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Our Deuteronom

DEHONIAN STUDIES



A series of presentations of the "Reading Guide" to the Constitutions, written by Fr. Albert Bourgeois.

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417 Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, means second law. It is a set of three discourses, attributed to Moses before his death (cap. 1-4, 5-11, 29-30) which frames a collection of laws (cap. 12-26), promulgated again before the renewal of the covenant (cap. 28). The book ends with an account of the death of Moses (cap. 31-34).

418 The history of the text is rather complex. The final edition is late (after the exile) and it is significant that this second law was placed under the patronage and authority of Moses not as a new law, but as a renewal and adaptation of the first and only law.

419 The fundamental book has had a great influence on the history of God's people, down to our days, as the expression of the faith of Israel. At Qumran, the number of manuscripts discovered shows that, together with Isaiah, Deuteronomy was the most copied book. For H.

Cazelles: "It is one of the most beautiful books of the bible... the book that moves us to read all the others... unearthing for us lessons of tenderness, fidelity, life... a book that speaks to the heart... the first biblical manual of the spiritual life. Its place in the old testament is comparable to that of John in the new" (*Introduction a la Bible* I, p. 223).

420 To speak of Deuteronomy in reference to our new Constitutions may seem pretentious and exaggerated. In fact, the text contains hardly any laws in the generally accepted sense of the word. There are a few in the latter parts on formation, government and administration. But the first two parts on our religious life (nn. 1-85), which make up more than half the Constitutions, can hardly be regarded as a code, a collection of laws.

421 Certainly not if laws are considered "norms established by the sovereign authority of a society and sanctioned by public force" (Petit Robert). Through their recognition by the church, our Constitutions realize this definition in part. Experience and the spiritual life depend on such laws for the organization of life, but experience and the spiritual life do not flow from the laws.

422 Still on various occasions I have used the term law regarding our faith experience and spiritual life.

- laws of reciprocal interiority (IV. 3)
- laws of the Spirit (V. 2.2.1)
- laws of ecclesial being (VI. 3)
- laws of availability and solidarity (VI. 4)
- laws of pure love and of epektasis (II. 3, VI. 6)

423 The most apt definition here is that of Montesquieu: "Laws are necessary relations that result from the nature of things" (*Esprit des lois*, 1). In this sense, Paul also speaks of the law of the Spirit and the law of the flesh, of sin, of death (cf. Rm 8,1-16).

424 Thus our experience and SCJ life have their laws, anterior to the

code, that is the general and particular ordinances and prescriptions. The juridical recognition (canonical approval) does no more than authenticate and consecrate its obligatory force for the wellbeing of individuals and of the society. But their true value and source come through our laws of the very nature of our vocation, from our experience, from our life, under the guidance of the Spirit.

425 These laws define the articulations or principal lines of what can be called a spirit or a spirituality. And they are truly constitutive words in the twofold sense of the word constitution.

- As the ensemble of the characteristics of a thing, of an individual or of a society; what constitutes it in being, according to nature (and according to grace).
- As a fundamental law that describes and determines a form of government, a lifestyle.

426 Ideally it can be said that a “constitution” (fundamental code) is good in so far as it corresponds to the “constitution” (nature) of the body it must rule or govern and to the end of that body. This explains the discussions on the “fundamental law” prior to the revision of the code of canon law: the fundamental law of the church is first of all the nature of the church, which is its foundation and criterion.

427 Thus we can understand n. 16 of our Constitutions: “Called to serve the church in the congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, our response will imply a spiritual vision”, not only as a condition of efficacy, which we are free to assume or leave, but as a need that flows from the call of the vocation and grace that make us Priests of the Sacred Heart. In some way, the description of this life and grace calls for regulation and the new literary style of the Constitutions is justified here (cf. 1.2.). This fundamental code, with its constitutive laws, gets its obligatory force from the reality and nature of our vocation and from the “being spiritual” that the vocation does to us. This obligation is finally that of “becoming what we are”.

428 In this sense reference to Deuteronomy becomes thought provoking. Materially speaking, these new Constitutions are not the

second but the third in our history, after the French of 1885-86 and the Latin of 1906/1924/1956. But in reality, we can regard this third text as a second law for us: not a simple translation or juridical transposition in a dry form as happened before, but a profound community re-evaluation of the SCJ tradition in the light of experience and the doctrinal, social, pastoral and ecclesial evolution brought about by the Council.

429 The elaboration of Deuteronomy after the Exile was a true manifestation of divine pedagogy. Thus Fr Bouyer can say: "As every expert pedagogue, God is not satisfied with saying once for all whatever he must say, or with doing (and especially with having done) by one stroke what he must do. Further God does not repeat the same things mechanically as a gramophone or a film. Rather, through like experiences, but ever more deep and involving, not only for our intelligence but for our whole being, God leads us little by little to the central truth, which he has at heart right from the beginning, so that we may be able to embrace it fully and make it our own (*Introduction a la vie spirituelle*, p. 36).

430 It is an excellent description of what the new Constitutions can and must do for us.

431 Fr Bouyer points out that Deuteronomy was not a new law, but "a resumption of the first law in the light of experience and of prophetic teaching occasioned by that first law". He adds: "The people, having renewed the covenant, committing themselves in faith to the renewed law, bound themselves to it again through sacrifice" (op. cit., p. 32).

432 This twofold light of experience and prophetic teaching in the resumption of the first law is curiously like the principles and criteria that the Council indicated for the renewal and adaptation of our life and our texts:

- fidelity to the first law is fidelity to the gospel, as supreme norm, and to the spirit of the founder;
- prophetic illumination is the teaching of the Council, the life of the

church and the action of the Spirit on the way of renewal;

- experience is the life of the community, all members being called to take a part in renewal, in communion with the life of the church and with “a suitable awareness of contemporary human conditions and the needs of the church” (2d).

433 Keeping a due sense of proportion, we could consider our new Constitutions a gift of God, as Deuteronomy was for God’s people, according to that divine pedagogy recognized by the Fathers and recalled by Fr Bouyer.

434 Finally there is the fifth principle given by the Council, “that even the most desirable changes made on behalf of contemporary needs will fail of their purpose unless a renewal of spirit gives life to them” (2e). This was the basic argument of the discourses attributed to Moses in Deuteronomy. In this regard, it could be useful to read a few chapters or thought-provoking passages of Deuteronomy, which express its spirit and spiritual dynamic: the three great discourses or, for example, chapter four: “And now, O Israel, give heed...”.

435 The formula appears often throughout the book (5,1; 6,4; 9,1; 20,3; 27,9) as in the “shema Israel”, the daily prayer of the true Israelite:

- “And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live...” (4,1).
- “Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth beneath... Therefore you shall keep his statutes and commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you... and that you may prolong your days” (4,39-40).

436 These two verses form the frame of chapter four, which alternates evocations of the Lord’s presence and his solicitude: the Lord, your God, as a father for his sons (cf. 1,31; 4,7; 4,29-31; 6,7-12; 8,5; 14,1; 32,6) the call to the demands of love (4,24; 6,15) and the appeal to return to God, present among his people (7,21; 30,14). A

wonderful spiritual and theological mine to enrich meditation and prepare the heart to listen and respond, to renew the covenant and life. "Now and today" – the expression appears more than 70 times in Deuteronomy.

437 Our new Constitutions, in their way, invite us to renewal and aggiornamento:

- to bring Fr Dehon's "charism to fruition, having regard to the needs of the church and of the world" (n. 1);
- to live our religious life as "a developing thing. Beginning with its original grace, it continues to grow, drawing nourishment from what the church, illuminated by the spirit, never ceases to draw out from its treasury of faith" (n. 15);
- to live this religious life "subject to constant questioning... (in) assiduous encounter with the Lord in prayer, continual conversion to the gospel message and openness of heart and mind to embrace God's own TO-DAY" (n. 144).

438 Availability, permanent conversion, God's today are themes and words that we meet throughout Deuteronomy. Letting the old words echo in us is perhaps not a bad way of preparing ourselves to read, meditate, welcome and live our "Deuteronomy" and, becoming what we are, thus enter into the great current of love that begins at the Heart of God and leads us back to the Heart of God.

439 "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15,15-16).

440 "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow" (Heb 4,12).

441 "You are my friends if you do what i command you" (Jn 15,14).

Hear, O Israel...

442 "You have seen how the Lord your God bore you; as a man bears his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place" (Dt 1,31). "As a man disciplines his son so the Lord your God disciplines you" (Dt 8,5). "You are the sons of the Lord your God" (Dt 14,1). "Is not he your father who created you, who made you and established you?" (Dt 32,6).

443 "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (Dt 4,7). "The Lord your God is in the midst of you" (Dt 7,21). "But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart and with all your soul" (Dt 30,14).

Hear, O Israel...

444 "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. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart" (Dt 6,4-6).

445 "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day" (Dt 8,11).

446 "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (Dt 4,24). "For the Lord your God in the midst of you is a jealous God" (Dt 6,15).

Hear, O Israel...

447 "The Lord set his love upon you and chose you... the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers... the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations... He will love you, bless you, multiply you" (Dt 7,7-9.13).

448 "But the Lord has taken you... to be a people of his own possession" (Dt 4,20).

449 "You will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and all your soul" (Dt 4,29). "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you" (Dt 4,31). "Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God of heaven above and on earth beneath; there is no other" (Dt 4,39).