

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
September 3, 2006

Sometimes it helps me when I am meditating on the scriptures to pretend that I am at the scene where the narrative takes place and that I am watching the action. Sometimes I also think as much about what is not said, as what is said. It seems to me that today's gospel is a good one to reflect on this way.

At first glance we have a story that has Jesus criticizing the Pharisees for failing to understand that it is what is in one's heart that is of critical importance, and that the Pharisees, by their own behaviors, demonstrated a lack of integrity between what they said and what they did. Sure enough, that is an integral teaching from today's gospel.

But let's look, for a moment, on what Jesus did not say. Jesus did not say that eating without carefully washing their hands was unimportant. This ritual of the Jewish people was not so much about human hygiene. Eating a meal was considered a holy act, an act of communion before God. The hand washing was meant to be a reminder that God was holy and that those who approach Him should do so with a clean heart. And so the Jews were instructed to observe various rituals that had been created to remind them of the sacredness of the meal. The ritual helped them to connect to a deeper reality. Over time, it became easier just to mindlessly do the hand washing than to reflect on the deeper reality.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, and it is worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the meaning of work in our lives. For some, work has become tedious, boring, and meaningless. It has become a mindless activity, like the hand washing, completely detached from its deeper reality. So what is the deeper reality?

The dignity of work and the rights of workers are bedrock principles in Catholic social teaching. In the Catholic tradition, work is not a burden, not just

how we make our living. Work is a way of supporting our family, realizing our dignity, promoting the common good, and participating in God's creation. John Paul II, in his great encyclical On Human Work, explains to us that work is a means by which we grow in union with God and participate in the paschal mystery (the plan of salvation for us and the world). We, as the people of God are scattered throughout every profession and work situation and it is precisely in that context that we exercise our spirituality. All of life—yes, even our workplaces, permeated by God's presence and love—becomes a grace opportunity and can further the process of salvation. In this Catholic understanding, work is not just something to be endured as a way of obtaining money for other pursuits that are seen as “real living.” To live in God's presence at work with sensitivity, awareness, and love is to live a spiritual life; it is to live our discipleship; it is to build the Kingdom of God. In this way our work can connect us to a deeper reality; it can be experienced as holy.

In a practical way, we do this by doing the ordinary well, by making the most of our talents and opportunities, by treating colleagues and customers fairly and with dignity, and by working with integrity and creativity. Social justice and the common good—both fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching—are built up or torn down in the countless decisions and choices we make in our work lives each day.

So here we are gathered, enacting this great ritual. Rituals help connect us to deeper reality. It is the way that we give expression to our overwhelming need to give thanks to God for the great deeds he has done in our history and our lives, and to memorialize the great act of Jesus Christ in dying and in so doing reconciling us to God and giving us this meal as an everlasting memorial to this saving act. Let us this day reflect on the most essential elements of the Sacrifice of the Mass—the bread and the wine—which Father will, in a few moments, offer to

God as the “work of human hands.” And let us be sent from here with a renewed understanding of the meaning of our daily work not only in earthly progress, but also in the development of the kingdom of God.

Submitted by:

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