

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 29, 2021)

Many of you saw on TV the recent major league baseball game at the Field of Dreams in Dyersville between the White Sox and the Yankees—the first such game ever played in Iowa. It was a success all around, and an exciting game in its own right. Baseball is filled with all kinds of traditions; for example, there is always a seventh-inning stretch—not third or fifth inning, but seventh inning. And the crowd always sings the same song at that time: “Take Me Out to the Ballgame”; not “Happy Birthday to You” or anything else.

The gospel today speaks about traditions as well—not about baseball, but about the traditions or customs of the Jewish people of Jesus’ time. St. Mark goes into some detail about how they carefully wash their hands before meals and purify their cups, jugs and kettles and other such things. The scribes and Pharisees were scandalized by the fact that some of Jesus’ disciples did not ‘follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands’. Jesus had to remind them in rather strong language that such traditions are nowhere as important as the need to avoid those evils that come from within a person such as evil thoughts, unchastity, greed, malice, envy, and arrogance.

Jesus’ comments about human traditions—the customary way of doing things--gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves about another meaning of the word ‘tradition’ that is central of our understanding of how we come to know the truths of our Catholic Christian faith. Why do we believe what we profess as our faith? We believe such things because of divine revelation—God’s communication to us the mystery of himself, his love for us and his desire for our eternal salvation. This revelation by word and deed has happened through time and most fully in the Person of his Son Jesus Christ.

And how do we know the content of that revelation, what God has revealed to us? Certainly the Bible, Sacred Scripture, is critically important—both Old and New Testaments, and especially the four gospels that give us the story of Jesus. But those gospels and the other New Testament books were not written immediately after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. That writing process didn’t even begin until at least 20-30 years after those events. So how was the gospel first preached and handed down? By the preaching and teaching of the apostles, just as Jesus charged them to do before he ascended into heaven. He had also promised them at the Last Supper that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all he taught them and would lead them to all truth.

Moreover, the apostles knew that they would not live forever; by themselves, they would not be able to preach the gospel to the entire world. So, in order that Jesus’ commission to ‘make disciples of all the nations’ could be carried on, the apostles named others to carry on that task and thus began what we call the office of bishops. These successors to the apostles preached and taught that same gospel, and they in turn named or ‘ordained’ others to succeed them and carry on that same task. As Vatican II put it: “the apostolic preaching...was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time.” This is what we call Sacred Tradition—what we might call ‘tradition with a capital T’—to distinguish it from the human traditions Jesus spoke about or that we have now (like baseball’s seventh-inning stretch). The Council also noted

that through this Sacred Tradition, “the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.”

That is why we believe that divine revelation, God’s revealed word to us, comes to us both in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition—the written word of God, and that word entrusted by Jesus to the apostles and to their successors so it would be preserved, expounded and spread by their preaching. Scripture and Tradition, then, work together and constitute the one revealed word of God. Indeed, the very fact that we have a New Testament with a defined content—the four gospels and its other books—is an example of Sacred Tradition in action. In those very early centuries of Christian history there were many other so-called gospels and letters, and they oftentimes were inconsistent or even contradicted one another. Thus it was necessary for the Church and her leadership through the successors of the apostles to determine which of all those writings authentically and accurately preserved the story and teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Back for a moment to those ‘traditions’ that Mark mentioned in the gospel: we Catholics certainly have our own such traditions (with a small ‘t’) such as abstaining from meat on the Fridays of Lent and the details of how we celebrate Mass and the other sacraments. These traditions are good and worthwhile as they help us grow in the conversion and holiness to which Jesus calls us. But these and other such traditions or customs can be retained or changed by the Church; that has happened many times throughout our history as Church. Many of you remember with me, for example, when Catholics abstained from meat on all Fridays of the year and not just during Lent. Sacred Tradition, however--Tradition with a capital “T”--cannot be changed by the Church in the same way that the words of Sacred Scripture cannot be changed by the Church. Together they preserve the revealed word of God, and no one—not even the pope—has the authority to change that revealed word.

In our second reading today St. James challenges us to “[h]umbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.” Thanks be to God that we are able to know that word because he has revealed it to us because he loves us. Thanks be to Jesus Christ, the fullness and the completion of God’s revelation, for giving us the hope of eternal life through his death and resurrection. And thanks be to the Holy Spirit for guiding the Church to know both through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition what the gospel of Christ means for us today. Again from St. James—may we always be doers of that revealed word of God and not hearers only.