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PASTORAL LETTER — LENT 2020

GOD'S CHOSEN: THE WEAK TO SHAME THE STRONG

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:
May grace and peace be yours in abundance
(2 Pt 1:2)

[1] In a time when leaders are constantly under scrutiny and their flaws widely published, it is good to open the pages of Sacred Scripture and read of those whom God himself chose to lead others. With utter frankness, the Bible refuses to misrepresent its heroes and heroines as individuals without flaws, failings and even grave sin. Many of those whose accomplishments were great were not perfect people.

[2] At the time when there was mass immorality on earth and God decided to send the Great Flood to destroy humanity gone wild, the Scriptures tell us Noah stood out. "Noah found favor with the Lord... Noah was a righteous man and blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gn 6:8-9). Yet, his walk with God was not perfect. He drank too much wine and got drunk after leaving the ark (Gn 9:21).

[3] The patriarch Abraham responded in obedience to God's word, leaving kin and country to go to the land of promise. He was chosen to be the forefather of a new people who lived by faith. Yet, he failed not once, but twice, in trusting God's providence. When the Pharaoh was captivated by the beauty of Abraham's wife Sarah, Abraham, out of fear for his life, handed her over to the Pharaoh, saying that she was his sister (Gn 12:10-20). And, he repeated the same lie sometime later, handing Sarah over to Abimelech, king of Gerar, who likewise was taken with Sarah's beauty (Gn 20:1-11).

[4] Abraham's son Isaac was the fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham that he would father a great people. But, Isaac is overshadowed by his more powerful wife Rebekah. Her love for her husband did not impede her from subverting his authority. She connived with her favorite son Jacob to deceive Isaac in giving him the blessing that belonged to his twin brother (Gn 27:1-18). Rebekah was not the only matriarch of Israel to engage in deception.

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[5] Rebekah's daughter-in-law, Rachel, also a matriarch in Israel, likewise engaged in deception. When she left her father's home to go to the land of promise with her husband Jacob, she stole from her father the *teraphim* (the family idols). In those days, the possession of these images would give her husband Jacob the legal rights to the family property (Gn 31:19, 33-35).

[6] Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, was also cunning, prone to lie and manipulate others for his own benefit. He cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright as first-born (Gn 25:29-34). By trickery, he also stole the blessing of the first-born from his father as Isaac lie blind and dying (Gn 27:1-29).

[7] Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel, rose to be second in power in all of Egypt. By his wisdom, he saved Egypt and Jacob's family from famine and extinction. Yet, as a young man, he was arrogant and proud. He flaunted his father Jacob's favoritism of him over and against his brothers. He angered them to the point that they tried to do away with him (Gn 37:1-11; 17-20). He showed little appreciation for the feelings of others. Only when schooled in suffering did he grow into a mature and humble man.

[8] Undoubtedly, Moses towers over every other Old Testament hero. Moses is mentioned in seven hundred and ten Old Testament verses and in seventy-nine New Testament verses. Those numbers are second only to David. He was charismatic and strong enough to lead the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Throughout their forty year desert wandering, Moses inspired and guided them on their journey to freedom and the Promised Land. When they rebelled against God, Moses was able to stand in the breach, appeasing God's anger and saving them from being wiped off the face of the earth.

[9] Yet, Moses was a murderer (Ex 2:11-15). He is praised as "the humblest of all men" (Nm 12:3). Nonetheless, he was given to bouts of anger. He burst into anger and smashed the Ten Commandments when he came down the mountain and saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf (Ex 32:19). He even doubted God's promise at the waters of Meribah at Kadesh in the desert of Zin (Nm 20:10-13).

[10] Since Moses was not a good public speaker, God chose his brother Aaron to be his spokesman (Ex 4:4-16). Aaron was tasked with guiding the Chosen People spiritually as the first High Priest of the Old Testament. Yet, despite his sacred office, at the very moment when Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, Aaron led the people into idolatry. He set up the Golden Calf for them to adore (Ex 32:1-8). He gave in to the sinful desires of the people and did not exercise moral leadership.

[11] Moses' sister Miriam was also chosen by God to help lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. She is the first woman mentioned in the bible to be a prophetess. However, along with her brother Aaron, she rebelled against the legitimate authority of Moses as God's chosen leader. Miriam appears to be the one who instigated the rebellion, since the biblical text names her first. And, when it came to squashing the rebellion, Miriam received the greater punishment (Nm 12:10-15).

[12] David, the young shepherd who became king, stands out as one of the most heroic and powerful individuals in the Bible. He consolidated the twelve tribes into a united nation, making Jerusalem their capital. He brought peace to his people. Noted author of the psalms, he enhanced the liturgical and faith life of the nation. He established the royal family from which Jesus himself descended. David is

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mentioned one thousand and forty two times in Sacred Scripture, second only to Jesus.

[13] David was truly devoted to the Lord. And he is rightly called “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22). Yet, he was guilty of some of the most serious sins recorded in the Old Testament. He committed adultery with Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, he tried to cover up his sin with deceit. When that failed, he had Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite, murdered. He then took Bathsheba to be his wife (2 Sm 11:1-27).

[14] David also willfully disobeyed God’s prohibition against numbering the people. To satisfy his pride, he took a census of the people and incurred God’s wrath (2 Sm 24:1-11). As a parent, he was lax in disciplining his children when they needed it. For this, he suffered the rebellion of his beloved son Absalom (2 Sm 13:1-28).

[15] David’s famous son Solomon began to reign as king, devout in his worship of the true God. He found delight in building the Temple in Jerusalem and was known for his wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1-13). However, when he grew old, he turned from the worship of the true God and worshipped idols.

[16] Scripture clearly lays the blame on his many wives. “King Solomon loved many foreign women... He had as wives seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines, and they turned his heart. When Solomon was old, his wives had turned his heart to follow other gods, and his heart was not entirely with the Lord, his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (1 Kgs 11:1-4). His love of women eroded his love of God.

[17] All these great people of the Old Testament accomplished very important roles in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. This does not justify nor condone their sins. But, it does open our eyes to the fact that God can and does use imperfect instruments to realize his purposes. And, it consoles us as, in our own weakness, we try to do God’s will.

[18] Just as the Old Testament portrays the leaders of the Chosen People with honesty, so too does the New Testament give us the first saints of the Church with all their virtues and vices. The New Testament makes no effort to gloss over their weaknesses. It neither hides nor excuses their sins. With total transparency, it presents those whom God chose to found the Church as individuals struggling with the common weakness of our wounded humanity.

[19] Jesus chose Peter to be a disciple and apostle. He made him the visible head of the Church. But, Peter was not perfect. He was impetuous, ready to speak without thinking. When Jesus began to speak about his upcoming Passion, Peter rebuked him and tried to dissuade him from accepting the cross. In response, Jesus called Peter “Satan” (Mt 16:21-23).

[20] During the Passion, Peter abandoned his beloved Master and even denied him three times. So significant was this for the early Church that it is recorded in all four gospels (Mt 26:69-74; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:55-62; Jn 18:15-27). Peter, whom Jesus forgave and restored to his ministry as the visible head of the Church, was a sinner as every other member of the Church.

[21] Peter had been given a special revelation telling him that the Gentiles were not unclean (Acts 10:1-

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11; 18). At Antioch which had a large Gentile population, Peter ate with the Gentile Christians. But, when some Jewish Christians objected, he weakened in his resolve, withdrew and ate only with Jewish Christians. He gave in to public pressure and acted out of human respect.

[22] As the leader of the Church, Peter was giving a bad example. Paul was quick to judge Peter's behavior as not "in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14). And as Paul himself says, "I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong" (Gal 2:11). Not every successor of Peter has been a saint nor has every action they have done been in complete line with the gospel. But, the Holy Spirit still guides the Church and keeps her faithful to the gospel.

[23] Paul himself entered the Church with a long record of persecuting Christians. His conversion on the road to Damascus made him a believer, but it did not make him perfect. At times he was abrasive and argumentative. He brooked no threat to his authority as an apostle. He was ready to take on any opponent whether it be Peter or those wishing to impose the Jewish law on converts.

[24] Great missionary, Paul could also be intolerant. Barnabas had gained Paul's acceptance by the other apostles after his conversion. Barnabas traveled with Paul on their first missionary journey. Barnabas' cousin Mark, the author of the gospel that bears his name, also accompanied them. Somewhere along the way, Mark returned home and Paul never got over this. He felt abandoned by this younger disciple.

[25] When Barnabas suggested bringing Mark on a second missionary journey, Paul strongly resisted the idea. Mark's courage seemed doubtful, his loyalty unproven. Barnabas was willing to give him a second chance. But not Paul. These two saints were at odds. The New Testament unabashedly says, "So sharp was their disagreement that they separated" (Acts 15:36-41). As far as we know, Barnabas and Paul never worked together or saw each other again!

[26] Thus, even this cursory glance through the pages of Sacred Scripture brings us face to face with the reality that God chooses flawed, sinful people to bear his gospel and grace to others. Humanity is flawed and weakened by original sin. This is not a justification for any sin. But it is a fact of life.

[27] When Jesus began his public ministry, his first word was the call to repent. (Mk 1:14-15). And he never ceased to repeat this call (e.g. Mt 4:17; Lk 5:32; Mt 12:41; Lk 13:3, 5). Those who judged themselves righteous delighted to hear Jesus call tax collectors and prostitutes to repentance. But, when he called them to repent, they became angry. For Jesus, "all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God" (Rm 3:23).

[28] Repentance means regretting our sins and changing our thoughts, feelings and behavior. And for Jesus, it is something more. In Jesus' twin parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Lk 15:1-10), Jesus gives us a new understanding of repentance. The lost sheep *does nothing*. It lays paralyzed with fear on the ground until the shepherd finds it and places it with joy on his shoulders, carrying it to the safety of the fold. The lost coin *can do nothing*. But, the woman recovers it and rejoices.

[29] When we are in sin, we are cut off from God and from the community of faith. We can do nothing on our own to come back. But, God searches for us until he finds us. For Jesus, repentance is the

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experience of being found and rescued by God. What we cannot do on our own, God is doing for us. He is bringing us into the embrace of his love. No wonder Jesus assures us that “there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10).

[30] On earth only Jesus was sinless and, by his grace, Mary was as well. Today, all the perfect people are in heaven. All of us on earth have temptations, failures, character flaws and sins! Yet, God deigns to use each of us for his purpose. God does not condone our sins. But, he is ever ready to forgive our sins and to help us mature morally and spiritually.

[31] The Church is not a museum for saints, but a refuge for sinners. In heaven, we will be perfected by God’s grace and share in his glory. But, while on earth, we struggle with our sinful nature. Yet, no matter what the sin, where there is repentance, God runs to embrace us and restore us to his love. He did not reject Peter after his sin. No. He changed him by his grace, making him the firm Rock on which the Church is founded. After all, a saint is merely a sinner redeemed and sanctified. And so, to show his glory and love, “God [chooses] the weak of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27).

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson,
on Ash Wednesday, the twenty-sixth day of February
in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and twenty.*

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