

Tradition or Traditions?

August 29, 2021, Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gospel of Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Fr. John

The following is an adaptation of a story related by the late Jesuit, Fr. Anthony in his book: **The Song of the Bird**.

When the monastery's abbot knelt to worship each evening in the chapel, the community's pet cat would get in the way and distract the brothers at prayer. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. Eventually the abbot died and the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. When the cat expired, another cat was brought to the chapel so that it could be duly tied during evening prayer. Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the abbot's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus cites the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines? You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human traditions'.

In the 2000 year history of the Catholic Church, many pious practices and devotions have emerged. Many of these were born out of practicality and the spiritual needs of the day. They were a prayer supplement for the laity to the celebration of the Mass, the sacraments and the breviary [Liturgy of the Hours] which had largely become the enclave of the clergy.

The danger that arose, however, was that when the original purpose and context of these devotions were lost in history, they tended to border on religious superstition and began to take on a life of their own.

Our human tendency is to begin to believe that the simple recitation of the prayers and devotions *alone* will magically deliver the promises that they hold forth. [cf. The devotions to the Sacred Heart on the successive nine first Fridays of the month]. Thus we may find ourselves saying the right holy things without becoming holy.

If the religious practice is not resulting in our on-going conversion and spiritual growth as evidenced in our attitudes and actions - then we are simply turning the devotion into a magical event.

Our faith has to be deeply rooted in reality-not superstition or magic. It is an incarnational faith by which God acts through the creation in which He has placed us.

While it is true that during his public ministry, Jesus did perform some acts that we would refer to as being miraculous. Yet, for the most part, his purpose was that of modelling how we should live as flesh and blood human beings in this world. It is in striving for that - that holiness is to be found.

In the Letter of James, [today's 2nd reading], the writer reminds us: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: '... to care for orphans and widows in their distress..." In other words that holiness resides not just in our prayers and religious devotions but in our actions and relationship with others which includes all living things and our environment as well.

Any disconnect between prayer and action betrays our sincerity in what we say we believe.

One of the main reasons that we are called back to the Eucharist every Sunday is a reminder not only of what God in Jesus has done for us but what we are now called to do in praise and gratitude all the other days of the week.

As once again, the Letter of James reminds us: "...be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceives themselves."