

22nd Sunday OT A - August 31, 2008

LESSON: Christianity Is a Radical New Religion

St Paul lived in the first century AD (which by the way means *ano domini* – *the year of the Lord, not after death*), - St. Paul lived at a time in the 1st century when the dominant religions were all **pagan**.

- ☞ Pagan religions (like witchcraft) were based on a **belief in the power of external rituals**.
- ☞ These sometimes consisted of **sacrifices** in which animals were slaughtered, grain was burned, or wine was poured out.
- ☞ They also sometimes consisted of ritual **dances, prayers, songs**, or similar actions.
- ☞ In every case, however, the **power** of the worship, its supposed ability to convince the false god to send **blessings** on the worshipper, depended on the **exact performance of the ritual** – just like witch's spells – you need the eye of a newt, hair of a cat, these words: and it happens.
- ☞ It was kind of like a gymnastics routine in the Olympics that just concluded: if the **ritual** wasn't performed with **perfect precision**, the worshipper would get a **bad score**, and the gods would either **ignore** the prayer or **get angry**.
- ☞ This pagan focus on **external rituals** of things had *also* seeped into **Jewish** practices at the time.

So, throughout his writings St. Paul is **constantly** warning the early Christians against falling into **ritualism**.

- ☞ He is **training** the early Church to have a **close personal relationship with God**, not a **cold, distant** relationship **clogged** with empty formalities.
- ☞ This is why he writes to the Romans, as we just heard, "offer your bodies as a **living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God, your **spiritual worship**."
- ☞ In other words, the **Christian's** relationship with God isn't **reduced** to a few rituals and prayers - **everything we do** is meant to be **worship**.
- ☞ Our actions, our words, our decisions, the way we live our daily lives - all these things are ways for us to **show that we love Christ and want to follow him**.

St. Paul is giving them a brand new & radically different **concept** of religion - a religion built on a **personal friendship** with the one true God who became man in Jesus Christ.

And it required, as St. Paul wrote, that the Christians "be **transformed** by the **renewal** of their mind."

ILLUSTRATION: Devotion to the Saints

This new concept of religion helps explain one of our **Catholic traditions** that a lot of non-Catholic Christians have **trouble** understanding - our **devotion to the saints**.

Some non-Catholics think that the **statues** of saints in our churches are there because we **worship** them, as **pagans** used to do.

- ✍ They would worship a **sacred statue** or an ancestor as if they were **divine**.
- ✍ But, our devotion to the saints is **VERY different** from that.
- ✍ We use **images of saints** for the **same** reason that we use **family photographs** - to **remind** us of some of the **great members** of our Christian family who have gone before us.
- ✍ The **example** of their faith, courage, and heroism, which the image **reminds** us of, is meant to inspire **us** to strive for holiness too.

So we **don't** worship statues. And we **don't** worship the **saints** either.

- ✍ We know that they were **normal, everyday people** just like us - not gods.
- ✍ They had **personality flaws, family problems**, and plenty of **headaches**, but they allowed God's grace to **touch** those things, and **sanctify** them.
- ✍ They recognized that God's offer of **friendship in Christ** was able to make them not only better **church-goers** and **pray-ers**,
- ✍ but **also** better husbands and wives, generals and lawyers, carpenters and nurses, scholars and artists.
- ✍ They followed St. Paul's advice, trying to make **every activity** of their day - whether folding laundry or writing theological treatises - into a "**living sacrifice**" of "**spiritual worship**."

That's why we have **patron saints** for everything and everyone, from **mathematicians** (St Barbara) to **midwives** (St Brigid), from **paralysis** (St Wolfgang) to **public schools** (St Martin de Porres),

We aren't **superstitious**, nor do we believe in **good luck charms**, but we **do** recognize that when God **comes into a life**, he has the power to **fill every little nook and cranny of it** with **everlasting meaning** - if we let him.

APPLICATION: Avoiding Hypocrisy

Our relationship with God is not based on **external rituals**; it's based on an **internal identity**: by baptism we have become **members of God's own family**.

There are two areas of our lives where this truth is especially **hard to live out**, where we are often tempted to slide back into the practical paganism of **saying** we believe **one** thing while **doing** another.

First, in our **professional life**.

- ✍ John D. Rockefeller, the oil billionaire from the early 1900's, used to **play the organ** in his church on **Sunday**, and then on Monday **ruthlessly terrorize** small businessmen.
- ✍ That's being **hypocritical**.
- ✍ If Christ **really** is our Lord, then we should behave **worthily of him** on **Sunday** morning **and** on **Monday** morning, **and** on Tuesday morning, **and** every morning!
- ✍ These days we often hear **political** leaders who *claim* to be Catholic saying that they are **personally** opposed to abortion but **politically** pro-choice.
- ✍ That **too** is hypocritical.
- ✍ Moral right and wrong don't **change** just because of politics or opinion polls.
- ✍ Just last Sunday, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi appeared on "Meet the Press" and, when asked about her faith and abortion, she *claimed* that the Catholic Church has never defined when life begins – and so, in her mind, it was possible for a politician to be BOTH Catholic AND pro-abortion (pro-choice).
- ✍ However, NOTHING could be farther from the truth. It is NOT possible to be both Catholic and Pro-abortion. The Church has ALWAYS taught that abortion is always and everywhere an intrinsically evil and immoral act. And the Bishops of the US have recently reminded us, as the electorate, that while there are many issues about which we must be concerned, all issues do not carry the same moral weight – the protection of innocent, pre-born life MUST be a priority, even over the death penalty and the war and poverty.
- ✍ Those same politicians who claim to be against abortion but support a woman's "supposed right to choose," never say that they are **personally** opposed to **stealing**, but **politically** they think people should be **free to choose** whether or not to steal.
- ✍ Often our faith helps us **understand** moral right and wrong **better** than people who don't have the benefit of Christ's revelation.
- ✍ Keeping that knowledge to **ourselves** is like withholding **medicine** from a dying patient.

The **second** area where we are tempted to slack off is in our **family relationships**.

- ✍ A man may be organized, polite, punctual, and self-sacrificing at **work**, but lazy, temperamental, and self-indulgent at **home**.
- ✍ A woman may be charming, patient, forgiving, and delightful at a **social event**, and moody, grudging, and resentful **with her husband**.
- ✍ That's not the Christian way.
- ✍ The Christian way is to make a **decent effort** to reflect Christ **all the time**, to make our **whole lives** into a "living sacrifice" to God.

All Jesus needs is that **decent effort** - if we give him **that**, **his grace** will take care of **all the rest**. And this is the cross that Jesus asks us to take up – if we do, we won't lose our life – we'll find it!