

Homily for Sunday, August 30, 2009 (22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Reception of Postulants and Renewal of Vows of Simply Professed
St. Martin de Porres Church, Milwaukee

Dt 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15:2-5; Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mk7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity.” So begins our Franciscan Rule, approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223. Sounds pretty simple and straightforward, doesn’t it?

Life, however, has apparently become a little more complicated over the past 800 years. In addition to our original Franciscan Rule—12 chapters that run about 6 printed pages—we now have:

- Our Capuchin Constitutions—over 100 pages;
- Our Initial Formation Handbook—over 125 pages;
- Our Provincial Handbook—almost 170 pages; and
- The Code of Canon Law—over 600 pages (without commentary)!

I think you get the picture. We seem to like rules. Indeed, the more complex our human communities, institutions, and organizations become, the stronger our desire to spell things out and make things clear.

Rules provide a degree of order, stability, precision, and certainty to our lives. Think about what driving would be like if there were no speed limits, no stop lights, no directional signals, or no safety regulations! In his classic work, *The Leviathan*, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes described a frightening and primitive “state of nature” without rules:

In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Rules, then, are not only useful but also necessary. That’s what Moses was trying to tell the people of Israel as they entered the Promised Land still in the infancy of their relationship with God. In our First Reading from Deuteronomy 4 we can almost envision Moses, like a kindergarten teacher (with a long beard and a short temper) lecturing his people, preparing them for their new venture, filled with the potential for prosperity and the danger of disaster. He was trying to convince them of the benefits of observing the “statutes and decrees” that God had given them.

In doing so, Moses used a classic “carrot and stick” approach. While he used a variety of sticks elsewhere, here Moses used two basic appeals to encourage obedience: (1) wealth; and (2) vanity. If they obeyed the rules, Moses assured them, they would be able to enter in and take possession of the land that God promised to give them. Not only that, all the nations around them would admire their wisdom and intelligence, as well as the fact that they had a powerful God so close to them.

But as any parent or teacher will tell you, “laying down the law” only goes so far. Unless they are internalized by repetition, reflection, and reinforcement, rules are destined to “go in one ear and out the other.” As we see throughout the rest of the Old Testament, that’s pretty much what happened with the people of Israel.

Rules also have a shadow side: they can become proxies for action, or more precisely, excuses for inaction. That’s what James was trying to confront in the early church. After acknowledging God as the source of all that is good, he urged them: “Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.” He then admonished them, “Be *doers of the word* and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

James was trying to address the misconception among some that faith—belief in the word—alone was sufficient to be a disciple of Jesus. It’s not enough, he reminded them, to simply remember the rules. In fact, he noted, it’s foolish and ultimately futile. (Read James 1:23-26)

A related danger—one that I am afraid is an “occupational hazard” in a billion-member group like the Roman Catholic Church as well as a symptom of our litigious society—is “laying down the law” in such detail and in so many layers that it smothers the very life it is supposed to nurture. Jesus confronted this in today’s gospel passage.

As part of their effort to live the Law of Moses faithfully, the scribes and Pharisees had developed an increasingly elaborate set of rules governing their daily lives and eventually the lives of all of their fellow Jews. By the time of Jesus, the *halakah* (“how to walk”) had unfortunately devolved into an oppressive regime of “jumping through hoops” instead of interior transformation into deeper holiness.

As we begin a new school year, a new Postulancy year, and our brothers prepare to renew their vows, may we be:

- Mindful of the various laws and other rules that govern us but even more mindful of the Spirit underlying them;
- Respectful of those the laws and rules of church and society but also willing to question them when reason or conscience demand it; and
- More committed to growing in holiness than jumping through hoops.+