

HOMILY SUNDAY 22-B
"Religion From The Heart"

(Dt 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15; James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.'" Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"

Is your religion from the heart, or from the head?

Let your faith be sincere and from the heart.

This week the Star Phoenix newspaper carried a headline that read: "Tradition begins in new school." The article went on to explain that the gathering of the whole student body for a group picture was a tradition for Centennial school, now housed in a brand new building.

Tradition can be defined as anything that is handed on to us from our ancestors from generation to generation that largely determines our lives.

There are different kinds of traditions. Social traditions can be positive in that they help us make up our minds about controversial topics like euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality, same sex marriages, as well as less controversial topics like social justice, homelessness, etc. We can be influenced by these either by choice or by osmosis. The movie *Fiddler on the Roof* that speaks of marrying from one's own class is an example. Another is the tradition of the pep rallies before football games at Notre Dame. The engineering building is built to accommodate the tradition of a marching band towards the stadium.

The country song *Family Tradition* that was popular some time ago speaks of dysfunctional traditions. Alcoholism in a family can be generational and create harmful behavior patterns such as the unwritten rules *Don't talk, Don't trust and Don't feel* that are justified as family tradition.

There is also Sacred Tradition or Tradition with a capital "T". This includes the norms of the Church, Church law and rituals passed on to us through the ages, through the life of the Church that first gave us the Word of God. This Tradition is called the Lived Word of God.

The Catholic Church has always sought to balance this *Tradition* or the *Lived Word of God*, with the *Written Word of God* or the *Bible*. The core of this Written Word of God is the Great Commandment to love God, and our neighbor as we love ourselves. That new commandment builds on the Ten Commandments, and is fleshed out by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes.

At the time of Jesus, the religious leaders had lost their balance, and ended up subverting the Written Word of God, this commandment to love, by their misguided over-reliance on human tradition. The commandments of God are meant to bond people together. The Jewish leaders were using human regulations to set themselves apart as better than others, and dividing people – a perversion of God’s word. This negative religious action earned harsh words from Jesus. Jesus was not condemning traditions. He simply insisted that these traditions do not replace the Law of God, but rather should lead us to repentance and healing.

What Jesus wants is religion that comes from the heart. It is not our pious actions and prayers that count as much as conversion of the heart. The list Jesus gives that defiles us and comes from within, follows the Ten Commandments. He names sinful actions that hurt the community and require forgiveness (adultery, murder, fornication), as well as negative attitudes and painful emotions that cause us to sin (avarice, envy, pride) and require healing. This is what conversion and metanoia is all about – repentance that includes conversion or change. We need to be forgiven for our sins, and healed of our defects of character that make us sin.

A story that illustrates a superficial religion based on externals is that of a rabbinical student who was working hard at readying himself to become a rabbi, something he wanted with all his heart. He was disciplining himself severely - sleeping on the ground, often eating only grass, and whipping himself three times a day. Finally he felt that he was ready and went to see the head rabbi, who asked him why he felt that he was ready for such a step. After he had told the rabbi all that he was doing to ready himself, the rabbi took him to a window and pointed out a donkey in the pasture. [See that donkey?] the rabbi said, [he also eats only grass, sleeps on the ground, and gets whipped at least three times a day. You may or may not be ready to be a rabbi, but for sure you are ready for the life of a donkey.]

One time a parish hired a pastoral worker based on her academic abilities. For the first two weeks she impressed everyone with her knowledge of the faith and her pious nature. However, one weekend a well known resource person was brought in for a conference. The organizers of the event were too busy to pay much attention to her, trusting that she would make herself to home and fit in. Instead, she sat around feeling sorry for herself, and finally left in a huff, taking some needed conference materials with her. When later approached by the organizers, she treated them in an angry and judgmental way, causing them great pain and disillusionment. They were amazed at her anger, intolerance, lack of patience and suspected that she was jealous of the resource person who came in. This is what defiles us from within. Happily, when confronted by the team, she was able to see the error of her ways, apologize and seek help to change both her actions and her attitude.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is the heart of our Sacred Tradition that helps transform us into the Body of Christ and empowers us to live the commandment to love the world.

So, let your faith be sincere and from the heart.