

Bishop's Reflection – 14th Sunday

Rules, rules, rules... and more rules! That's what religion has come to mean for many people. Rules set up by systems and structures they had little, if anything, to do with. In the end, it's not God they have come to reject, but all the many rules that are associated with him.

Rules, rules, rules... That's what some people want to go back to. "The Church has grown too lax", they say. "It's time we re-emphasize those moral teachings we seldom hear about." For them, the Church has erred on the side of leniency. It is only a shadow of its former self.

Jesus addresses both sides equally when he offers his invitation to those who "are weary and carrying heavy burdens", those who are, literally, being crushed by the load they are asked to carry by the Religious Authorities of the day. He contrasts this to the yoke he places on the shoulders of all those who come to him; a yoke that is easy, and a burden that is light.

His audience would have had no trouble associating "Yoke" with the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. The word "Yoke" occurs often in the Old Testament and it always refers to the relationship God forged with his people through the Mosaic Law. Whereas the teachings of the Religious Authorities had become oppressive and impossible to keep, Jesus' interpretation of the Law resounds with truth and gives joy to the heart.

As in many well-established systems, the Religious Authorities focused almost exclusively on maintaining it. In contrast, Jesus opening statement reads more like an invitation to come to know him. "Come to me", he says and, "learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart." The Law is re-interpreted and understood in the context of relationship. The rules are not rules for their own sake, but flow out of the relationship with him.

To understand the difference, you have only to compare the rules as they were laid down at home, rules given to you by your parents, and the rules that underpin a marital relationship. When you fall in love with someone you don't complain about rules dealing with monogamy and against adultery. When you are in love, you are more than eager to fulfill all kinds of expectations and put up with all kinds of inconveniences for the sake of the relationship. The difference being that, once you are in a meaningful relationship, the rules flow from that relationship; rules that may make very little sense without it.

Unfortunately, when it comes to religion, too many people learn the rules first, without any real connection to Jesus as a person and as one who invites. It is all about going to church, doing your catechism, jumping through one hoop or another to celebrate the sacraments, being told the Ten Commandments, what to do/not to do regarding particular moral issues; often without any explanation or reasoning how it connects together with the faith you profess. The result, for many, is mass confusion, resentment and rejection.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens." "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart." These words are both inviting and instructive. It is only once you come to know him, and the face of the Father that He reveals, that you are willing to share in his yoke, in his teaching. It is only once you learn from his devotedness to the Father's Will that you will adopt it as your own.

What is often lacking in our formation as Christians, is a true and genuine encounter with Christ, who alone can shape hearts and mould our lives into his likeness.