

## 22<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

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

Excerpts from Pope Francis – Angelus – 2018

Excerpts from Father Raniero Cantalamessa - 2006

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Brothers and sisters, Jesus addresses an important topic for all of us believers: the authenticity of our obedience to the Word of God, against any worldly contamination or legalistic formalism. The Gospel opens with the objection that the scribes and Pharisees address to Jesus, accusing his disciples of failing to observe the ritual precepts according to tradition. In this way, those challenging him seek to strike at the credibility and authority of Jesus as Teacher. In a sense, they are trying to discredit Jesus in saying he has no right, no authority to teach. What kind of “teacher allows his disciples to evade the tradition of the elders”? Jesus responds with force using the word ‘Hypocrite’. He is speaking to the teachers of religion: doctors of the law, scribes. Have you ever been treated as a ‘Hypocrite’? It makes you react.

Indeed, Jesus wants to awaken the scribes and Pharisees from the error they have fallen into. And what is this error? That of distorting God’s will, neglecting his commandments in order to observe human traditions. Jesus’ reaction is severe because something great is at stake: it concerns the truth of the relationship between us human beings and God, the authenticity of religious life or religious practice. A hypocrite is not authentic. Today too, the Lord invites us to avoid the danger of giving more importance to form than to substance. He calls us to recognize what is the true core of the experience of faith, that is, love of God and love of neighbour, by purifying it of the hypocrisy of legalism and ritualism.

The message is also reinforced by the voice of the Apostle James, who tells us, in brief, what *true religion* is meant to be, and he says: pure religion is “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world”. This means to practice charity toward neighbours, beginning with those in need, the vulnerable, most marginalized people. They are the people whom God takes care of in a special way, and he asks us to do the same. “To keep oneself unstained from the world” does not mean to isolate oneself and close oneself off from reality. No. It means being vigilant so that our way of thinking and acting may not be polluted by the worldly mentality, or that of vanity, of greed, of arrogance.

We can draw from this teaching not only of an individual order but also social and collective. There is very much concern about exterior and physical contamination from the atmosphere, the water, the hole in the ozone layer, etc. There is almost absolute silence about interior and moral defilement. We are outraged on seeing marine birds emerging from waters contaminated with petroleum stains, covered with tar and unable to fly. But we do not show the same concern for our children, contaminated of the mantle of wickedness that already extends to every aspect of life.

Let's be very clear: It is not a question of opposing the two kinds of contamination. The struggle against physical contamination and care of hygiene is a sign of progress and civilization which must not be given up at any price. I believe that the pandemic has greatly given us that lesson. However, Jesus tells us that it was not enough for us to wash our hands, our vessels and all the rest; this does not go to the root of the problem. Jesus launches the program of an ecology of the heart. Let us take some of the "defiling" things listed by Jesus: slander with the related vice of saying wicked things about one's neighbour. Do we really want to undertake the task of healing our hearts? If so, we must engage in an all-out battle against the habit of gossiping, of criticizing, of murmuring against absent persons, of making quick judgments. This is a most difficult poison to neutralize once it has spread.

One day a woman went to confession to Saint Philip Neri, accusing herself of having spoken badly of some people. The saint absolved her, but gave her a strange penance. He told her to go home, to get a chicken and return to him, plucking its feathers along the way. When she was in his presence again, he said to her: "Now go back home and collect one by one the feathers that you let fall when you were coming here." "Impossible!" exclaimed the woman. "The wind has certainly dispersed them in all directions." That's the point Saint Philip wished to make. "Now you see -- he said -- how it is impossible to take back saying wicked things and slander once they have left the mouth."

Brothers and sisters, let us make an examination of conscience to see how we embrace the Word of God. We must welcome the Word with open minds and hearts, as good soil, in a way that it may bear fruit in real life. In this way the Word itself purifies our heart and actions, and our relationship with God and with others.