

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2015

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Internal evidence in the Gospels tells us the ongoing life of the Church influenced the telling of original teachings or incidents in the life of Our Lord. And why not? *The Bible is the Church's book*. The Protestants don't like that, of course, and in the past century they tried to get back to "the historical Jesus." It didn't work. The problem with the Protestants is that they saw the Church as the problem. But the Lord did not leave us a book; He left us His Church.

Today's gospel takes up the matter whether Christians were bound to observe the Jewish Law. This matter had been settled long before Saint Mark composed his gospel account. That was thanks to the firm stand made earlier by St Paul. Not just observant Jews but *anyone* could be baptized Christian. In the period between Our Lord's Ascension and Saint Peter's preaching in Rome (which was the basis for Mark's account), Christianity was already well on its way from being understood as a Jewish sect to becoming the world-wide religion embracing believers of all nationalities and races. St Mark's Gospel is a long way from the time the original disciples were being hassled by the Jerusalem religious police!

But the Gospel is not just full of ancient historical information. There is also important direction for present day Christians attempting to get on with lives centered on Christ. We have the Lord's teaching that the only kind of cleanliness that matters is *moral cleanliness*. Not that Christianity is averse to good personal hygiene! But much of the Old Testament law emphasized the importance of ceremonial cleanliness. We must remember that this law came from God Himself. But man had *added* to the law of God's making, to the point where all the concentration was on the ceremonial washings and not on purity of heart! Our Lord Jesus reminded His hearers it is not what is external to us that causes harm but what is *within*. Jesus put the emphasis of our spiritual development on the internal. All of the "armor of God" (in St Paul's phrase), the nourishing and healing medicines of the Catholic Church, have as their goal the conversion of heart and soul and the drawing closer of our souls to God. That is why we have ceremonies, sacraments, catechism, architecture, music, fine art, and stained glass, and all the rest. They are there to bring us closer to God. Any other goal simply won't do and is hypocritical religion on the first order. And God's Incarnate Son says so.

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Hypocrisy is so easy to condemn! Yet the teaching of Jesus is surprisingly difficult to assimilate and maintain in our lives. Outward appearances are powerful and often successful in dominating our thinking and capture our relationship to Christ. I'll give you an example. Acting on behalf of our neighbor is something we do because Christ asks us to do it. His asking is regardless of external results. But the minute we think we are making the world a better place by reaching out to our neighbor we have become attached to external results. That is when in heart and soul our internal obedience to Jesus Christ takes second shelf.

From everything the Lord taught us, we can see the tendency to externalize our faith runs directly counter to spiritual growth. This is not to say faith doesn't issue in good works. "Faith without works is dead." But the problem is as old as Saint Paul's worry. And his solution must be ours as well. Paul told the Corinthian Christians "I keep my body and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." (I Cor. 9:27)