

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's second reading contains one of my favorite verses from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*" For the most part, Catholics traditionally made moral decisions deductively, i.e., by applying laws, norms, or rules to concrete situations. However, as a student in Rome, I learned that in some Eastern philosophical systems, individuals are encouraged to model themselves after the best person they know. Before making moral decisions, they ask themselves what their role model would do.

Paul's words in today's second reading mirror this. He asked the Corinthians to model themselves on him just as he modeled himself on Christ. As I reflected on this verse, I struggled to understand why St. Paul asked the Corinthians to model themselves on him rather than simply asking them to model themselves on Christ. I think it was because he had lived among them and, therefore, could be a very concrete role model for them. We all need good role models whom we strive to imitate. Unfortunately, today our society chooses men and women as societal role models because of their fame, fortune, or athletic ability rather than because of their holiness or character.

Right before I graduated from college, one of my professors gave me wonderful advice. He suggested that when I arrived in Rome, I choose as friends the best students and the best people at our college. He said the mistake many people make is choosing as friends people to whom they can feel superior. I think his advice is good whatever our age. We need to choose as role models and friends those who will call forth the best in us, who will challenge us to become the "best versions of ourselves."

At the same time, like St. Paul, we are all called to imitate Christ. Living 2000 years after Christ, we cannot copy his life. What we can do is to make our own and live the attitudes and values of Christ. In today's Gospel, Jesus models compassion or mercy.

A compassionate person is sensitive and responsive to the real needs of others. Today's first reading presents the Jewish law regarding leprosy. Because leprosy was believed to be highly contagious, those with leprosy had to separate themselves from their family and from the community. Because family and community were so important to the Jewish people, those with leprosy became, in effect, the living dead. When the man with leprosy asked Jesus to cure him, he was asking Jesus for more than physical healing. He was asking Jesus to give him back his life, i.e., his family and community, and Jesus immediately said yes.

My brothers and sisters, in his First Letter, St. John wrote, "*The man who does not love is among the living dead*" [3:14; NAB, 1970]. As true as this is, it is equally true to say that the one who is without love is among the living dead. In other words, the living dead are not only those who do not love but also those who do not experience love in their own lives. Loving others, especially those who seem unlovable, is the most compassionate thing we can do. When we are compassionate, we imitate Jesus, and we become life giving. As philosopher Søren Kierkegaard reminds us, "If someone has cut my hands off, I cannot play the zither, and if someone has cut my leg off, I cannot dance...and if I myself lie with a broken arm or leg, then I cannot rush into the flames to save another's life: but I can be compassionate everywhere."¹

¹Søren Kierkegaard, as quoted in Paul Roubiczek, *Existentialism for and against*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 68.