

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 2, 2018

In the past week, news reports reminded us that it has been a full year since Hurricane Harvey did major damage to the Texas Gulf Coast. We are also fast approaching the first anniversary of Hurricane Maria that significantly crippled the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. While things are better for both areas – flood waters have receded, some rebuilding has taken place, for large areas of both Texas and Puerto Rico it is as though the storms hit last week. For all of the promised help, for all of the prayers and assistance that came rushing in, many are still displaced, homes are still decaying, and – at least in Puerto Rico – electrical power has only recently been restored. First anniversaries are times to remember those who were lost, to observe moments of silence and to pray for all who were killed and injured in the storms. But when these moments of silence or prayer services are over, most of the people in these areas will go back to the thankless task of clearing debris, or tearing down uninhabitable houses, or building anew. It has been a slow process. To those of us looking on from a distance, it would seem that the Texas Gulf Coast and Puerto Rico should almost be back to normal – after all government and charities have certainly sent a lot of money their way. And yet, as we have learned time and again, what is most prominent in these regions is not governmental assistance, but governmental red tape. Yes, the only thing growing faster than the mold and mildew in these devastated regions is the bureaucracy at every level of government. It seems the people aren't getting helped, just the bureaucrats. Every time progress threatens to break out, the government is there to ensure that it doesn't get too far.

In a somewhat similar way, Jesus confronted a bureaucracy in our gospel passage today. The Pharisees were criticizing the Apostles because they did not wash their hands prior to eating. Now those of us in the twenty-first century may find it difficult to be on the side of poor hygiene. After all, hand washing is one of the simplest yet most important things we can do to prevent the spread of disease. So for us to understand the point Jesus was making, we need some background on the Pharisees and their law. Recall that the Pharisees were a Jewish sect that placed great emphasis on ritual purity – careful observance of strict laws of cleanliness. Now these laws were not the few commandments that are contained in the Scriptures. No, Pharisaical rules had been created over the years by high priests, rabbis and others who wanted to ensure good ritual practice. In the first reading, we heard Moses tell the Israelites **not** to add to the commandments the Lord had imposed. But, as the centuries passed, they did anyway. So shortly after the time the gospels were written, these rules and regulations of the Pharisees were collected into one volume called the “Mishnah.” There were some 600 laws in the

Mishnah. It was a challenge even to read all of those regulations, much less keep them. Nonetheless, for the Pharisees, adhering to these little rules became as important, if not more important, than following the Ten Commandments. Ritual purity was the essential test of faith for a Pharisee and the little rules became obstacles along the path of one's relationship with God. They meant very little, but they threw people off course.

Confronting the Pharisees in today's gospel, Jesus says that it is not ritual observance of human precepts that is important – what is important is what lies in each person's heart. In our heart – and from our heart – we follow God along the path that he lays out. It is, at times, a difficult path and the evil one may indeed block our way from time to time. But we only help Satan when we create our own roadblocks – even small ones – and place them in the path of another, or – just as frequently – in our own path. We wrap ourselves and others in red tape of our own making. As the gospel tells us, it is not what comes from outside that defiles us, but what comes from within.

Each day, we make countless decisions. Some are meaningless – which color socks to wear, for example, or whether tomorrow is the last day to wear white shoes until next May. Others represent a true moral dilemma. How do we decide which way to turn, which rules to observe and which ones it is OK to disregard? Well, that is why God gave us a conscience – the ability to make reasonable judgments which help us to recognize and seek what is good and to reject what is evil. Conscience is not just a feeling, an excuse for doing whatever it is we want. Our conscience is where our heart and our mind and our soul should be in continual dialogue with our loving God. That continual, prayerful dialogue with God is what we call conscience formation. Oh, we can form our consciences based on public opinion polls or what we hear in the media or by imitating the actions of our friends or of celebrities. Or we can do what too many in our society and in our church seem to have done – put on a good front in public, criticizing others for making small errors, while at the same time leading a life that is morally bankrupt. As recent events have shown us, if we do not spend the time to form our consciences in dialogue with God, then we can be led seriously off-track. We must form our consciences, discern what is right and what is wrong in the light of the Gospel – in humble submission to the will of God. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming the best 21st Century Pharisees around.