

Between 1845 and 1849, the Great Potato Famine cruelly tortured Ireland and was responsible for the slow starvation and deaths of tens of thousands. The irony was that the potatoes appeared large, firm, and hearty.

But when you cut open the potato open, it revealed the blight had consumed it from the inside. The potatoes rotted from the inside out.

It is the message of Jesus to move from externals to what is within.

We wash our hands before eating, as a matter of personal hygiene. That's not the concern here in the gospel. They were religious leaders; and instead of being concerned about hygiene, they were concerned about ceremonial tradition, about some rituals that Jesus and his disciples were ignoring.

It goes back to the "Written Law" or Torah (the first five books of the bible), and the "Oral Law", which were clarifications of, and additions to, the Mosaic Law given by scribes as equally holy and binding. These oral laws, known in Jesus' time as the "Traditions of the Elders," were a series of oral traditions intended to act as "a fence around the Law." For example, we are told to rest on the Sabbath according to the written law. But they then said, "What constitutes work?" So countless laws were written in order for one to know he was working and should stop.

Their original intention was to be reminders of the written law. The external cleansing, for example, was originally a reminder to keep a clean conscience. This is not to deny that externals can help. Our Catholic faith is a sacramental faith; it is replete with externals. But these rituals do not replace the responsibility for our interior life, but they direct our attention to it.

For example, we bless ourselves with holy water. No magic. It is a reminder of our baptismal promises and a prayer for God's grace to keep us faithful to those promises. We wear religious emblems and display them in our homes. We do so not to replace our Christian obligations but as a reminder to live the faith which they symbolize. Though as we know, none of these are on par with our Sacraments. They merely point to them.

However, by the time of Jesus, their religion had degenerated, being reduced to only the exact performance of external rituals and on par with written law. For example, we might today call something mortal sin, like abortion or adultery. Pretty big stuff. But for them a mortal sin would be to forget the external cleansing; it came on par to moral law.

For example, in our rite, the priest washes his hands saying, "Wash me of my iniquity, cleanse me of my sins." If I forget, no big deal as it is only symbolic. But in their day, they would call that a mortal sin, something that could completely separate me from God. Wash my hands though and I'm free of my sins.

Jesus flatly denied that external things or circumstances could separate a person from God. Jesus was not criticizing rituals given in the Mosaic Law, but the giving of disproportionate importance to these things while neglecting what was far more important, the love of God and the care for one's fellow-human beings.

So that is the background of the gospel, but its words are still relevant today.

+It happened at a board meeting of one of the leading producers of dog food. Sales were way down and slumping badly, and the chairman of the board was angry. “I don’t understand it” he shouted, as he pounded the table. “We have the best dog food money can buy. We have the most expert brains in nutrition advising us on the content. Our art department has designed award-winning labels for our product. Our advertising people are second to none in putting together an aggressive marketing campaign.

So, why are sales down? Can anybody tell me, huh?” There was silence around the table as the various members of the board wilted under the chairman’s glare. Finally, from the back of the room, a voice piped up with the answer. “The dogs don’t like it.”

This story reminds me of today’s readings. The only difference is the subject. It is religion and not dog food. In both cases, it’s the quality inside that counts. With the dog food, it’s the quality of meat inside the that counts. In the case of religion, it’s the quality of love inside the heart that counts.

The number one temptation in religion is to think that following certain rules, doing certain things, or saying certain prayers, or performing magic ceremonies will automatically guarantee holiness and salvation. Another issue is doing our externals, like blessing ourselves with holy water, we should understand what we are doing. Otherwise, it is empty of meaning.

The readings basically speak of two different kinds of religion; one is a camouflage religion, the other is a religion of the heart. Jesus describes camouflage religion as he speaks to the Pharisees the “experts of the law.”

Camouflage religion enables people to hide under, or camouflage, their true way of living with empty ritual, mere human traditions, and empty words. As we have seen from the news, we also have camouflage priests – look good on the outside, say all the right things, but empty inside, rotten with sin and criminal behavior. More than just sins, but criminal behavior.

The religion of the heart comes from acting on the word of God, caring for the poor, bringing the homebound communion.

Religion of the heart is based on a relationship of love and not on an obligation to a law. Some of us go through life asking the question, “Do I have to? That’s usually a child’s questions, but we adults do the same thing when it comes to religion.

For example, we know how late we can come to Mass or how early we can leave and still have it “count.” Or if we attend a wedding Mass on Saturday, we ask “Does this fulfill my obligation?” Behind such questions hides the desire to do the least we have to do in order to stay on the good side of God.

It’s a minimal approach to God and religion. People who are really in love don’t have to ask the question, “Do I have to?” People truly in love with each other are happy to express their love

with generosity and self sacrifice. That other person is really the center of their lives. True of Jesus?

Can we turn the “Do have to” into “What more can I do Lord”?

Down through history, the predominant viewpoint has been that what we do determines who we are. We've all heard the adage, "You are what you eat." A recent TED talk declared, "You are what you tweet."

Each carry's a significant nugget of truth but gets the core message of the gospel backward. Frank Zappa, of all people, got it right: "You are what you is."

In other words, it's not what we do that determines who we are; rather, who we are determines what we do.

That comes from within.