

THE COVENANT AND COVENANT COMMUNITIES

by Fr. Francis Martin

Mother of God Prayer Meeting

April 1, 2001

Biblical Background

- A. The basic principle of the biblical covenant is that God wishes to have a people and to be in communion with them. It is he who takes the initiative by saving his people and then specifying for them how they are to respond to his initiative. Thus, the motive for fidelity to the covenant is *gratitude*.

[Exodus 19](#):3-8: And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."

[Exodus 20](#):2-3: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. "You shall have no other gods before me....."

- B. Jeremiah received a word from the Lord that he, the Lord, would provide his people with the power to respond to his initiative and be faithful to the covenant. Ezekiel, Jeremiah's younger contemporary, further specified that the principle, this law written in the hearts of God's people, would be the very Spirit of God who would be the bond uniting the people with God and with each other.

[Jeremiah 31](#):31-34: I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,... this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

[Ezekiel 36](#):26-27: A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

- C. Jesus came and by his death instituted and sealed the New Covenant, who is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves us to understand intimately what God expects of his people and of each one of us individually, and he empowers us to do it.

[Luke 22:20](#): This cup is the New Covenant in my blood which is shed for you. [2 Corinthians 3:5-6](#): Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

[Romans 8:3-18](#): For [regarding] the ineffectiveness of the law, in that it was weak because of the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and "for sin," condemned Sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to flesh but according to Spirit. For those who are according to flesh are intent upon the things of the flesh, those according to spirit, the things of the Spirit... If, however, Christ is in you, the body indeed is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of justice. So if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he will also give life to your death-directed bodies because of his indwelling Spirit in you. For those who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery, for fear again; but you received a Spirit of sonship in which we cry Abba, Father! The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God. If children, then heirs as well: heirs of God and coheirs of Christ, if indeed we are "co-suffering" so that we will also be "co-glorified."

[Hebrews 9:13-14](#): For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those defiled sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more, the blood of Christ, who by the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, will purify your conscience from dead works for the worshipping of the living God.

[1 John 2:20-27](#): But you have an oil of anointing from the Holy One [=the action of the Holy Spirit bringing the word of God to life within you], and you all have knowledge. I did not write to you that you do not know the truth, but that you know it, and that no lie is of the truth... I wrote you concerning those who are misleading you; and as for you, the oil of anointing which you received from him abides in you and you have no need that anyone should teach you; but as his oil of anointing teaches you concerning everything, and is proven true and is not a lie, so as it teaches you, abide in him. **(This text is pointing to the manner in which the new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah, above, is fulfilled).**

Covenant Communities

- A. **Lay Communities:** Beyond this [the need for lay groups in a secularized society], the profound reason that justifies and demands the lay faithful's forming of lay groups comes from a theology based on ecclesiology, as the Second Vatican Council clearly acknowledged in referring to the group apostolate as a "sign of communion and of unity of the Church of Christ."

First of all, the freedom for lay people in the Church to form such groups is to be acknowledged. Such liberty is a true and proper right that is not derived from any kind of "concession" by authority, but flows from the Sacrament of Baptism which calls the lay faithful to participate actively in the Church's communion and mission. In this regard the Council is quite clear: "As long as the proper relationship is kept to Church authority, the lay faithful have the right to found and run such associations and to join those already existing" (*Christifideles Laici*, #29-32).

- B. **Charismatic Communities:** "Charismatic communities are bodies of Christians seeking through a common commitment to the Lord and to each other to translate the grace of baptism in the Spirit into a shared lifestyle. They typically see this new life and power of the Holy Spirit forming a faith-filled community as sign to both church and world of the truth and efficacy of the gospel." Peter Hocken, "Charismatic Communities" in Burgess and McGee (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 128.
- C. **Covenant Communities:** Covenant communities specify this common commitment through a covenant, that is a common agreement made before the Lord by which each person commits to a way of life expressive of a particular spiritual calling within the general call to charismatic communities and the still more universal call to holiness. It is the common agreement made as a community with the Lord in response to his saving initiative that specifies the arrangement and warrants the use of the biblical term "covenant." **It is a particular communal appropriation of the New Covenant made in the blood of Christ and which binds all Christians into a single people.**

Questions for Personal Study and Small Group Discussion

1. Do you have a deep awareness that God took the initiative in your life by calling you into a covenant with himself? What are some ways you know this?
2. Study some of the scripture passages above. How has God fulfilled the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in your life?
3. What does it mean to you concretely that you are covenanted to God? What does it mean to be covenanted to brothers and sisters in Christ? How can you "go deeper" in understanding and living this out?
4. Has God called you to make a covenant with him within Mother of God Community? [Note: there is no need to answer this right away. It may take much time and prayer.]