

I come from Rio de Janeiro, which is a city founded in the XVI Century, by the Portuguese, as a stronghold against French incursions in Brazil. It is a very old city for New World standards. It also grew considerably early, so that in 1900 it already had about a million inhabitants.

So, it's a city with considerably old and narrow streets. This causes a lot of traffic. However, since the geography of Rio is very irregular, with mountains that almost touch the sea and narrow strips of land that can be occupied, there are almost no shortcuts. You are stuck in traffic. There is no other option.

This is frustrating for so many of us, because we LOVE easy paths. We want to take shortcuts so we can arrive earlier in places. I wonder if you felt this way before.

As followers and disciples of Christ, we are presented with a series of commandments we must follow at all times. Sometimes, we are forced to engage them creatively with new realities that were not known by the people of God back then, but they are, nonetheless, commandments we must follow.

And those are not easy paths. The path to sainthood takes a long time and a lot of effort. We must keep our hearts and minds open at all times to hear God's action around us, and we must be ready to keep God's commandments. But, there's always a very strong temptation of taking a shortcut!

Because shortcuts seem to be an easy way out of a difficult problem. Too much traffic? Just take a side road. What about those commandments? Just skip them! Or, even worse, tweak them so you can pose as somebody who really does it right...

Jesus' words present us a series of expressions following the formula “you have heard it said ... , but I say to you ... ” In this section we meet not a new list of rules, but the intentions of the law. Some verses before today's reading, Jesus himself had stated very clearly tht he did not intend to abolish the law and the prophets, but seeks to fulfill them.

But many people were “taking shortcuts”. They knew murder was forbidden, but continued to insult each other, thinking it was a more excusable sin. Jesus points to them a path towards reconciliation: “first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come to the altar”.

Married men knew that adultery was forbidden, but they found ways of disrespecting their wives, who were treated as property. Husbands lusted after other women and, when they got tired of their own wives, they would just cast them aside, divorce them and marry someone else. If you interpret the law literally, there is nothing wrong with that. But Jesus points out that this behavior is sinful, for it does not treat women as full citizens of the Kingdom of God. They were treated just as property, and divorce was being used as a tool of exclusion, instead of being the guarantee of a safe termination of a broken marriage.

Jesus did not want his disciples to take shortcuts. He did not want them to follow the law literally, but not in principle. He wanted them – and he wants us – to be people of integrity, who walk the path of sainthood without trying to find easy solutions and half-truths.

The people of God should not swear at any time, not because it is forbidden by law, but because followers of Christ have no need to swear if they live a fruitful life and speak in truth.

The people of God should honor their own commitments and vows, and respect other people's vows, understanding that partners and spouses are not people we can use at will, but companions in life that should be respected.

The people of God should, at all times, respect their neighbors and treat them as equals, without offending them or treating them as inferiors. And, whenever we fall, we must be ready to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is the path of life. This is the fulfillment of the law. This is the Kingdom Jesus came to bring. The vision Jesus presents of this kingdom may seem to be stern, but it is a vision of equality, because it forces us to fight our sinful nature and treat all of humankind as equals. And the Church is the proper venue for enacting this vision of God's kingdom.

Today, we are being presented with two paths: one is the path

of life. It is a long, difficult journey, but it is full of excitement, joy and mutual support.

If you choose this path, you will soon learn that there are many others who will help you and support you throughout the journey. And even more people who will be blessed by your life and experiences. Today, in this very sacred place, our lives crossed. Our paths converged to this moment. It was all part of God's plan, so we could be encouraged to carry on, grow together and be children of the light.

But... there is also the shortcut of death. It looks short and simple, but it is dirty, and ugly. It involves disrespecting God and God's people. This is not a path of love. This is not what God intends us to do.

God is asking: choose love, so you can live. Choose light. Choose life.

Choose the Reign of God, so you can live. Amen.