

Homily based on the readings from August 26, 2025 (1 Thessalonians 2.1-8; Matthew 23.23-26)

Whenever I am giving a tour of a church – either to a faith formation class or to a group of RCIA candidates – I always take some time to examine the sacred vessels: the ciboria that hold the Body of Christ and the chalice that contains the Precious Blood. The main *point* I make is that, while the *outside* of the vessels can be constructed from *any* material – metal, wood, ceramic – the *inside* must be made of gold, or at least be gilded. The *reason* for this practice is *apparent* even to the youngest children. The external appearance – what you and I can see – is totally unimportant. What actually matters is the part of the vessel that comes into contact with Jesus Christ. In other words, the design of our sacred vessels reflects our *deepest* belief that Christ is truly present – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – in the transubstantiated bread and wine.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes a similar point in his criticism of the Pharisees: "cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean." On a basic level, the Pharisees are inverting the relationship between appearance and reality. By emphasizing the *outside* of the vessels rather than the *inside*, they are prioritizing style over substance – what people can *see* over what actually matters.

Jesus, of course, is not just talking about cups and dishes, but is *demanding* that the Pharisees make an honest appraisal of their daily lives. Do their actions represent a *sincere* attempt to serve the Lord, or are they primarily intending to impress other people? Are they holding themselves to the same standards as the individuals they are attempting to instruct? Are they fixating on the *minute* details of the law, yet ignoring its fundamental purpose – to guide us in practicing "judgment and mercy and fidelity"?

Even though the rules that apply to modern Catholics are substantially different from those of the Pharisees, *all* of us could benefit from the

same kind of soul-searching. Consider our own engagement with the sacraments: are we approaching them with reverence and humility, or using them as an opportunity to show off our purported piety? Are we receiving Christ in the Holy Eucharist, only to treat the people around us in an un-Christlike manner? Are we obtaining absolution through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, only to fall back into our old behavior the moment we exit the confessional? Are we truly *living* out our ministry as baptized Christians, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone we encounter?

On a broader level, we need to take an unflinching look at how this same issue applies to our parishes and our diocese. How often are children baptized but not instructed in the principles of the faith? How frequently are they taken to Faith Formation but not to Sunday Mass? How many children actually *come* to Mass the day after their first Holy Communion? How many people treat the Sacrament of Confirmation as a *de facto* graduation from Church? If we allow Christianity to become

nothing more than a set of coming-of-age rituals, then we have *utterly* robbed it of its meaning.

In the end, the formula we need to follow is incredibly simple. Our actions are important, but they must flow *authentically* from what is inside our hearts – or, to be more precise, *who* is inside our hearts. If we are truly *filled* with the love of Jesus Christ, then everything we do becomes a reflection of that fact. That is the *only* way to cleanse our immortal souls, both *outside* and *within*.