

22nd Sunday OT Year B
August 30-31, 2015

Do not cling to human tradition

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8; James 1:17-18,21-22; Mark 7: 1-8,14-15,21-23

There is a saying that “Character is what you do when no one else is watching.” It was the summer of 1988 and I was in the midst of a study program in the Holy Land. It was a wonderful, even if extremely warm and grueling summer, but I was so privileged to be there to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. One afternoon after class, I wandered into downtown Jerusalem to get a bite to eat at a fast food restaurant. I recall that it was called Mc David!

As I was eating my hamburger saw a young person who looked to be high school age and noticed that he was washing his hands in a sink strategically placed right in the middle of the restaurant. I immediately recalled the advice of my mother to us kids- “Don’t forget to wash your hands before dinner!”

But I just as quickly I realized that the primary motivation behind his hand washing was different than I had initially surmised. This was not necessarily a hygienically astute lad, but rather a devout one. He was following his faith, keeping the tradition of the elders of his faith. I remember being impressed because he appeared to be all alone; no one was looking over his shoulder. But according to his faith, he did the right thing.

Saint James reminded us in today’s 2nd reading that we ought to be “doers of the Word,” and not just hearers. Religion that is “pure and undefiled” consists in caring for those around us and remaining unstained by the world. He captures the essence of our faith: to help others while keeping ourselves blameless before God.

Moses provided sound teaching when he commanded the Israelites that they must not add to nor subtract from the decrees of the Lord.

Rather, they were to observe them carefully, giving evidence of their wisdom and intelligence. Are we able to see the precepts of our faith as something freely given and received for the sake of our sanctification? We are invited to respond, not out of fear of punishment, but out of respect for the Lord who has shared with us a perfect gift from above, His law and His truth.

Certainly there is a difference between human tradition and God's commandments, and we need to understand this. You see, the Church's faith precedes the faith of us believers who are invited to adhere to it. For example, the liturgy we celebrate here today is a gift received, not a rite manufactured. It came first from the Lord himself at the Last Supper and subsequently from the Tradition of the Church handed down through the centuries. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition of the Church.

It is for this reason that no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the Pope may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy. We therefore are servants of the liturgy, not masters of it.

St. Thomas Aquinas argued that the Church was said to be built up with the sacraments that flowed from the side of Christ. Its "power cannot be from him who makes use of a sacrament: because he works but as a minister. Consequently, it follows that the power of the sacrament is from the institutor of the sacrament."¹

The same holds true for fundamental dogmatic and moral doctrines of the Church. Other aspects of the various sacramental rites are changeable and develop organically over time, but always with the approval of the Church, and never without it.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 64, art. 2.

There are also traditions (with a lower case “t”) that ought to be distinguished from Tradition, certainly exhibiting a less central relation to the core doctrines, but important nonetheless. Jesus was teaching the Pharisees that they must never disregard God’s commandments by getting lost in mere human tradition. That is an equally important lesson today.

We desire a worship that is pure and undefiled, while always keeping our focus on the essentials of our worship, knowing that celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace they signify.

The young person in the restaurant that summer day 27 years ago taught me an important lesson. If we desire to be faithful, we do so in all things, even the seemingly minor aspects of our faith. It all adds up, and God rewards the person who seeks to do His will.