



August 29, 2021

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

"You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." Mark 7:8

Dear Friends;

As a young priest, I was asked by a couple (I was preparing them for marriage) if I would perform their ceremony at another parish closer to the reception site. I asked which parish. When they responded I am sure I blanched. It was the most conservative parish in the diocese. It was a center for the old liturgy in Latin. The pastor had a reputation for his severity. I wasn't sure he allowed an outside priest to celebrate a wedding there. I said yes, if the pastor will permit me. He said yes.

Months later the date for the rehearsal arrived. I was coming from Sacramento to the Oakland parish. I was a few minutes late. It was a chilly autumn evening. The front doors of the church were wide open and the lights were on. Yet the whole bridal party was standing outside in the cold. I thought this is strange.

I parked and walked up to the bride and groom. The bride was crying. I asked what happened. The groom said that *"someone in the party was chewing gum so the pastor yelled at them and through them outside."* I thought, great now I have to negotiate peace talks. I went into the church and the pastor was sitting in a pew. I said *"Hello Father, I'm Fr Schmit and am here for the wedding rehearsal."* He stands shrouded in his black cassock and says to me, *"Father we have rules here and they will be followed,"* I dutifully said *"Yes, Father."*

The priest said *"Come with me to the sacristy."* So I followed. We were on the side aisle against the wall. We were going to go through a side door to the sacristy. The grim-face priest then stopped mid stride and looks to the high altar where the tabernacle with the reserved Eucharist is kept. It was a good thirty feet away. He made a dramatic genuflection. I remained standing. He looks at me and sternly reprimands, *"Father, here we show reverence for the Blessed Sacrament."* At this point I had had enough. I looked directly at him and said, *"Father, if I know correctly the rubrics one need only genuflect when you pass directly in front of the tabernacle."* I wanted to let him know that I was not going to be bullied by his piety.

Inside the sacristy I gave him the paperwork. He tells me that I should not invite the bride and groom to kiss at the end of the ceremony and there will be no clapping. He was not having that in his church. So I said *"ok,"* but thought how are you supposed to stop natural and human expressions of joy and love? So when we finally had the rehearsal I told the couple, *"Father doesn't want me to invite you to kiss. But when I introduce you and if you were to spontaneously kiss I'm not going to stop you."* The next day through the whole wedding I could see the pastor watching from behind a curtain in the choir loft. I introduced the couple and of course they kissed and of course everyone applauded. It was wonderful.

This is not the only story from "the good old days!" For the life of me, I do not understand why many bishops and young clergy long for the return of this rigid style of church. Maybe because it was a world where the clergy were almighty and the people were treated like ignorant peasants. This world created a lot of problems including the pedophile cover-ups. This fascination with the past also may be based in fear. People who are looking for some security in a rapidly changing world look for certitudes, but that is fundamentalism. These are not the answer. As Pope Francis has recently said, *"Tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops, like a tree that remains the same yet which gets bigger and bears ever more fruit."*

Jesus is faced with people who are trying to hold on to a dying world and institutions. They believe that if they only obsessively follow rules then they will gain salvation. But their rigidity ignores the realities of peoples' lives. The poor in the countryside did not have ready access to the pure flowing water needed for the ritual purifications before prayer and eating. What were they supposed to do? For the scribes and the Pharisees their rules were more important than people.

In the history of the church we have often mistaken misanthropy (hatred of humanity) for reverence and devotion. We thought we had to kill everything that is human so we could be "holy." Yet the Incarnation proclaims that there is no genuinely good human experience that is not sanctified by the presence of God. As the early father of the Church St Iranaeus of Lyons (130-202 C.E.) preached, *"The glory of God is humanity fully alive!"*

Peace,

Fr Ron