

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

This weekend's second reading comes from the letter of James. In it, he says,

**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their affliction
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** (James 1:27)

The word "Religion" has become a bad word in our culture. You may have heard people say, "I'm spiritual, not religious," in many cases implying that religion is bad, or that it doesn't come from God. Religion is a virtue, though. In order to understand what religion is, we need a better understanding of the virtues.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) says that a virtue is "An habitual and firm disposition to do the good" (1803). What does this mean? It means that when we regularly and consistently choose to do what is right and good, we are forming a virtue. This is not done on our own, but our effort cooperates with the grace of God. There are four "cardinal virtues". In this case, the word "cardinal" does not refer to the bird, the baseball team, or even the people in the hierarchy of the Church who elect the pope! Rather, it means that they are pivotal human virtues – important for living good moral lives, following Christ. The four cardinal virtues are **prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance**.

For this article we need to look at the virtue of **justice**. When we speak about "justice," we speak about giving to God and neighbor what is their due – what is owed to them. I think this is pretty easy to understand – if you take something from a store without paying for it, you are breaking the virtue of justice (and a commandment as well!). Rather, you are to give the store what is its due – proper compensation (meaning, you pay for what you take). Notice that the virtue of justice also points to God – giving God His due. "**Religion**" is a virtue of justice – for religion is about giving to God what is His due, what is owed to Him.

So, what do we owe to God? "Adoration is the first act of the virtue of religion" (CCC 2096). What we owe first and foremost to God is to adore, to love Him, and to recognize Him as God, as Creator of all things visible and invisible, as Savior, as Lord and Master of all things, as infinite and merciful love (cf. CCC 2096). This is what religion is – not a bunch of rules and regulations, not a menu for rituals and the like, but **giving to God what is owed to God**. Everything the Catholic Church does and teaches comes from this truth – that we give to God worship and adoration, we act in certain ways that recognize Him as Creator of all, we fly to Him for mercy and love.

Note that St. James says that pure religion is more than just what we do on Sunday, though; it must affect our lives: "**To care for orphans and widows in their affliction**". Giving to God what is due to God means reaching out in love to neighbor, especially the *weakest and most vulnerable* (as the widows and orphans were in the time St. James was writing). Questions to ask yourself: Who are the weakest and most vulnerable in your life? How can you help them in their affliction?

Pure religion also means "**to keep oneself unstained by the world.**" In the Gospel today, we hear Jesus tell us that we need to be aware of our hearts – are our hearts pure? He says that the things that defile us, make us impure, come from our hearts:

**evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness,
envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.** (Mark 7: 21-22)

It is quite a list! It might be a good practice to use this as an examination of conscience sometime (after all, Jesus says this is important). Don't be afraid to look up certain words if you don't know what they mean, or need to get a better understanding them (I had to). Ask the Lord for help that you may give God worthy worship, pure religion. He **IS** merciful and desires to give us the grace to live virtuous lives.