

Rev. Donato Infante
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Many of you are aware that this fall I am teaching a class on Catholic social doctrine online for Anna Maria. That topic treats things like caring for widows and orphans, as mentioned in the second reading, so I kept getting distracted writing this thinking I was writing about the things they read. Once I got focused and looked at some Scripture resources, I realized that this week is not so much about social justice but law.

The law exists to make us just, to make for a just society.

“Or what great nation has statutes and decrees
that are as JUST as this whole law
which I am setting before you today?”

It is to create a just society, although it is not reduced to that: it also contains precepts about the heart (this is why the second reading exhorts us to remain unstained by the world) and in fact, if lived rightly, the law teaches the heart. This is why Jesus is upset with the Pharisees, who have reduced it to external observances like the washing of cups, forgetting that:

"From within people, from their hearts,
come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,
adultery, greed, malice, deceit,
licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.
All these evils come from within and they defile."

Further, this law, because it creates for a just society and helps us learn to be just, is not a burden but a gift.

'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.'
For what great nation is there
that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us
whenever we call upon him?

What God is so loving that He gives a law to his people? The God of Israel! Our God!

One might ask how it is that the Pharisees ended up so far from the original intention of the law. Pope Benedict said in a Sunday address a few years ago that originally the Jewish people knew

they needed to cry out to God and rely on him when they wandered in the desert, but when they were settled in the Promised Land

“they [were] tempted to place their security and joy in something that is no longer the Word of God: in possessions, in power, in other ‘gods’ that in reality are useless” These things, he notes, are idols, and adds, that, “Of course, the Law of God remains but it is no longer the most important thing, the rule of life; rather, it becomes a camouflage, a cover-up, ...”

Knowing they still needed God, instead of crying out in need, they reduced religion to,

“practising secondary customs which instead satisfy the human need to feel in God’s place.”

It is not just a temptation of the Pharisees, although it would be different us today because we don’t have ritual washings. What might this look like today? Well, it might look like someone who comes to Church all the time but makes no effort otherwise to live the Christian life. We don’t mean the person who keeps sinning and repenting, but someone who feels vindicated but is not trying. Or someone who fervently practices the discipline of fasting in Lent, giving up coke, but does not repent of real sins like gossip, anger, or lust, nor give alms, or the person who takes a commandment like, “Don’t get drunk” and turns it into “Never drink alcohol” and then makes it the highest commandment, greater than the weightier things of the law, like forgiving enemies or paying a just wage and judges others for not following it.

James reminds his listeners to be “doers of the word, not merely hearers.” May that be the grace granted to each and every one of us as we live as authentic followers of Jesus Christ. May God bless you.