

220b, 2015

Have you ever felt that you were simply going through the motions of your day to day existence? We get up, get dressed, eat something, struggle through the tasks of the day, have supper, watch a little t.v., go to bed and then repeat the same routine the next day, and the next...

If this repetitive daily routine overwhelms our spirituality, we may find that our spiritual journey is lacking an authenticity, a vibrancy—and so we must be careful to not allow our daily routines to separate us from our “religious” day to day journey.

It’s so easy to allow our piety to slip into a disconnectedness that focuses mainly on externals without taking care of the interior life.

True piety is not a practiced and soulless routine, but a holiness that arises from within a heart that is consciously in love with God.

After 5 weeks of reflecting on the 6th chapter of John’s gospel and the theme of Jesus as the Bread of Life, today we have our scriptures focus upon the nature of true religion.

The Law of Moses was very important for the chosen people of Israel. They were rightly proud of the legal system they had developed in their desire to be God’s people. Through the Law they were expected to lead lives which were different, better than their pagan neighbors.

But by the time of Jesus, the law had become so hopelessly complicated in its application that only experts could interpret it in the many practical problems which would arise in daily living.

Another problem had arisen by Jesus’ time. The law was no longer a guideline helping people on their way to loving and serving God because observing the law had become an end in itself. The emphasis

was not on building a relationship with God and one's fellow human beings, but on checking out one's own external behavior.

Sometimes our confessions can be like that. Many of the sins we confess are often phrased as personal failures. (I lost my temper, I was impatient, I was lazy, I was uncharitable) with very little reference to how I relate to other people or how my actions(or even more so, my non-actions) causes them pain. I need to ask myself what effect that my bad temper have on another; what pain did inflict upon them?

As Jesus indicates in today's gospel, many of the Old Testament laws were of human invention. They had little to do with loving God but rather were about conforming to social demands.

They helped those in authority to keep control, while allowing people to know where they stood. If they externally observed the Law, they were "good." As in our time we might say: He's a good Catholic; he's always in church on Sunday. While there is no mention of what he does in church, what he thinks, or what he feels, or how he relates to people, especially after Mass is over. The important thing, for this mentality, is that he is there physically and that's about all. Instead, we need to not allow our prayers to become rote or allow our participation in the Mass to become more of a habit than a commitment to God.

This conflict between the law and what is intended by the law is presented in the gospel today by a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The purpose of today's gospel then is to put these Jewish customs into proper perspective. Washing hands before eating is a very sensible precaution. How often as children we were told: Don't come to the table until you have washed your hands? There were many prescriptions in Jewish law which seem to be primarily hygienic in origin, ie, a distinction between foods that were "clean" and "unclean."

Experience has shown that certain foods could be dangerous to eat and eating with dirty hands could be a source of disease or sickness.

Actually Jesus is not criticizing such precautions. What he is criticizing is the disproportionate importance given to these things to the neglect of what is far more important—the love of God and the care for one's fellow human beings. Every one of us is susceptible to the lure of hypocrisy; the challenge for us is not to polish the outside, but to come to know one's inner self with no illusions. It's easy to see that Jesus had no tolerance for lip service; in the eyes of God, pure hands are nothing when compared to pure hearts.

And so then Jesus speaks of where real uncleanness comes from. The source of uncleanness is not any food or drink that comes from outside. Real uncleanness is in the heart. A person does not become "unclean" by eating pork or by coming into contact with blood, It is the "evil intentions" that arise in the depths of the heart: lust, stealing, murder, adultery, greed, maliciousness, deceit, jealousy, slanderous talk, or arrogance. All these are in direct conflict with a genuinely loving relationship with God and people. And washing hands does nothing to change that.

In other words, religion has little to do with the observance of laws—our focus should be on being sensitive to the needs of the weakest and most marginalized among us.

And this is true religion because "as often as you did it or did not do it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did/ or did not do it on to me.

There is a strong attraction for some to have a religion of laws and regulations. The question on their lips is often: Is this a sin? Is it a mortal sin or only a venial sin? The main concern of such people to

know what they can get away with and how to be free from feelings of guilt.

But these are not the questions to ask. Our real concern should be: is this a loving thing to do? There may or may not be any commandment or regulation about it, but if it is not a word or act of love, then it is not Christian, nor is it a moral act.

It is possible to keep all the laws and rules perfectly (as the Pharisees of all religions do) and yet to be very far from the spirit of Jesus and the Gospel. The law-keeper is primarily concerned with "saving his soul," with "being in the state of grace" (whatever that means). When he shows "charity" to others, it is often simply to get "merit" for himself.

Obviously in our Church and in our parish and wherever people have to work together, we have to have rules. But they are only means to help us work together more smoothly. Once the rules start dictating to us, then we are in trouble.

There is a lot of truth in the statement: Rules are made to be broken.

Laws are meant not to restrict, but to maximize the freedom of individuals and groups without detriment to others.

In the final analysis, we all have to discern for ourselves just how, in given circumstances, we can best love and serve Christ. It calls for a great deal of honesty, integrity and a high level of real freedom, the freedom to choose what is good, what is better, what is more loving.

The Scriptures are not a code of laws. Rather they provide a vision of a truly human life lived for God among other people. It is focused on relationships rather than individual actions.

After all, when faith is completely replaced by creed, when worship is completely replaced by discipline, when love is completely replaced by

habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, then we are entering into the world of the Pharisees and that, my brothers and sisters, is not something that we should ever want to do.

This very day we will have many opportunities to love and serve Jesus in various situations. Instead of being anxious about what I do is wrong, by asking is it a sin? Rather ask: where and how can I be more loving, caring and compassionate person this day...