

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012

The readings of this Sunday talk about true religion. They show us the spirit that should accompany a true religion and what we can do in order to live in the spirit of true religion.

In the first reading of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of Israel of the importance of the Law. He invites them to respect and observe the whole Law without adding or subtracting from it any of its stipulations. He assures them that such an observance will draw a blessing on them so that they come to live and enjoy the land that their God gave them. Moreover, by doing so, they will give witness to the rest of the world how God is close to them and how Israel is a wise and intelligent nation.

What is behind this text is the idea that the observance of the Law is a source of blessing for those who entrust their life to God. Another idea is the truth that although other nations might be admirable because of their undertakings and progress, their knowledge cannot be compared to the wisdom and the intelligence that come out of the observance of the Law.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and the Scribes about some of the stipulations from the tradition of the elders. First of all, the Gospel says that when those Pharisees and Scribes realized that some of the disciples of Jesus were eating without washing hands, they were unhappy and questioned Jesus about it.

The Gospel reveals also that Pharisees and Scribes have a lot of prescriptions and many other things they observe besides the Law. For instance, they observe the purification of cups and jugs, that of kettles and beds, as well as their own purification when they come from the market place or before eating any meal, etc.

In his response, Jesus was direct and targeted their hypocrisy, because their observance was just from the outside and not from the sincerity of their heart. That is why, by quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus reminded them how they honored God only with their lips while their hearts were far from him. He reproached their external worship of God and the observance of human precepts and traditions.

The Gospel finishes with the speech of Jesus addressed to the crowd in which he makes a distinction between the outside and the inside of a person. For him, indeed, what defiles someone is not what comes from outside, but from within, because it is from the heart that come out all bad things that someone can do.

What do we learn from the Gospel? The first point I want to bring is about the meaning of true religion. In fact, Jesus is criticized because his disciples are eating the meal with unclean hands. For the Pharisees and the Scribes, such an attitude is unacceptable because it denotes a lack of respect vis-à-vis the tradition of the ancestors.

In truth, their criticism denotes a deep tendency of seeing the truth of religion in what one does externally. In that sense, the external appearance of an individual becomes a sign of his holiness or his devotion. But, we know by experience that it cannot always be true. Of course, there is no denial that holiness can also be seen in the way someone behaves and takes a stand in life. However, it would be a mistake to think all the times that external and outside display a proof or an evident sign of sanctity. As a French

saying goes on, “L’habit ne fait pas le moine”, translated the external vestment of an individual does not make of him a monk.

It is for that reason that Jesus reacts vigorously against the religion of outward observance of regulations without sincerity of a heart given to God. For Jesus, indeed, true religion is that of the heart and not of appearance. In that perspective, we understand why he maintains that nothing that enters someone from outside does not defile him, but rather what comes from within.

The point Jesus makes is about the importance of the conversion over the religious regulations. The external appearance is certainly beautiful, but it is not the ultimate criterion that determines the sanctity of the life of a person and his true worship of God. The holiness of a person and that of his life belong to the domain of conversion of heart. Therefore, the Pharisees and the Scribes should care more about their internal state of being before God than just the external appearance before men. After all, who can reward us when it is about our eternal salvation? Is it God or human beings?

The second point I want to highlight is about the role of tradition. Here are two important things we have to know, namely that our biology is passed on to us through genes, but the social order is acquired through culture and tradition. In that sense, the many traditions we have express in different ways our identity and the social order through which we live as a group or society.

In itself, tradition makes no sense at all if it is cut from the life of the people who have given it birth. In that sense, the role of a tradition is to deepen the understanding of the people to which it is linked and what makes them to be who they are. For instance, the people of Israel were the people of God par excellence. If, then, they had some traditions, those should allow them to deepen their understanding of the Covenant with God and who they were with regard to their commitment before God.

However, under the guidance of Scribes and Pharisees, that was not the case. Scribes and Pharisees made the tradition stand for itself without any impact on their belief and their life as the people of God. It is here that Jesus does not agree with them because the mere respect of the tradition is not enough if it cannot lead to God.

That is the reason why Jesus repeats the complaint of God expressed thru the mouth of the prophet Isaiah that those people honor God with their lips while their heart is far from him. This remark of Jesus is addressed to the Pharisees and the Scribes, but also to us. Positively, it means that we have to care for the conversion of heart and not just for the fulfillment of religious regulations and the respect of the religious traditions. It is not the outward observance of the regulations that makes us just, but our conversion of heart. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may give us the grace of conversion of heart so that our words and deeds will come together. May God bless you all!

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8; James 1: 17-18, 21-22, 27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23



Homily Date: September 2, 2012
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20120902homily.pdf