

Hypocrites and Human Traditions

By Rev. John Gavin, S.J.

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

Readings: Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-8; James 1.17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In today's reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus condemns the Pharisees and scribes for being hypocrites, that is, for being "bad actors." They put on a good show as sticklers for external norms, but inside they are empty. "You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." They have elevated the oral tradition regarding ritual purity for meals to a standard applied to all, at the expense of a proper interior disposition. Jesus then echoes the opening words of Moses in the first reading—"Hear me"—in order to dispense all from the accumulation of norms and to emphasize the conversion of heart.

Yet, before we join in Jesus' condemnation of these "hypocrites," perhaps we should pause and look at ourselves. Does not the Church impose certain norms? We cannot eat meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent; we must go to Confession and receive Communion at least once a year; we must attend mass weekly and on holy days of obligation. Perhaps the Church is hypocritical for insisting on rules and obligations! Did not Jesus condemn this precise approach?

Now, Israel, hear . . .

In our first reading, Moses calls the Israelites to obey the commandments established in their covenant relationship with God. "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you." These commands include ethical norms that distinguish the culture of the chosen people from many of the hedonistic practices around them. Yet, more significantly, they direct the fundamental orientation of their lives toward the one, true God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt.

In the *Book of Leviticus*, God also dictates to Moses the various dietary restrictions that continue to shape the daily practices of Jews. For example: "Say to the sons of Israel, These are the living things which you may eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven footed and chews the cud among the animals, you may eat. Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part of the hoof, you shall not eat these" (Lev 11.2-4). These latter norms of diet and purity should not be overlooked as useless accretions surrounding the more substantive ethical commandments, since they come from God's word, remind the people of the Covenant, and reorder their disordered appetites. J.H.H. Weiler wrote, regarding Kosher observance, "Like all other living creatures, man would eat when and what and how much desire dictated . . . It is *Nomos* [the Law] that makes man free from the slavery of his appetites and truly sovereign over them."

Still, problems did emerge regarding the people's obedience to the Law. First, long before Jesus, the Prophets noted the oft found disconnect between *outward* adherence to the norms and the *interior* disposition of the people. Words, purification rites, and animal sacrifices could become rote and devoid of love. Second, over the centuries, in order to prevent assimilation to the surrounding powers, many Jewish leaders developed an extended series of practices to maintain ritual purity—e.g. "the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds"—that became nearly ends unto

themselves. Though well intentioned, these “human traditions” had come to obscure the fundamental commandment of love found in the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6.4). Thus, Jesus could quote the Prophet Isaiah, who condemned such empty praxis: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.”

Hear me . . . and understand

We should not understand Jesus’ condemnation to be an abrogation of the Law, nor a repudiation of ritual practice, but rather a call to interior conversion. Jesus makes this very clear in Matthew’s Gospel: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt 5.17). In fact, Jesus often teaches the essential precepts of the law and even extends their scope. Yet, when Jesus echoes Moses’ call to “hear”—“Hear me, all of you, and understand”—He makes it clear that something *new* has arrived: a new Moses who has brought the Law to fulfillment and invites all to receive the Word into their hearts. Now Jesus, the Word Incarnate, becomes the Law that lives in our hearts and brings us into a new Way of life. Clement of Alexandria, in the third century, wrote: “What is more, by assuming the Word as our law, we will discover that his commandments and warnings are the shortest and swiftest road to eternity.” The second reading, from the *Letter of St. James*, emphasizes this point: “Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.” Human traditions—in this case, the extended purity rituals surrounding the essential elements of the Law—should not become ends unto themselves, but rather the Word must transform our souls and lead to a deeper commitment to the commandment of love.

Yet, what of the Church’s precepts? Are these not simply a return to empty “human traditions”? Many today certainly voice such criticism. We can, however, offer two replies. First, the precepts of the Church—so simple and few—emerge from the new dispensation in Christ and allow the Word to transform our hearts. The sacraments offer us a participation in the saving actions of Jesus, a share in his very life. Our minimal sacrifices during Lent and at other times of the year unite us as a body for the discipline of the appetites and the consciousness of our pilgrim status in the world—echoes of the dietary restrictions in *Leviticus*. The ethical teachings of the Church, grounded in the Scriptures and centuries of reflection, guide our freedom to a greater imitation of Christ. Though we can fall into an empty, rote adherence to the Church’s precepts, we have Jesus’ admonition to seek the proper interior disposition and exterior manifestation of God’s infinite love. The minimal precepts of the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit living within us, ensure our regular reception of grace and life.

Second, if we are truly concerned about the empty adherence to “human tradition,” we should not look toward the precepts of the Church, but toward the precepts of the world. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, lamented the destructive power of human customs—*consuetudines*—over human behavior. Though some human customs and traditions favorably form us for community and civic life, others easily corrupt us. “Woe, woe to you, you flood of human custom! Who can keep the footing against you?” lamented Augustine. Our human customs, in the words of Augustine scholar Veronica Roberts Ogle, often “make that social order into its own foundation; it is to *replace* the natural order with *consuetudo*” (Ogle, 71). How often today do we define our morality, civic participation, and even world view by “human tradition”? The extended Jewish purity rituals aimed at forming a people of the Covenant; our modern human traditions, spelled out in pop songs and “woke” proclamations, too often denigrate the human person and cloud the mind. Sadly, we Christians regularly elevate such human tradition at the expense of the Word—and the harmful results ripple through our society today.

Jesus’ warning in this Gospel calls us to avoid sin and to invite the Word to reign in our hearts. “Blessed the men whose strength you are! They go from strength to strength.”

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [## 2041-2046](#)
- Drachman and Kohler, "[Ablution](#)"
- Hirsch and Benzinger, "[Washing](#)"
- Veronica Roberts Ogle, [Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's City of God](#)
- J.H.H. Weiler, "[Why I Keep Kosher](#)"

In short . . .

- *The Jewish observance of purification rites and dietary rules reminded people of their covenant relationship and reoriented disordered human appetites toward God.*
- *Yet, as the Prophets proclaimed, these rules could become rote practices at the expense of a proper interior disposition and love of neighbor.*
- *In Jesus' time, many purification rites had been extended to the people as a whole and could become ends unto themselves—empty human traditions.*
- *Jesus calls for the purification of one's interior life and a conversion of heart. In doing so, He invites all to open their hearts to the living Word, the Law of life.*
- *The Church's precepts exist to ensure the reception of God's generous gifts into the Body and the proper orientation of hearts toward the Creator.*
- *The empty "human traditions" that often reign in Christian hearts come from the world. Christians must become conscious of such harmful influences and pattern their lives on the imitation of Christ.*