



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 18 August 2021*

**[Multimedia]**

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**Catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians: 5. *The propedeutic value of the Law***

*Brothers and sisters, good morning!*

Saint Paul, who loved Jesus and had clearly understood what salvation was, taught us that the “children of the promise” (*Gal 4:28*) — that is all of us, justified by Jesus Christ — are not bound by the Law, but are called to the demanding life-style of the freedom of the Gospel. The Law however exists. But it exists in another way: the same Law, the Ten Commandments, but in another way, because it could no longer be justified by itself once the Lord Jesus had come. And therefore, in today’s catechesis I would like to explain this. And we ask: what, according to the Letter to the Galatians, is the role of the Law? In the passage we heard, Paul says that the Law was like a *pedagogue*. It is a beautiful image, that of the pedagogue we spoke about during the last audience, an image that deserves to be understood in its correct meaning.

The Apostle seems to suggest to Christians that they divide the history of salvation into two parts, and also his personal story. There are two periods: before becoming believers in Christ Jesus and after receiving the faith. At the centre is the event of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which Paul preached in order to inspire faith in the Son of God, the source of salvation, and in Christ Jesus we are justified. Therefore, starting from faith in Christ there is a “before” and an “after” with regard to the Law itself, because the Law exists, the Commandments exist, but there is one attitude before the coming of Jesus, and another one afterwards. The previous history is determined by being

“under the Law”. And those who followed the path of the Law were saved, they were justified; the subsequent one, after the coming of Jesus, is to be lived by following the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal 5:25*). This is the first time that Paul uses this expression: to be “*under* the Law”. The underlying meaning implies the idea of a negative servitude, typical of slaves: to be “under”. The Apostle makes it explicit by saying that when one is “under the Law” it is as if one is “watched” and “locked up”, a kind of preventive custody. This period, Saint Paul says, has lasted a long time — from Moses, to the coming of Jesus — and is perpetuated as long as one lives in sin.

The relationship between the Law and sin will be explained in a more systematic way by the Apostle in his Letter to the Romans, written a few years after the one to the Galatians. In summary, the Law leads to the definition of the transgression and to making people aware of their own sin: “You have done this, and so the Law — the Ten Commandments — say this: you are in sin”. Indeed, as common experience teaches, the precept ends up stimulating the transgression. In the Letter to the Romans he writes: “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive” (*Rom 7:5-6*). Why? Because the justification of Jesus Christ has come. Paul succinctly expresses his vision of the Law: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (*1 Cor 15:56*). A dialogue: you are under the law, and you are there with the door open to sin.

In this context, the reference to the pedagogical role played by the law makes total sense. But the Law is the pedagogue that leads you where? To Jesus. In the school system of antiquity, the pedagogue did not have the function we attribute to him today, namely that of supporting the education of a boy or a girl. At the time he was instead a slave whose task was to accompany the master’s son to the teacher and then bring him home again. He was thus to protect him from danger and watch over him to ensure he did not behave badly. His function was rather disciplinary. When the boy became an adult, the pedagogue ceased his duties. The pedagogue to whom Paul refers was not the teacher, but the one who accompanied his ward to school, who watched over the boy and brought him back home.

Referring to the Law in these terms enables Saint Paul to clarify the role it played in the history of Israel. The *Torah*, that is, the Law, was an act of magnanimity by God towards his people. After the election of Abraham, the other great act was the Law: laying down the path to follow. It certainly had restrictive functions, but at the same time it had protected the people, it had educated them, disciplined them and supported them in their weakness, especially by protecting them from paganism; there were many pagan attitudes in those times. The Torah says: “There is only one God and He has set us on our way”. An act of goodness by the Lord. And certainly, as I said, it had restrictive functions, but at the same time it had protected the people, had educated them, had disciplined them and it had supported them in their weakness. And this is why the Apostle goes on to describe the minor age. And he says: “The heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees

until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe” (*Gal 4: 1-3*). Hence, the Apostle’s conviction is that the Law certainly possesses a positive function — as a pedagogue moving forward — but it is a function that is limited in time. Its duration cannot be extended too far because it is linked to the maturation of individuals and their choice of freedom. Once one has come to faith, the Law exhausts its propaedeutic value and must give way to another authority. What does this mean? That after the Law we can say, “We believe in Jesus Christ and do what we want”? No! The Commandments exist, but they do not justify us. What justifies is Jesus Christ. The Commandments must be observed, but they do not give us justice; there is the gratuitousness of Jesus Christ, the encounter with Jesus Christ that freely justifies us. The merit of faith is receiving Jesus. The only merit: opening the heart. So what do we do with the Commandments? We must observe them, but as an aid to the encounter with Jesus Christ.

This teaching on the value of the law is very important, and deserves to be considered carefully so as not to fall into misunderstandings and take false steps. It will do us good to ask ourselves whether we still live in the period in which we need the Law, or if instead we are fully aware of having received the grace of becoming children of God so as to live in love. How do I live? In the fear that if I do not do this, I will go to hell? Or do I live with that hope too, with that joy of the gratuitousness of salvation in Jesus Christ? It is a good question. And also a second one: do I scorn the Commandments? No. I observe them, but not as absolutes, because I know that it is Jesus Christ who justifies me.

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### Special Greetings

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. May these tranquil summer days be for you and your families a special time of grace and spiritual renewal. God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly, the sick, young people and newlyweds*. Dear elderly and dear sick people, may you have the comfort of the maternal presence of Mary, a sign of sure hope, in your old age and in suffering. And you dear young people, as you build your future, always put Christ’s call in first place. And you, dear newlyweds, I hope that your love will be a mirror of God’s infinite and eternal love.

My Blessing to you all.

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**Summary of the Holy Father's words:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians, we have seen how Saint Paul teaches that faith in Jesus Christ brings a spiritual freedom that liberates believers from the demands of the Mosaic Law. For the Apostle, the Law served a “pedagogical” function; as a merciful gift of God, it demanded obedience to his commandments, while at the same time pointing to the reality of our sinfulness and need for salvation. With the coming of Christ and his redeeming grace, the Law finds its fulfilment in the Gospel message of new life and freedom in the Spirit.

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