

## SYNOPSIS OF O. T. XXII (AUG 30) HOMILY: Mk 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (L-15)

**Introduction:** Today's readings explain what true religion is. It is not simply a scrupulous, external observance of rules, laws, traditions and rituals. It is a loving, obedient relationship with God expressed in obeying His Commandments, worshipping Him, recognizing His presence in other human beings and rendering them loving and humble service. Prayers, rituals, Sacraments and religious practices only help us to practice this true religion in our daily lives.

**Scripture lessons:** The first reading explains that religion is a Covenant relationship with a caring, providing and protecting God, fostered by keeping His Commandments given through Moses. God gave Israel the Law so that the Israelites might keep their Covenant with Yahweh and thank Him for His love and fidelity to His Chosen People. The Law was also intended to keep them a united, holy and intelligent nation, proud of their powerful, protective, single God.

In the second reading, St. James defines true religion as keeping the word of God and doing His will by helping the needy, the poor and the weak in the community. He challenges Christians to become doers of the word, not merely hearers.

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes true religion as serving God and all His children with a pure and holy heart. The Gospel explains the encounter of Jesus with the Sanhedrin observers and the Pharisees who had been sent to assess his unique, controversial teachings. These experts had found Jesus' teachings an open violation of the "Traditions of the Elders, and His implied and spoken claims "blasphemous. It was in the fifth century BC that the scribes started adding *oral traditions* as interpretations and practical applications of the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees observed them and insisted that all the Jews should do so. The original noble purpose was to sanctify the daily lives of the people, making them "holy as God is holy" ("*You are a priestly kingdom, a holy nation*" -- Ex 19: 6), and different in lifestyle from their pagan neighbors. Jesus uses the occasion as a teachable moment to give them the following lessons: 1) Don't teach human doctrines as dogmas. 2) Internal disposition, purity and holiness are more important than external ritual observances. 3) Keep your heart holy as it is the source of sins, vices and evil habits. The observance of traditions and of washing rituals does not correct the internal motivations and inclinations that really defile people. 4) External piety without internal holiness is hypocrisy.

**Life messages:** 1) We need to learn and keep the spirit of the Church's laws and ritual practices. For example our Sunday obligation is intended to allow us to worship God in the parish community, to offer our lives to God, to ask His pardon for sins, to thank God for His blessings and to receive Divine life and strength from Him in Holy Communion. Our daily family prayers are meant to thank God for his blessings, to present the family's needs before God, to ask pardon for sins and to maintain the spirit of unity and love in the family.

2) Let us avoid the tendency to become cafeteria Christians that is, to choose certain Commandments and Church laws to follow, and to ignore the others as we choose certain food items and ignore others in a cafeteria.

XXII Dt 4:1-2, 6-8; Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mk 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Anecdotes: 1) "Put your hand in Jesus' hand": For almost 50 years Mother Teresa worked in the slums of Calcutta, India. She worked among the most forsaken people on earth. You and I would recoil from most of the people that she touched every day – the dispossessed, the downtrodden, the diseased, the desperate. And yet, everybody who met Mother Teresa remarked on her warm smile. How, after almost 50 years of working in conditions like that did she keep a warm smile on her face? Mother explains that it is interesting. "When I was leaving home in Yugoslavia at age of 18 to become a nun, my mother told me something beautiful and very strange". She said, 'You go put your hand in Jesus hand and walk along with him.'" And that was the secret of Mother Teresa's life ever after. (Rev. King Duncan). Many of us here have good jobs. And we live in nice homes, and we have easy situations. But we don't have the warm smile on our faces that this little nun, working in the most desperate situation imaginable, had on her face. What's the difference? It may be that we've never put our hand in Jesus hand. It may be that we have him only on our lips as St. James remarks in the second reading.

2) Ritual washing using drinking-water: William Barclay in *The Daily Study Bible* tells the story of an old Jewish rabbi in the Roman prison diagnosed with acute dehydration which would have led to his death. The prison guards insisted that the rabbi had been given his quota of drinking water. So the prison doctor and the officer in charge instructed the guards to watch the rabbi and ascertain what he was doing with his ration of water. They were shocked to find that the rabbi was using almost all his water for traditional ritual washing before prayer and meals. Today's Gospel tells us how the tradition-addicted Pharisees started questioning Jesus when his disciples omitted the ritual washing of hands in public before a meal.

3) Pursuit of enemy not hindered by prayer: Barclay's second story is about a Muslim pursuing an enemy to kill him. In the midst of the pursuit, the Azan, or public call to prayer, sounded. Instantly the Muslim got off his horse, unrolled his prayer mat, knelt down and prayed the required prayers as fast as he could. Then he leaped back on his horse to pursue his enemy in order to kill him. Jesus opposes this type of legalism in the Jewish religion in today's Gospel.

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**Scripture lessons:** The first reading explains that religion is a Covenant relationship with a caring, providing and protecting God, fostered by keeping His Commandments given through Moses. God gave Israel the Law so that the Israelites might keep their Covenant with Yahweh and thank Him for His love and fidelity to His Chosen People. The Law was also intended to keep them a united, holy and intelligent nation proud of their powerful, protective, single God. The Responsorial Psalm describes a person who practices true religion —blameless and just, thoughtful and honest in dealing with others. In the second reading, St. James defines true religion as keeping the word of God and doing His will by helping the needy, the poor and the weak in the community. He challenges Christians to become doers of the word, not merely hearers. In today's Gospel, Jesus describes true religion as serving God and all His children with a pure and holy heart. The occasion is a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees on the subject of "Tradition." Jesus warns the Pharisees against their tendency to equate traditional "human precepts" with God's will. He blames the scribes and the Pharisees for giving undue importance to external observances in the name of "tradition," while ignoring the Law's real spirit. True religion should focus on the essentials. In particular, Jesus criticizes Pharisaic observance of ritual washing and declares that it is our inner motivations and dispositions that produce our purity or impurity.

**First reading: Dt 4:1-2, 6-8:** In the fifth century BC, internal corruption and external pressures had brought the Israelites to the brink of extinction. Kings, priests, prophets and Temple had failed to hold them together. Deuteronomy, recorded under the Holy Spirit's direction during the crisis of the Babylonian exile, 587-539 BC, presented the ancient legal traditions surrounding the Law which had been given Israel by the Lord God through Moses. In this book, Moses described the beauty of the Law and commanded its observance as Israel's sign of gratitude for the Lord God's promise of the land. He assured the people that their God-given Law and their faithful observance of the Law would serve three purposes: a) it would help Israel survive as a people; b) it would make the people proud of their God and His Covenant; c) it would make neighboring nations marvel at the graciousness and justice of the God of Israel, at His closeness to His people and at their closeness to Him. Hence, Moses challenged the Israelites with the questions: *"What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him? What other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?"* Moses cited the praise they would receive from neighboring nations as an additional reason for keeping the Law: *"This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people."*

**Second Reading, James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27:** Today we begin a series of five Sunday readings from the letter of James. In the letter, James addresses the whole Christian Church in general, rather than speaking just to a particular community or person as Paul did in his letters. After dealing with the value of trials and temptations and refuting the argument that temptations come from God (James 1:2-18), James provides the only formal definition of religion in the Bible. He defines true religion as translating the love of God into deeds of loving kindness toward the vulnerable members of the community and putting into practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. More specifically, true religion means that one is

to "care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

**Exegesis: The context:** Just as Jesus and his disciples were reforming Judaism by transforming it into Christianity, the Pharisees had begun reforming Judaism at an earlier period. They considered the "Written Law" or Torah or the *Law of Moses* (the first five books of the Bible), and the "Oral Law" (clarifications and additions to the Mosaic Law given by scribes from the fifth century B.C.), as equally holy and binding. These oral laws, known in Jesus' time as the "Traditions of the Elders," were a series of oral traditions intended to act as "a fence around the Law," so that the Mosaic Law itself, and, thus, the Covenant, would never be violated. The original, noble intention of the scribes who formulated these traditions and of the Pharisees who practiced them was to have their religion permeate all Israel, purifying the people in their daily lives, making them holy as their God is holy. In spite of these noble intentions, however, by the time of Jesus, their religion had degenerated, being reduced to only the exact performance of external rituals. Small wonder, then, that the scribes and Pharisees were scandalized by the revolutionary teaching of Jesus, by the unique Divine and Messianic claims made by him and by his violations of the "Traditions of the Elders"! Hence, the supreme governing body of Judaism, the Sanhedrin, sent from Jerusalem as observers a team of scribes (experts in the Jewish Law), to assess Jesus' claims, miracles, violations of traditions and controversial teachings. A few of the local Pharisees accompanied the experts and started questioning Jesus when they noticed that Jesus' disciples had omitted the ritual cleansing of hands before a party meal.

**Ritual versus hygienic washing:** Ritual washing was required of the priest, but there was nothing in the *Mosaic Law* that required the same behavior from lay people. Pious Jews began to adopt that habit on the principle of Exodus 19:6 — "you are a priestly kingdom and a holy nation," and gradually it became the "the tradition of the elders." The ritual cleansing of raw food items bought from the market, of vessels used for cooking and of the hands of those who were to eat the prepared food, like many similar practices, evolved later, to remind the Chosen People of their call to be "set apart as a holy and consecrated people," with values and life-style consciously different from those of pagans. But in Jesus' day, the Jews ignored the spirit of these traditions and practiced them simply as an essential judicial and ritual requisite. The question "Why do your disciples not wash their hands before eating?" persisted. It created tensions in the early Church, particularly in the Christian community of Mark where some of the new Christians were Jews and some were Gentiles. The Gentiles did not follow the Jewish customs, and, consequently, some of the Jewish Christians were upset.

**Jesus' reaction:** In response to the Sanhedrin's public criticism, Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition by citing Isaiah 29:13, where the prophet castigates the tendency to "teach mere human precepts as dogmas." "*This people pays Me lip-service but their heart is far from Me. Empty is the reverence they do Me, because they teach as dogmas mere human precepts.*" The Pharisees placed emphasis, not on building a relationship with God

and their fellow-human beings, but on checking out their own external behavior. Originally these religious traditions were intended to symbolize inner realities -- outward signs of inward devotion to God's Will. But the Pharisees were using them to boost their own egos.

Hence, Jesus flatly denied that external things or circumstances could separate a person from God. Jesus was not criticizing rituals given in the Mosaic Law, but the giving of disproportionate importance to these things while neglecting what was far more important, the love of God and the care for one's fellow-human beings. By insisting that uncleanness comes from violations of the moral law rather than of minute ritual prescriptions, Jesus denied a basic principle of Jewish religion and set aside a considerable amount of Mosaic Law. *"Nothing that enters a man from outside can make him impure; that which comes out of him, and only that, constitutes impurity."*

**Real source of impurity:** As illustrations of the evils which really make a person sinful and alienate him from God, Jesus mentions six evil acts: practices of sexual immorality, thefts, murders, adultery, acts of coveting or lust, and wickedness in general. Then he adds a checklist of six vices or sins of the heart: deceit (lying), wantonness (shamelessness, immodesty), jealousy or envy, slander (imputing evil to others), pride (arrogance), and folly (the stupidity of one lacking moral judgment). The point is clear. Righteousness is not what we do on the outside, but who we are on the inside. Righteousness is not about the hand; it is about the heart. Acts of adultery, murder and unkindness come from within, from hearts that are adulterous, murderous and unkind. For Jesus, a community that is actively worshiping God is a community that does not base its behavior solely on precepts and doctrines, but is integrally connected to God through righteous, just and loving relationships. What makes a person holy are the attitudes and actions that Paul in Gal 5:22-23 lists as "the fruit" of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

**Life Messages:** 1) We need to keep the spirit of the Church's laws and practices. For example our Sunday obligation is intended to allow us to worship God in the parish community, to offer our lives to God, to ask His pardon for our sins, to thank God for His blessings, to present our needs before Him and to receive Divine Life and strength from Him in receiving Holy Communion. Our daily family prayers are meant to thank God for His blessings, to present the family's needs before God, to ask pardon for all our sins, and to maintain the spirit of unity and love in the family.

2) Let us avoid the tendency to become cafeteria Christians: As the Pharisees did, we too show the tendency to add to or subtract from God's laws given in the Bible and taught by the Church. Some of us pick and choose certain Commandments to follow, ignoring the others as we do food offerings in a cafeteria. For example some actively do corporal and spiritual works of Charity, but avoid Sunday Mass or remain unfaithful to the obligations attached to the gift of their sexuality or the sacrament of marriage. Others are interested in fulfilling only the "minimal obligations" of the Faith. They come to Mass late and leave early.

They make an effort to avoid serious sins, but don't go to confession even when they fall into mortal sins.

3) Let us accept the challenge to become hearers and doers of God's word as St. James instructs us: Let us ask ourselves how the Sunday or daily readings are affecting or changing our lives. That will show us whether we are being attentive listeners to, and doers of, God's word. We become more fully Jesus' family members, only when we consistently "hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21). When we receive Jesus in Holy Communion today, let us ask him for the grace to become the doers of his word as he was the doer of his Fathers' will.

Prepared by Fr. Antony Kadavil (akadavil@gmail.com) and published in the CBCI Website.