

## WHAT IS RELIGION?

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC  
St. Peter's Church, Volo, Illinois  
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“Now I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you.”<sup>1</sup>

These were the opening words of today's reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, in which he reminds his listeners of the fundamental basis of all Christian belief. Because of their internal disputes, he needed to remind them of what they first had to accept as Christians; that is to be a member of Christ's Church, they had to believe that Jesus Christ died for our redemption, that he rose from the dead and was seen in the body by many people, and that this was all predicted in the Scriptures. All other teachings and principles of the faith flow from those truths, for as he writes just a few verses later, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain.”<sup>2</sup>

St. Paul was laying out for them what a person had to profess if he was to be an adherent of the Christian religion. But today, depending on whom you talk to, there seem to be many different ways of being Christian. Aside from the long-standing doctrinal divisions within Christianity between the Catholic Church on one side and the Orthodox and Protestants on the other, we have a myriad of other understandings of what being a Christian means. The laws of the Church, to which all Catholics are obligated, are cavalierly brushed aside and they make up their own rules. “I have my own religion,” “I go directly to God” or other such things. Cafeteria Catholics, as we call them, picking and choosing what suits them and rejecting whatever challenges them or makes them

uncomfortable. And after twenty centuries, it sometimes appears as if we are no better off than they were in Corinth a mere twenty years after Christ's death.

All of you here today, I assume profess to the Christian religion. So, if I may be a bit esoteric, what then, we might even ask, is a religion? What do you mean when you say that this is your religion? We use this word all the time but in our present age of word manipulation it, like so many other words, means many different things to different people. In the spirit of rampant relativism, it has unfortunately often come to mean nothing more than what a person wants it to mean, effectively reducing the word to no meaning at all.

Think for a moment about how you understand the word "religion". Your first impulse would possibly be to define it as a certain set of beliefs accompanied by a body of prayers, rituals and other practices. Now, listen to how the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it: "a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices" or "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith."<sup>3</sup> This leaves the field pretty wide open and could, in fact, mean just about anything that one wanted it to mean.

Religions have usually been very closely associated with certain social, cultural and historical traditions. Although Christianity originated in middle-eastern culture, through time it became so closely identified with western culture that now those, who are anti-Christian are usually also anti-western culture. We think of Muslims as Arabs and Hindus as Indians. They, along with Christians, Jews and some Buddhists comprise what we call the major religions of the world. Others, such as Confucianism and some branches of Buddhism are, in fact, not really religions at all, but rather philosophies

because their basis is found in a way of life rather than a distinct belief in a deity or deities. Satanists and atheists now say that their beliefs are religions deserving of public recognition, and in certain ways, movements such as Freemasonry, Nazism, Marxism and even today's extreme material secularists can be considered religions with their own distinct beliefs and practices.

So, we return to the question: What is a religion? Or perhaps better phrased: What is a religion supposed to be? Our post-Enlightenment world has generally defined "religion" within the framework of institutions, social bodies or moral practices. But prior to this period, "religion" in a Christian understanding was "a part of the virtue of justice by which human beings pay due worship to God (...) and in particular to the proper way of undertaking this worship, [that is] the Christian faith, *vera religio*,"<sup>4</sup> "true religion". "Religion" is "the moral virtue by which a person is disposed to render to God the worship and service he deserves."<sup>5</sup> And because Christ invested His Church with all authority in these matters, it is She who determines how we are to fulfill that obligation. Anything else is merely personal preference, which is essentially Protestant in nature.

Every person, whether he realizes it or not, is in search of truth and goodness. And the more we discover truth and goodness, the more we are drawn to God, the origin of all truth and goodness in the universe, because He IS truth and goodness. Therefore, whether one is conscious of it or not, man's whole life on this earth is a search for God, the ultimate meaning and goal of our existence. But in order to reach any destination, we need directions. Religion, therefore, should not be just a "users guide", a moral manual of how to act. It has to be more than that. Religion is, in a certain sense, a road map to help us in this journey to our ultimate destiny. Different religions are different maps of sorts in

this search for truth and goodness. But not all of these maps are accurate. Not all of them are complete. Some even give us wrong directions. There is only one road map that is the true map, the true religion, because it was given to us directly by the Creator, who is in Himself all truth and all goodness. And He entrusted this map to certain men like St. Paul with the charge to pass it down to all men. The Catholic religion is this map, the only true map. The only map with a direct and sure path to our ultimate destiny.

This is what St. Paul reminds the Corinthians about. “I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you ... For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received.”<sup>6</sup> This is what we pass down to you, also. It is the true religion because it is the only true map to heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1-2.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:17.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

<sup>4</sup> *The Catholic Dictionary*.

<sup>5</sup> Hardon, John A., *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, (Eternal Life: Bardstown, Kentucky, 2001) 461.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3.