

22nd Sunday in the Ordinary Time

Today's readings explain what true religion is. It is not simply a scrupulous, external fulfillment 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.

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 listeners.

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 spectators 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 offensive. They also noticed that Jesus' disciples omitted the required ritual washing before meals. 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 of Faith. 2) Sincerity of heart, internal disposition,

purity and holiness are more important than mere external ritual fulfillments. 3) Keep your heart holy as it is the source of sins, iniquities and evil habits. The fulfillment 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.

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.

Let us avoid the tendency to become restaurant 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.

Let us accept the challenge to become listeners 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.