

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 17-18

Psalms 103: 1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

1 Corinthians 3: 16-23

Matthew 5: 38-48

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

In our first reading, God has a message for the chosen people. The Lord says to Moses, "Tell the people to be holy." Nothing particularly striking about the passage so far. But then God goes on to say why the people should be holy. And the reason isn't just a thundering, "Because I said so." Rather, the Lord says, "Be holy because I, your God, am holy." In other words, the people are being asked to imitate God.

We run into the same idea in our gospel. Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Why? Because "this will prove that you are children of your heavenly Father, for his sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust." Once again, we are asked to imitate God. The Lord is merciful and kind to everyone, whether they are good or not. And it is because God acts this way, that it becomes the ideal for us.

Imitation has been called the sincerest form of flattery. Perhaps it is. But imitation can have other motivations as well. Sometimes imitation is inspired by fear. Years ago Woody Allen made a remarkable film called "Zelig," in which the title character is a human chameleon. Zelig has the amazing ability to blend in with any crowd. If he is with Africans, the shade of his skin changes to match theirs. If he is with fat people his waistline grows. In the presence of rabbis he quickly acquires an appropriate suit, and hat, and even a long black beard. The scientist who studies Zelig, learns that these changes are caused by fear. He doesn't

feel safe unless he is just like the people around him.

Most of us have a bit of Zelig in us. We're afraid to stick out from the crowd. When we go out for the evening we like to know beforehand what everyone else will be wearing. Teenagers probably suffer most from this fear. I remember when I was in junior high, I suffered through a particularly cold New England winter without a scarf, simply because no one else was wearing a scarf that year. A frozen head was better than standing out from the crowd. This isn't the kind of imitation that God urges upon us. In fact, the more we imitate Christ, the better able we are to be our own unique selves -- the more likely we are to have the courage to act with integrity.

Sometimes imitation is inspired by the desire to get ahead in the world. I used to live in a country where people imitated a particular accent that was associated with success. Office workers everywhere tend to dress the way the boss dresses. Years ago, before I entered the seminary, I remember going to lunch with several of my colleagues and our new boss. The waitress asked if we wanted to order a drink before our meal. It soon became obvious that no one wanted to answer her question until we saw what the boss would do. This kind of imitation is no way to get ahead with God. After all, we've just heard that God treats everyone with equal kindness and mercy.

Sometimes we imitate people we admire. I'm from Boston, and for years I've been a big Celtics basketball fan. Until he retired, that meant being a big fan of the Celtic's superstar, Larry Bird. Before he walked out on to the basketball court, Bird always reached down and ran a hand along the bottom of each of his shoes. And because Larry Bird performed this little ritual, young players all over the United States did it

too. They wanted to be like their hero. Some of our Portland Pilots players are still doing it today! Here, finally, is a kind of imitation relevant to our relationship with Christ. Jesus is a hero worth imitating.

But a lot of imitation goes on without our being aware of it. For instance, I've noticed that in our Holy Cross community here on campus we often unconsciously adopt each other's tag-lines and catchphrases. And, of course, children inevitably imitate their parents. Whenever I spent time with my parents as an adult, I was always struck by how many of my own gestures and habits of thinking and speaking were borrowed from them. This kind of imitation is much more powerful and effective than any other. And it is far more authentic than any conscious effort to pattern ourselves upon another person.

This is the kind of imitation that is most relevant to our faith. Our imitation is not inferior or fraudulent, because we imitate God as children of God. As St. Paul reminds us, the Spirit of God dwells in us. This Spirit equips us to be like Christ, not out of flattery, fear, or self-interest, but out of love for a God who is mother and father to us. And it allows us to see Christ in one another.