

No More Rules

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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The stereotype that the Catholic Church is full of rules, even though our Church is much more relaxed than it was 50 years ago, is still there. The general understanding is that Catholics have to do whatever the pope says, go to mass each Sunday, can't eat meat on Fridays during Lent, tell their sins to a priest, live a strict moral life, and never question their faith. I guess it is true that Catholics are rule followers. To be fair, part of this is nobody's fault. Just by being part of a centuries old institution means we are going to have a lot of accumulated teachings, policies, and regulations. Yet, from time to time we need to be reminded that the purpose of the Church is not to keep adding more and more rules to what God has already given us. Our readings this weekend are trying to make that very point.

In our First Reading from the Book of *Deuteronomy*, God gives the people God's statutes and decrees. Then God warns them, 'you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it.' It is that first part that hurts because we humans like to add our own agenda to everything. But God insists, 'I set the rules, not you.'

In our Gospel from *Mark*, Jesus reenforces the same point. For him, the Pharisees, as the religious leaders, were adding all sorts of rules that the people needed to follow. Religion became about the addition of rules. When someone didn't follow them, these Pharisees become extremely judgmental and condemning. In response, Jesus challenged them by letting them know that they are overstepping their boundaries. They aren't sharing God's rules, but merely man-made rules that they came up with themselves- like the ritual washing before meals. As Jesus says, you are 'teaching as doctrines human precepts' and 'you disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition.'

True religion has little to do with the addition of rules. It is more of a way of life. As the letter of *James* in our second reading says, "religion that is pure and undefiled is this: to care for orphans and widows." That is quite different. Yes, we have rules (and many of them are good!), but no, adding more and more rules does not make us more religious.

The 20th century German theologian Karl Rahner said that the rules (or commandments) coming directly from God are shockingly rather few. It is true. Most of our rules, however good and purposeful, have a human origin.

As Catholics, we should not be overly concerned with adding more and more rules.

Is my understanding of religion more than just rules? A religion of just rules, whether following them or breaking them, misses the point. Religion is a way of life. Let us pray for a relationship with God so that Jesus may not say of us, like he did of the Pharisees, “this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”