

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 2, 2018

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There are indications in the Gospels the ongoing life of the Church influenced the telling, or the arrangement of the telling, of original incidents and teaching in the life of Our Lord. And why not? Our Lord's Ascension was not a book-signing event! He promised to send His Holy Spirit to guide and guard His Church and lead her into all truth. *The Bible is the Church's book*, and not the other way round.

Many scholars believe St Mark was St Peter's travelling and recording secretary. If so, Peter's sermons are the basis for what Mark wrote. And then it is easy to understand that the incident in today's gospel passage was included by the evangelist because of a controversy current among potential Jewish converts in Rome. There was, after all, a large Jewish community in Rome. At issue was the matter whether Christians were bound to observe the Jewish law. This matter had been settled *well before* St Mark's Gospel even existed. In the period between Our Lord's Ascension and St Peter's preaching in Rome the Catholic Church was well on her way from being understood as a Jewish sect to becoming the world-wide religion embracing believers of all nationalities and races. When he included this passage in his narrative St Mark may have been addressing a contemporary problem among Roman Christians and potential converts. So much for that.

There is also here important information for you and me and our fellow Catholics attempting to get on with lives centered on Christ. And recent scandals in the Church remind us how much we *need* that information. For here we have the Lord's teaching that the only kind of cleanliness that matters is *moral cleanliness*. Not that Christianity is opposed to washing your hands before food preparation! Much of the Old Testament law emphasized the importance of ceremonial cleanliness. And that 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 reminded His hearers, including all of us, that it is not what is external to us that causes harm but what is *within*. Concerning our spiritual development, Jesus put all the emphasis on the internal. You know St Paul's exhortation to "put on the whole armor of God." He is referring to the nourishing and healing medicines of the Catholic Church. They have as their goal the conversion of heart and soul and the drawing closer of that

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soul to God. The rituals, sacraments, catechism, architecture, music, fine art and stained glass, and yes even canon law, have one purpose: to bring us closer to God. Any other goal simply won't do. That train won't get to the right station! Going through the motions is hypocritical religion on any day, and the Lord says so. So did the Old Testament prophets.

Of course hypocrisy is 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 actions. And they can hijack our relationship to Christ.

For instance, acting on behalf of our neighbor is something we do because Christ asks it of us. His asking is paramount. 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. Getting derailed is so easy.

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 the faith doesn't issue in good works. Faith without works is dead. But the problem is as old as St Paul's stating of it and his solution, which must be ours as well. For Paul told the Corinthian Christians: "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." (1 Cor. 9:27) Sadly, just now, we are made aware a few Catholics missed the sermons and seminary lectures on St Paul's directions.