

**Year of the Bible Series**  
*Ignorance of the Scriptures is Ignorance of Christ (St Jerome)*

**Series III: The Book of Deuteronomy**

Dear Holy People of God,

Last week, we treated the book of Leviticus with its primary focus on the cultic life (that is, the life of worship, which addresses the life and the ministry of the priests of the Old Testament), and likewise, the concept of holiness as understood in the early history of Israel. We likewise studied the book of Numbers, which showed us the rebellious nature of Israel in the desert following the departure from slavery in Egypt. It became clear that what kept Israel going was God's faithfulness to God's promises: we might be unfaithful, but God is always faithful. Hence, the source of our hope as Christians today is the conviction that even in my sinfulness and infidelities, God is always willing to give me a second chance whenever I turn to him in repentance. The book of Numbers is really about God's patience and forgiveness in the face of human obstinacy.

This week, I will like us to conclude with the last book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), the **book of Deuteronomy**. The name "Deuteronomy" is derived from the Greek word *deuteronomion* which means "second law" (Greek *deuteros* + *nomos*). The book is called Second Law because Deuteronomy repeats the Ten Commandments (Deut 5: 6 -21). It likewise presents another covenant law in addition to Sinai covenant (Deut 29:1). Deuteronomy records the farewell speech of Moses to Israel on the plains of Moab (Deut 1:1-2). Besides the book of Genesis, the Psalms and the book of Isaiah, the book of Deuteronomy is the most significant book in the Old Testament, from a theological perspective. It is the book that links the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) with the Historical books, most of the books of the Prophets and the books of Wisdom Literature. Hence, the Old Testament as a whole is made up of FOUR groups of books: the Pentateuch (that is, the first five books), the Historical books (for example, the book of Judges and Kings); the Prophetic books (for example, Isaiah, Jeremiah); and Wisdom Literature (for example, the book of Proverbs). So, when reading the Old Testament, it is always important to ask the question: what genre (or kind of book) am I reading?

Returning to the book of Deuteronomy, we find the foundation of the what is today known as the **Catholic Social Teaching**, namely, the care for the poor, widows, the stranger, the orphan, the payment of just wages, et cetera. In other words, Deuteronomy provides us with the rules for social interaction. Deuteronomy was one of the most popular books of the Jewish Scriptures in Jesus' day: Jesus himself cites Deuteronomy in his refutation of Satan during the Temptation in the Wilderness (Mt 4:4, 7; see Deut 6:13; 18:8:3). For us Christians and likewise Israel, Deuteronomy makes charity towards the poor obligatory, for the simple reason that the poor will always be with us: "For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore, I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother and sister, to the needy and to the poor, in the land" (Deut 15:11). Hence, because of the overwhelming nature of the human condition, the believer must always do something to ameliorate the situation. Deuteronomy also teaches the "circumcision of the heart," that is, that we are to observe the laws of God not simply

because of an exterior conformity, but out of an interior love for God. In other words, my relationship with God should be guided by a genuine love for God that lies deep within me.

A text in Deuteronomy that is very important today is its teaching on the permission for divorce as given by Moses (Deut 24:1-4). The Pharisees bring this up in an argument with Jesus: “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” (Matthew 19:7-8). Jesus’ answer points out three aspects worth keeping in mind, especially given the phenomenon of the rapid break up of marriages today: Firstly, Jesus points out that the permission to divorce given by Moses was an accommodation or a compromise. It was not from God: “For I hate divorce” (Malachi 2:16). Secondly, Jesus points out the reason why Moses made this accommodation: because of the hardness of heart (Matthew 19:8). Human obstinacy counteracts God’s will. And finally, Jesus points to the original will of God before the divorce accommodation by Moses: “but from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:8). Reading the book of Deuteronomy therefore, gives us the opportunity to stop and think about the state of Christian marriages, especially in the light of the frequency of the breakdown of Christian marriages. But above all, reading Deuteronomy should cause us to pray for Christian marriages, for healing of marriages going through trials, for the stability of Christian marriages, to be renewed in love, unity and hope. Our world today needs the witness of the gospel of the indissolubility of Christian marriages, and we need to pray for this witness, for the grace of couples to persevere as husband and wife. (Fr Maurice).