



Allocutio



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Allocutio: True Religion

The problem as to what constitutes true religion is as old as you can go back. I was struck the other day in the readings when Naomi said to her daughter in law, Ruth, “Your sister has gone back to her own people and her gods; you go back too.” Naomi had a great balance and recognised she could not hold them after their husbands had died and could also understand that the concept of god given in a particular culture can be hard to overcome. But she could live with that. It reminds me of the Blessed Charles de Foucauld who tried to get the Taureg peoples of the desert to be good Moslems and observe their own faith. To even achieve that would be a good thing.

What is interesting is that in both cases, by allowing people their freedom, and let us even say by understanding their hearts, they actually won souls. In whatever way Naomi impressed Ruth, this Moabite woman replied, “Where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God”. And while the people of Tamenrasset didn’t convert they saw Charles de Foucauld as a good man. I would like to think that what people meet in us will be what will make them convert, be it from other faiths or from lapsed faith.

Last Sunday we saw again how some people could accept Jesus and his teachings while others left him. And in our Mass of this coming weekend we will hear Jesus challenge people about their faith. Is it the external observation of laws or is it something deeper going to the core of their being. By the way that word *core* is the same as the Latin *cor*, the French *cœur*, the Irish *croí*. True religion is that which touches the heart because it understands the heart.

Let us listen again to St. James. “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain.” What on earth was James getting at? Well he goes on to say, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:26-27). What is so immediately obvious is that true religion is shown more in its action than in its words. It is the response to the afflicted. By referring to widows and orphans James is clearly referring to those who were left in the most vulnerable situations in days before there was social assistance. By using the word affliction he is showing us that his heart is touched by their predicaments and so he responds from his heart. The Good Samaritan was the same. The priests and levites who passed by and left the victim were the cute guys. They interpreted it as a trick to mug and rob them. They had such good defences their hearts were unable to help in the discernment. But the Good Samaritan takes the risk of being led by his heart and wins the hour.

We must be careful too in not thinking of religion in terms of denomination. How often did Jesus commend those who were not of the Jewish faith and made the most solemn pronouncements of those who were its supposed authorities? He used the image of a Samaritan in the parable I have referred to. He commended the faith of the centurion, he marvelled at the Samaritan who came back to thank him, he warns that many from east and west will go into the Kingdom of God while those who were diligent about their faith would not enter.

Sadly all over the world we have people professing many faiths who have no qualms about inflicting terror and misery on others in the name of God. And before we think of Moslems let us not forget the many Christians and Catholics who did the same in the name of the faith. In all faiths you have people who proclaim values but who have been caught out by their actions.



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So what is true religion? How can you tell the authentic from the inauthentic? Let me say this. This must not be an academic discussion. The real question is for me. Like that young man each of us must ask: What must I do to be saved? How am I in actual reality to be a person of authentic religion? What is the guarantee? The answer of the Gospels seems to me to say: Love and love in a real practical way. Look out for those in need and respond. Think of all your human brothers and sisters in their need and do something for them. Have a heart. The only way we can know for sure we are in tune with the true God is if we are reaching out to those in need around us. And is not that the exam we must face before God: you fed the hungry, you sheltered the homeless, you visited the lonely.

And that explains St. James asking us to bridle the tongue. Talk proves nothing. Like as St. Paul says it may just be a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal. But bridle the tongue too against spoof, gossip and bragging.

But there is another reason for keeping quiet. The person of true religion knows that we are creatures and indeed sinners. God is so much greater than we are. We do well to be humble and silent in his presence. The more authentic religion is the more it knows it knows nothing and so can say nothing. I notice that the great mystic say that it is so hard to find words to express the deep truths about God. And the mystic is someone who prefers the quiet so he or she can attend to the presence of God in silence.

There was a philosopher from Austria, a fellow called Wittgenstein, who used to come and visit Connemara about 100 years ago. And one line of his always struck me. He said, "Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent". I don't think he had any formal religious allegiance but his insight was certainly contemplative. In his own way he was in touch with He who is.

But to return to the one thing that gives us assurance we are on the right road. Let us love one another from our hearts. Let us listen to the words, "As you would want others to treat you, you treat others that way." And also those words, "God is love. He who loves lives in God and God in him." "By this will all know that you are my disciples, love one another."

But again I say those words are only the beginning. Only when we are translating them into action do we begin to go the right way. And believe you me sometimes they are so much more easy to say than to do. And God forbid that we use them to assuage our conscience and do nothing to translate them into reality.

Of course don't let your left hand know what your right is doing.

Amen

Fr Paul Churchill