26]. This includes a wide range of practices that will lead the people to the holiness God desires for them.
 - a. Blood, sexual relations, ritual holiness, moral holiness, offerings [Lv 17-22]
 - b. Festivals, Rites of the Tabernacle, Sabbaticals and Jubilees [Lv 23-25]
 - c. Covenantal blessings and curses [Lv 26]
 - d. Offerings for Redemption [Lv 27-34]

Perhaps the best summation of the book of *Leviticus* is found in the book itself:

The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I, the LORD, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived, nor shall you do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you; do not conform to their customs. My decrees you shall carry out, and my statutes you shall take care to follow. I, the LORD, am your God. Keep, then, my statutes and decrees, for the person who carries them out will find life through them. I am the LORD [Lv 18:1-5].

It's apparent, therefore, that God, as a result of the Mosaic Covenant, intends Israel to be His special people, separate from the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and all other nations of the earth. It is through Israel, this holy nation, that God will continue and ultimately fulfill His creative plan for humanity. Although at the time God's plan is not yet fully revealed, it leads directly to the Incarnation and the Redemptive act of Jesus Christ.

Let's now address, if only briefly, each of the key elements presented in the book of *Leviticus*. Every aspect of these key elements is not addressed in *Leviticus* and we must occasionally turn back to *Exodus* or look forward to the books of *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy* to fill in the blanks, so to speak.

Israel's Cosmic View. If there's one thing that today's Christian finds perplexing it's the fundamental belief encountered in both *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*. Some have labeled it a "mechanical view" of the observance of the law and the national welfare. Crudely stated, in effect, it said: "If you are good, I will reward you with prosperity; if you are bad, I will punish you with adversity." But it means so much more than this. Perhaps Old Testament scholar, Fr. John McKenzie, S.J., described it best when he wrote:

The national welfare and the very order of nature itself are integrated with the moral order. The Lord does not have one will for the course of nature, another for the course of political and economic events, another for the moral life of man, His will is directed to a universe which is a harmonious unity, in which all its members cooperate under the single direction of His will. In this harmonious unity, the governing force, under the will of the Lord, is the will of man; by submission to the divine will, man communicates to the rest of the world the harmony which is established by the divine government [The Two-Edged Sword, p. 181].

Israel possessed a firm belief that God wielded nature, His creation. Nature is a gift to man from His Creator – "...and God saw that it was good" – but when man fails to submit to God's will, the gift can be taken away. Perhaps the key concept here is that *Israel saw the Lord as both present and active in the world.* He is certainly no disinterested observer.

To understand *Leviticus*, then, we must understand this view of the world. The writers of these codes of law (and the prophets who followed them) considered national sin more than a moral evil, more than the violation of one or more particular statutes. For them it was cosmic, and its consequences influenced every aspect of human life and welfare –

biological, social, political, and economic. These all depended on man's willing submission to God's will. Sin, therefore, disturbs man's cosmic harmony.

Note: As we will discover when we study the prophets, they saw sin as a stark reality. There's nothing abstract about their words when it comes to evil. They preached a remarkably simple and straightforward message: those who care little about the actions of men also care little about God and His will. But if one is acutely aware of sin's intrinsic evil, then one is just as aware of God's goodness. Sadly in their day their words were largely ignored and the consequences were grave. It would do our world much good if we read and listened to the prophets today.

Sacrifice. It was through the Sinai Covenant that Israel was formed as a people and in communion with the Lord. To strengthen the unity established by the Covenant, to deepen the people's relationship with God, and to cast out evil, He called for sacrifice. God's Presence among them highlighted the sin of the people and pointed to the need for reconciliation.

Sacrifice was just that. It was the people offering a gift to God in order to heal their broken relationship with Him because of sin. It also healed broken human relationships within the community. *Leviticus* addresses different types of sacrifice:

- **Burnt offering.** This is the "holocaust" or complete burning of an animal in acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and absolute dominion. Offered for atonement or thanksgiving, the animal must be without blemish; in other words, only the very best should be offered to God [Lv 1:3-17; 6:18-23].
- **Cereal offering.** This offering, typical of an agricultural people, had ancient origins – Cain [Gn 4:3], Melchisekdek [Gn14:18], and Moses [Ex 29:40; Nm 15:1-2]. Only fine, unleavened wheaten flour (the best), along with oil, should be offered. Incense was also burned to enhance the liturgical aura of the offering. Salt was used to add flavor to the offering, which was then eaten as a sacred meal. The salt also emphasized the perpetuity of the Covenant. The cereal offering was also made in thanksgiving or for atonement [Lv 2:1-16; 6:7-16].
- **Peace (or communion) offering.** Usually offered to keep a vow or in thanksgiving, it also involved an animal sacrifice (male or female) but only the entrails and fat were burned. Offered as a rite of reconciliation with God, it was known as a communion sacrifice (or "eucharistic" sacrifice) since the priest and the one offering the sacrifice would eat the rest of the animal as a meal in a sacred place. This meal symbolized fellowship between Israel and God [Lv 3:1-17; 7:11-36].
- **Sin offering.** These offerings define Israel's great respect for the Sinai Covenant – that any offense against it had to be expiated. The "sins" all involved offenses against God and the sanctuary, even though the offence might have been committed unwittingly or out of ignorance [Lv 4:1-5:13; 6:17-23]. But even then there is a sense that the offender was less than prudent [Nm 15:22-29]. The text addresses four kinds of persons: priests, the entire community, rulers and ordinary people. The sins of the priest are especially great because they also

bring guilt on the people. The same is true of kings and political leaders, as we see later [2 Sam 24:10-15]. The offerings of poor people reflect their poverty and instead of sacrificing a lamb or goat, they may substitute turtledoves or pigeons.

- **Guilt offering.** These offerings dealt with sins of desecration and the atonement for transgressions against the Law. Like the sin offerings they generally addressed unwitting violations involving the unjust retention of sacred things or the violation of divine rights. Often these violations were more matters of legal fault rather than moral fault. Guilt offerings were demanded as a result of sins against another, which also included return or restitution when they related to property [Lv 5:14-6:6; 7:1-10].

Interestingly, the Levitical text includes safeguards against the kind of ritualism later condemned by the prophets and by Jesus. For example, it wasn't enough to make a guilt offering. One must also admit one's guilt and make restitution [Lv 5:1-6; 5:14-6:6]. Additionally, the sacrificial ritual didn't in itself bring forgiveness; rather it demonstrated God's sovereignty and asked for His mercy [Lv 4:20,26,31]. Unlike the pagans whose gods demanded only the ritual act, the Hebrews realized that the sacrificial ritual was just the outward sign that must point to internal change and repentance. This, of course, foreshadows the sacraments, outward signs and instruments of God's grace.

Priests and Levites. Mosaic law defined the priesthood as the exclusive function of Aaron and his male posterity. Other members of the Tribe of Levi were to act as servants to the priests. All those who performed religious functions, therefore, came from the Tribe of Levi according to the following hierarchy:

1. *Levites.* At the lowest level, we have the non-priestly members of the tribe who functioned as servants of the priests.
2. *Priests.* The Aaronites or priests proper. Only those Levites who were in the direct line of Aaron could function as priests.
3. *High priests.* The highest level included Aaron and his first-born successors.

This three-level hierarchy was not arbitrary but reflected the threefold division of the sanctuary itself. The Levites were restricted to the Outer Court; the priests could enter the Sanctuary; and the high priest alone could enter the Holy of Holies.

The *Levites* were consecrated in a one-time purification ritual designed to purify them and their successors so they can enter into God's Presence [Nm 8:5-22]. Ritually, the Levites assisted the priests with sacrifice, maintained and protected the tabernacle, transported the tabernacle as it was carried during the wanderings through the wilderness, and assisted in the preparation of the showbreads, among other functions. But they also performed functions external to the Sanctuary; e.g., the instruction of the people in the Law.

A *priest*, also a member of the Tribe of Levi, must be able to trace and prove his lineage directly from Aaron.

Note: Because this genealogical requirement was foundational to the Law itself, when Jesus, as a descendant of the Tribe of Judah, is proclaimed high priest, this proclamation then abrogates the Law (see Heb 7:5-20).

With the establishment of the New Covenant, priests can then come from both the Jews and the Gentiles.

As a sign of priestly dignity, *Priests* were to demonstrate good moral behavior and not have any physical deformity. They must also avoid all Levitical uncleanness (see the discussion below) during their time of sacred service.

The priest, therefore, stands so close to God that he was considered the property of God, chosen explicitly to perform his service. The priests attended the entire sacrificial service, maintained the sacred fire, set out the showbreads, and offered the priestly blessing after the morning sacrifice. They also instructed the people in matters of the Law and made decisions in particularly difficult legal cases. Because the priests not only offered sacrifice, but also functioned as teachers and judges, the religious and civil life of Israel were closely bound together. Turning to the Letter to the Hebrews, we find an explanation of the priest's role as mediator between God and man:

Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. In the same way, it was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest, but rather the one who said to him: "You are my son; this day I have begotten you"; just as he says in another place: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" [Heb 5:1-6]

The high priest – *hakkonen* – because he was anointed on his head with oil at his seven-day ritual of consecration, was called the "anointed priest." At his consecration the high priest was sprinkled with the oil of the anointing and the blood of the sacrifice, and invested with the sacred garments or vesture. These ancient symbols of consecration had explicit meaning. The blood – a symbol of life – signified the dedication of the person's life to God, the Author of life. The solemn anointing set the person aside from other men, and with the investiture in sacred garments the priest was entrusted with the sacred service at which he officiates. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies.

Major Themes. Although many themes run through *Leviticus*, in our study we will focus primarily on two major Levitical themes:

1. The Call to Holiness
2. Keep Holy the Sabbath

These two themes relate closely to our lives as Christians and to Jesus' call to discipleship. Both address the sanctification of daily life by living, through faith, a life of right worship and perfect charity. Jesus expressed this clearly when He taught the Great Commandment:

And one of the scribes came up, and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first 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” [Mk 12:28-31].

In His response Jesus referred back to the teachings of the *Pentateuch*. Jesus’ first commandment is a repetition of the *shema yisra’el* [Dt 6:4-5], and the second is taken directly from *Leviticus*:

“You shall not hate any of your kindred in your heart. Reprove your neighbor openly so that you do not incur sin because of that person. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD” [Lev 19:17-18]

I am always disturbed when I hear a Christian belittle the Old Testament or, as Jesus would call it, the “Law and the Prophets,” and suggest we need read and study only the New Testament. Jesus, the Apostles, and the New Testament authors were steeped in the teachings of the Old Testament, especially that of the Law (the *Pentateuch* or *Torah*). It’s important that, as Christians, we realize this for the Old Testament permeates the teachings of the New Testament. Remember, as Jesus taught us, the New Covenant does not replace the Old Testament; rather, it fulfills it.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” [Mt 5:17].

Does it not make sense, then, to study and understand all that Our Lord fulfills, so we can better understand and live this fulfillment in our lives? Like the newly formed people of Israel – the nation God called to holiness – we too are called to holiness, called to turn away from all that will separate us from the Lord God who loved us into existence.

The Call to Holiness. Only God is truly holy, because holiness is a divine, not a human, attribute. In Isaiah, the Seraphim cries out:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!” [Is 6:3]

This three-fold “Holy” is one way the Hebrews expressed the superlative: nothing and nobody is holier than God. And we find God’s holiness described throughout the Old Testament; for example:

“There is no Holy One like the LORD...” [1 Sam 2:2]

“Your way, God, is holy; what god is as great as our God?” [Ps 77:13]

In *Leviticus*, however, we find God, in His holiness, calling Israel to be holy:

“To me, therefore, you shall be holy; for I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be my own” [Lev 20:23].

And in both *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* we find the Lord choosing Israel to be “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” [Ex 19:6; Dt 7:6].

Israel, of course, did not merit this call to holiness, nor did it achieve holiness itself. Holiness was a gift of the God of Israel, who called them to “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy” [Lv 19:2].

As mediator between God and man, the priest was called to holiness in a special way and further called to be concerned about the holiness of all the people [Lv 8:1-10:20]. Priests were given this special task when they were commanded:

“You must be able to distinguish between what is sacred and what is profane, and between what is clean and what is unclean; and you must be able to teach the Israelites all the statutes that the LORD has given them through Moses” [Lv 10:10-11]

As we come to understand the Levitical teaching on holiness, we discover it has a two-fold aspect:

1. In a positive sense, holiness involves sanctification, living a holy life, and an attachment to God. The nation and the individual must worship the Lord God as the one God, the Holy One. This conviction, however, extends beyond worship and must be manifested in our relationships with others [Lv 19].
2. Negatively, striving for holiness also means separating oneself from all that is unholy, impure, unclean, and sinful [Lv 11:1-16:34].

From this, we can grasp a foreshadowing of the teachings of Jesus and understand how they represent a “fulfillment” of the Law.

During our study of *Leviticus* we will look briefly at the laws regarding purity and impurity, but I don’t intend to spend a lot of time on the subject. For most of us today, these laws seem very strange indeed. But perhaps this is more our fault than that of the laws themselves. When it comes to holiness we tend today to overspiritualize our religious thinking, and place little consideration on the things of this world. But for Israel, holiness was firmly rooted in the reality of creation itself.

God’s creation as described in *Genesis* [Gn1:2-2:4] really consists of two key actions on God’s part:

1. He brings order to chaos and creates a harmonious world, consisting of distinct spaces in which His creatures can live; and
2. He fills this world, these living spaces, with living beings.

From this creative act on God’s part we find the rationale for many of the pure/impure distinctions addressed in *Leviticus*. We can separate these distinctions into laws regarding cultic cleanness and the dietary laws.

Cultic cleanness. *Leviticus* draws a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Persons and things are, therefore, considered either clean or unclean based on whether they can perform or are excluded from sacrificial activity. Ritual uncleanness exists, lasts, and can be removed depending on varying factors, and may or may not require a sacrifice. The Law actually distinguished three categories of cultic uncleanness:

1. Uncleanness of a human corpse or animal carcass [Lv 11].

2. Uncleaness of leprosy [Lv 13-14].
3. Sexual uncleaness [Lv 12,15].

When considering the meaning and purpose of these precepts it's important to understand that Levitical uncleaness cannot simply be identified with moral uncleaness or with sin. The consequence is not to interrupt the individual's interior communication with God, but only to prohibit participation in cultic acts; e.g., sacrifice. The man who approaches God must be free of all the effects of sin and through these precepts service to God is lifted above the profane and the sinful into inaccessible holiness.

Dietary laws. As for the dietary laws, they present a distinction between clean and unclean that is largely external. Animals that ruminate and have a cloven hoof are clean, while others – e.g., camel, ass, pig, badger, hare, etc. – are unclean. Why this distinction? We don't know for certain, but some believe it related to particular animals' connection with pagan sacrificial cults, or their eating habits, or simply their revolting appearance.

Some dietary laws are more understandable. Animals that seem to confuse living spaces – for example, creatures of the sea that crawl like land animals, are unclean, while those with fins and scales are clean. In the same way, winged insects that walk on all fours are unclean. Among insects only land locusts and grasshoppers are clean, which is why we read of John the Baptist surviving on them. Other impurities arise from health issues – birds that feed on carrion or reptiles – and there are cases of animals in which the reasons for their impurity aren't particularly clear. In general, however, the determination of cleanness and uncleaness – in itself an element of holiness – all seems to stem from a concern for the proper ordering of God's creation and for the sanctity of life in all its manifestations.

Holiness of place. Holiness, then, is in part directly related to man's use of the elements of God's creation. But holiness also relates to space; that is, there are places sanctified as holy because of God's Presence or because of the nature of the activity performed there. As we learned in *Exodus*, the Tent of Meeting, which contained the Ark, was a place of singular holiness because God was especially present in and for His people. In front of the Tent was the altar of sacrifice, another sacred place because of what happened there. Centuries later, this understanding of holiness of place was applied to the Temple at Jerusalem. And in the Church today we consider both altar and tabernacle to be holy places for the same reasons.

Today, living as we do in our seemingly antiseptic world, most moderns would be repulsed by the sights, sounds, and smells of the Tent or Temple. The sacrificial slaughtering and holocausts, that at many times of the year were almost constant, have no real equivalent in today's world. The ancients, however, lived much closer to the messy realities of birth, life, and death. [As a deacon I am frequently called on officiate at funerals, vigil services, and cemetery committals. Every so often I will encounter mature adults who tell me they are nervous about attending a vigil service because they have never seen a dead body. I find this remarkable.] In any event the various sacrifices offered by Israel are all related to the twofold dimension of holiness mentioned above.

They represent a grateful recognition of God's goodness and mercy, or a humble recognition of our sinfulness or uncleanness and the desire to be whole once again.

Keep Holy the Sabbath. Holiness has yet another dimension, a temporal holiness or holiness of time. Israel demonstrated this through its calendar of feasts, of which the most important are addressed in *Leviticus* [Lv 23]. These were annual feasts and included the following:

- Passover / Unleavened Bread [Lv 23:4-14]
- Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) [Lv 23:15-23]
- Rosh-Hashanah (New Year) [Lv 23:23-25]
- Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) [Lv 23:26-32]
- Booths (Feast of Tabernacles) [Lv 23:33-43]

In addition to these annual feasts, and equally important, is the regular, weekly celebration of the Sabbath.

Why did Israel celebrate the Sabbath? Scripture provides two different but not contradictory answers, one in *Exodus* and another in *Deuteronomy*. In the latter [Dt 5:15] Israel keeps the Sabbath to remember how God redeemed them from the slavery they had endured in Egypt. And so Israel is called to remember that their "time" in its entirety is the gift of the redeeming God. In *Exodus* [Ex 20:11], however, we are given a different reason: Israel rests to share in God's Sabbath rest of Creation [Gn 2:3]. Here we find the Sabbath made holy because God has blessed it and filled it with His life-giving, creative power. Combining these two reasons, we come to understand that keeping the Sabbath is a sacred obligation [Ex 31:12-17] because Israel then remembers the Lord God, Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of Israel. This also presents us with a view of God as the universal Creator – ultimately, the God of all humanity – as well as the God of His Chosen People who will present humanity with the fulfillment of His plan. Keeping the Sabbath, then, is both an act of memory and an act of anticipation.

Who keeps the Sabbath? Scripture describes us as living in relationships, where the actions of the individual affect all those around him:

"...the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your work animal, or the resident alien within your gates" [Ex 20:10].

All those whose lives are intertwined with each other – family, household, alien, even the animals – all are involved in the Sabbath rest. Even the land itself shares the Sabbath in the sabbatical or seventh year:

"But the seventh year you shall let the land lie untilled and fallow, that the poor of your people may eat of it and their leftovers the wild animals may eat. So also shall you do in regard to your vineyard and your olive grove" [Ex 23:11].

Note the attention given to the poor and the wild creatures, further indicating that all belongs to God and we are mere custodians who must use God's gift worthily. The

Sabbath rest, then, expresses an awareness of our interconnectedness with each other and with all of creation. We exist because of God's creating and redeeming actions and are called to extend and share this activity in and through our relationships. Keeping the Sabbath is an act of solidarity.

When is Sabbath celebrated? First and most obviously, once a week, on the seventh day. But, as already mentioned, every seventh year is a sabbatical year involving the land in a special way [Lv 25:1-7]. Every forty-ninth year (seven times seven) is a jubilee year when the land lies at rest, property is returned to its original owner, and slaves are freed [Lv 25:8-55]. Sabbath, then, is not some isolated occurrence but is woven into the recurring rhythms of the weeks and years.

The Sabbath is also a time of trust. For example, when Israel was wandering in the wilderness and starving, God gave them manna to eat; but on the Sabbath they must refrain from collecting the manna. Even in their distress, they are to stop and celebrate the Sabbath. Later, after the nation was settled, and their lives depended on planting and harvesting, they still stopped and celebrated the Sabbath [Ex 34:21]. In a very real sense, the Sabbath reminded Israel that everything did not depend on them, but that God is the source of all. Israel is to be holy, and the Sabbath is one of God's great gifts. It is blessed; it is filled with life; it is holy.

Keeping the Sabbath should be just as real for us. It is an act of faith and trust, a time to recall that our lives, our work, and our time are now and will always be in the hands of the creating, saving and loving God. Keeping the Sabbath is essential to our keeping focus. The world pulls us in many directions, and many of these do not lead us to the salvation God desires for us.

Conclusion. *Leviticus* tells us "the life is in the blood" [Lv 17:11]. And so it resides at the very heart of the *Pentateuch*, pumping the lifeblood of holiness through Israel's veins. It is a difficult book for today's reader and many of its precepts no longer apply since the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. Depending on their level of orthodoxy, today's Jew concentrates instead on keeping the Sabbath, celebrating the annual feasts, and following the dietary laws (*kosher*).

As Christians, however, we recognize that the laws and precepts of *Leviticus* – the old Law – provide the foundation for the new Law proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The older sacrifices of the Tent and Temple are replaced and fulfilled by the redeeming sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. And, fulfilling His promise to be "with you always, until the end of the age" he gave us His Eucharistic Presence through the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Jesus, the High Priest, founded His one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church as...

"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" [1 Pt 2:9].

Whatever challenges we face, we can always turn to *Leviticus* and hear God's constant call, one that extends through the ages:

"Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy" [Lv 19:2].