

## “I HAVE A RELATIONSHIP NOT A RELIGION.”

By: Michael Faber

Often on the internet I encounter a preacher that declares that he has a relationship with Christ, but not a religion. Often unspoken is that other Christians, like Catholics practice mindless liturgies while not knowing Jesus personally. It has always been true that some followers of God, practice rituals of worship without building a relationship necessary to give those rituals meaning. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah in declaring “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” Matthew 15:8-9. But worshiping God through rites of liturgy is not the opposite of having a relationship. To say you must have one but not the other is a false dichotomy, a false choice. Instead, as Christians we are to have BOTH, not one without the other. Yes, worship without relationship and obedience is vain. But worship WITH relationship and obedience is life giving and powerful.

First of all, for some evangelicals to openly declare or insinuate that Catholics don’t have a relationship with Christ is simply wrong. The Church does NOT advocate mindless practice of ritual without relationship. That is a caricature. What does the Church ACTUALLY teach about relationship with Christ?

Pope Benedict declared: “We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). To be a Christian is not philosophical. It is not a choice simply to live a good

life, but it is an ENCOUNTER with JESUS CHRIST. Only when we have encountered Him personally, are we given a new horizon and a decisive direction. Earlier Pope John Paul II declared, “No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!” Novo Millennio Ineunte (2001) paragraph 29. We are saved by the person of Jesus Christ through our RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

But what does a RELATIONSHIP with Jesus look like? What do people mean when they say they have a RELATIONSHIP. Does it simply mean having an imaginary friend who we talk with in our minds? Well, Jesus is not imaginary. He did and does exist, and we can speak with Him in our minds and hearts, but what does it look like? What does a relationship with Jesus look like?

Before, I share what Pope John Paul said in his encyclical Novo Millennio Ineunte, let me firmly declare, that we ALL have a relationship with Christ, because we are created by God. The question is WHAT KIND of relationship do we have. Are we simply biological children of a chance encounter and are not even aware of the existence and person of our father? Or do we know Him but despise His rules and desires for a relationship with us? Are we rebellious children? Or do we know of His existence but could really care less? While not rebellious and angry, we are estranged, and live our lives as if He doesn't exist?

Do we have a cool relationship where we simply go through the motions, and send a Father's day card, and maybe make a quick visit on Easter and Christmas to fulfill our familial obligations? Or do we try to have a warm and close relationship where we interact with our Father, and His Son Jesus Christ on a regular basis? The foundation of a relationship with Jesus and His dad, is to avoid living in opposition

to His desire for us. Pope John Paul II said all Christians who desire a relationship with Jesus should strive for Holiness: “The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction. It is also clear however that the paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine "training in holiness", adapted to people's needs.” 31

We cannot expect a relationship with Jesus, if we don't talk to Him! And we cannot simply be the greedy children who only come around when we want something. Pope John Paul II said our relationship must be founded on Prayer “Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become genuine "schools" of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love".” 33

We also should visit our beloved Jesus regularly through the Sunday Mass, and for Catholics, the taking of the Eucharist, which gives us spiritual and physical communion with Jesus. “The Liturgy offers the deepest and most effective answer to this yearning for the encounter with God. It does so especially in the Eucharist, in which we are given to share in the sacrifice of Christ and to nourish ourselves with his Body and his Blood. JP II *Spiritus et Sponsa* (2003) paragraph 12.

Sometimes in our relationships, we fail our loved one. How often do we fail Jesus through active sin, or simply ignoring Him and putting other priorities first. When we mess up, Catholics have the beautiful sacrament of Reconciliation. It is there, when we mess up that we humbly take time out of our routines to confess our sins to Christ, through the priest which Jesus gave authority to forgive sins. The

priest is standing *In Persona Christi*, and when confessing to the priest, a flesh and blood human being, who stands in the place of Jesus with his authority, we feel the shame and gravity of our sin as we confess it with our mouth and feel the power of Jesus's forgiveness and mercy as we hear with our ears the words of absolution.

Pope John Paul II also advises that a person exercising a true relationship with Jesus will listen and study the Word of God in the Bible. St. Jerome declared, "Ignorance of Scripture is Ignorance of Christ" If you love someone you want to learn all about them. Scripture teaches us about Jesus and His desires for our life, and Jesus also speaks to us through Scripture, such as in the practice of *Lectio Divina* (praying the Scripture). When we hear the word, we will naturally want to proclaim the word and share the word with others. Finally, when we have a relationship with Christ, we learn to see Jesus in others around us, and we learn to serve them as we serve God. In my Liturgy of the Hours prayer this morning, I prayed "Enable us to see your image in all men, and to serve you in them." Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Matt. 25:40.

In summary, to have a relationship with Christ does not mean to neglect worship of Him through sacraments and Church, but to fully participate in these things, with a personal knowledge and love of Him who we are worshiping. Our relationship with Christ is founded on knowledge of Him through Scripture, communication with Him through Prayer, Fellowship with Him through obedience and holiness, and reconciliation when we fail, and metaphysical communion with Him through worship, liturgy and the Sacrament of the Eucharist and Church on Sundays, as we participate with Him in the pascal mystery. Finally, our relationship

with Christ must bear practical fruit as it affects how we show love for others around us.

Yes, we have a relationship with Jesus, and we build this relationship and this encounter by the faithful practice of the religion of Christianity which Jesus and His apostles gave us.