

SACRED RITES AND RITUALS

Excerpts from the book: 'To Be Like Jesus', of Fr. Peter Ribes, s.j.
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Intent of these notes:

- ✓ *To study the nature and function of rites and rituals in human life, with a special emphasis on religious rites.*
- ✓ *To caution us on the dangers inherent to all rites and rituals whatever - religious, social, political, Etc..*
- ✓ *To critically study our Christian rites and worship.*

THE SADHU AND THE CAT (A story)

Once upon a time, there was a very religious and scrupulous Sadhu. Every day without fail, he performed his 'puja' under a banyan tree in the Temple yard, following all the prescribed rites and sacred rituals.

The Sadhu had a pet cat, which he loved, as though it were his own child. The little cat followed his master wherever he went.

While the Sadhu was performing the 'puja' and recited his prayers, the cat would move freely all over the place, upsetting the sacred utensils and disturbing its master and his devotees.

To prevent such disturbance and profanation the Sadhu, before starting his puja, began tying the cat to the big banyan tree. With the passing of time, this became a standard practice.

Once the cat was tied to the banyan tree, the Sadhu performed the 'puja' most scrupulously and devoutly.

After many days, the good and God-fearing Sadhu died. One of his chelas- also a very conscientious and scrupulous man - took his place. He too, kept tying the cat to the sacred tree every time he performed his 'puja'.

Unfortunately, some time later the cat died. The new Pujari was at a loss and perplexed. He kept asking himself: "Now that there is no cat, how can I possibly perform my 'puja'?" He thought and prayed about it. At last he found a solution.

From that day on, before the 'puja' would begin, you could have seen the good and scrupulous Sadhu running down to the nearest village street, catch any stray cat he could find, take it to the temple, tie it to the banyan tree and then only, scrupulously start his 'puja' in keeping with all the customary rites and rubrics of the sacrifice.

Personal Work**First Part.****Personal Reflection**

(As far as possible, take some jottings of your reflections)

1. Did you experience any “emotional” reactions – positive or negative – while reading or listening to the story of the Sadhu and the cat? If so, what are they and what do they tell you?
2. What are rituals and rites in human life in general and in religious matters in particular? What’s their use and function?
3. Are they necessary or superfluous? Why?
4. What is meant in the story by the ritual or the sacred cat?
5. Are dangers, exaggerations and even distortions possible in the use - or misuse- of rites and rituals? Give instances.
6. How do such exaggerations and distortions take place? What are the consequences of such distortions?
7. Can you apply the moral of the story also to our Christians Rites, Sacraments, pious practices and devotions? How? Explain.
8. How can we purify our rites, rituals and devotions and make them more meaningful to modern people, especially to the youth and those more critical minded?
9. Can you find some “sacred cats” in our rites and rituals? Name them?
10. Have we not sometimes, unfortunately, while trying to correct our mistakes and exaggerations thrown away some of the essentials along with the accidentals. For instance” belittling our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, our devotion to Our Lady, the use of the Sacrament of penance, Sacrifices, Fast and abstinences, etc. How to correct such mistakes?
11. Have you any doubts, questions, criticisms, objections you would like to make on Baptism, Confession, Mass - *Vernacular or Latin or any other type of Mass rites* - Eucharist, funerals, marriages, devotions, novenas, rosary or on any other religious practices? Please list them down one by one.

Second Part.

Read and study the Notes below

Important Notice

After pondering on the story of the ‘Sadhu and the Cat’ and writing down your reflections on the points suggested above, carefully read the thoughts below. You may find in them some explanation to your unanswered queries.

THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE, FUNCTION AND DANGERS OF RITES AND RITUALS

Nature and Function of Rites and Rituals

- Human beings stand in need of rites and rituals. Rituals are “external” expressions of “internal” realities experienced or intuited deep within us.
- These inner realities are “ineffable” – namely, they cannot be expressed verbally in human language - yet they strive toward expression and communication.
- Rites and rituals are their outward and visible “symbolic” and “analogical” signs.
- In human life and society, there are all sorts of rites and rituals: social, political and religious. We restrict ourselves here only to the “religious” rites.
- Throughout the centuries we can discover religious rites and rituals in all countries, cultures, civilizations and communities. They are attempts to externalize and embody the “religious experiences” of human beings.
- In all rites and rituals we have to distinguish between “the thing signified” and the “symbol” used to signify it.
- The symbols may vary from place to place, from culture to culture, from civilization to civilization, yet the things signified are the same, they have a perennial value.
- We can say that the ‘symbolic expressions’ in religious practices are temporally and culturally conditioned.
- The reason why a particular rite or ritual was created or introduced in a particular instance, can very well be put down to fortuitous circumstances, such as chance, cultural bias, personal preferences, availability of materials, social ethos and environment.
- Specific instances are: wax, lamps, coconuts, flowers, salt, finger rings, oil, wheat, fruit, wine, bread, stones, clay, colours, animal sacrifices, etc. Even the languages used in the performance of the ritual take a symbolic character.
- All the instances mentioned above provide clear examples of the relative nature of ritualistic symbols.
- The Church has a right to prescribe the rites she deems suitable for her sacraments and worship.
- Yet, we should not make the mistake of thinking that these rites have an absolute value. They are not ends in themselves but only means, and attempts to express the ineffable.
- The church can and ought to change them when the circumstances demand it. For instance, the church can establish Indian, Chinese, Japanese or African rites to suit the needs of people living within different cultural traditions, without sacrificing the substance of her message or her mission.
- Rites and rituals, to some extent, share in the nature of “language”, the same thoughts, feelings and experiences can be expressed in different languages- English, Latin, Chinese, Sanskrit, etc.- because the things signified or expressed by verbal sounds are part and parcel of a common and unique experience of humankind.

- However, rites and rituals as much as languages, being culturally and ideologically conditioned may- consciously or unconsciously - twist, exaggerate, play down and even conceal reality. We have to be critical.

Dangers and Exaggerations in Rites, Rituals and Sacraments

1. “Sacralization” and “Absolutization” of our Rites and Rituals

- There is a tendency to “sacralize” and “absolutize” religious rites and rituals in such a way that we end by subordinating persons to rites and rituals.
- Religious rites and practices have no absolute value.
- To assign such a value to them would be a form of idol-worship.
- There is nothing absolute except God himself. Nothing that is not God can be turned into an object of worship.
- An overestimation of rites and rituals and formulae may prove to be a symptom of our lack of faith in God and of spiritual infantilism.
- We might be creating “idols” to cover up our unbelief or allay our anxiety of not fully accepting God as the only and supreme reality.
- What Jesus said about the Sabbath being meant for men, not men for the Sabbath, should equally be applied to all rites, rituals, religious practices and devotions.
- We clothe our worship with symbols and formulae, but let us remember that it is God we worship, not the symbols and the formulae.
- We tend to attribute to sacramental rites, sacramentals and religious practices a power they do not possess. We fall into a fetishist belief-system bordering on “superstition”.
- Sacramental rites and rubrics in themselves are not sacraments, they are means instituted by the church to express our relationship with God. What really matters is what they signify.
- Some good and scrupulous people, like the good Sadhu of the story are meticulous, even obsessed with the outward observances of their faith and the externals of their religious practice. Yet religion has to be practised in spirit and in truth.
- Scrupulous Pharisees who ‘sacralized’ the law and other external practices were rebuked by Jesus for sticking to the letter of the law and forgetting its spirit. We read in the Scriptures: “The spirit vivifies, the letter kills.”
- If we have to worship God in spirit and in truth we must first do away with the “sacred cats” in the sanctuary of our religious lives. Only then will our burnt offerings be truly pleasing to God.
- Just as in our daily life, in order to convey meaning to others, we use the common language of the people, so also – in religious matters - we must use common meaningful rituals and rites in keeping with the spiritual strivings, the intellectual capacity and emotional yearnings of the common people.
- We might have to change some of the rites and symbols and the language of our liturgy to make ourselves relevant, meaningful and purposeful to the people of the 21st century.

2. Empty Ritualism: Substituting Inner Realities with External signs

- By their very nature rites and rituals are repetitive. There is a real danger that due to repetition, over a period of time, our religious rites become routine, mechanical and robot-like actions. In the end they may turn to be empty gestures and dead symbols.
- It's not uncommon that rites and rituals become a "substitute" for the reality they were meant to express. For example, ordinarily we express adoration - *actually an inner inward disposition of our heart* - by external bows, genuflections, prostrations, etc. In the course of time, due to sheer repetition, we may keep performing those outward signs of adoration without a thought of the inner reality they represent.
- An external action like bowing for instance becomes a substitute for true and inner worshipping! The net result will be empty ritualism.
- It is an unfortunate fact that many of our rites have, with the passage of time, become meaningless rituals. For instance, crossing ourselves, genuflecting, the use of holy water, the rite of the sign of peace at Mass, etc.
- Even confession can become a matter of empty ritualism, sort of touchwood.
- Attendance at Mass can turn out to be a compulsive exercise in spiritual vacuity for many of the "Once- a-week Catholics".

3. Complacency and False Security

- Empty ritualism may lead to complacency and false security because having substituted the reality with a rite, we are led to believe that the rite is the reality when in fact it is not.
- We may imagine we are worshipping God because we kneel or bow before Him when in fact, a yawning gulf separates us from Him.
- If we make our confession out of routine without genuine repentance and a sincere resolve to change our life, we may feel that our sins are forgiven, when in reality they are not.
- At Mass, because of the rite of peace, we may think that we are at peace with our brothers and sisters, yet we are not. A sign of peace, a mere ritual act of reconciliation, is no substitute for a sincere reconciliation with my neighbours by forgiving and accepting them.
- Once we mistake rites for reality, we deceive ourselves with the comforting thought that
all is well with our relation to God and neighbours when actually it is not. Empty ritualism breeds self-complacency and false security.
- Empty ritualism cannot take the place of reality. It leads us only to self-delusion.
- By going through the external ritual trappings of religion, instead of practising it, we may run after a shadow and miss the substance.

4. Pride and Pharisaic Attitudes

- Self- complacency and self-satisfaction may lead us to despise those who do not keep "rites" and "rituals" as scrupulously as we do! We may feel tempted to judge our neighbours merely by the way they practise the rubrics and externals of

the faith. For instance, we may think ourselves to be better than those who do not go for Mass and Confession.

- We may flatter ourselves with the assumption that God is happy with us because we strictly conform to all the canons of ritual propriety.
- We may imagine ourselves to be favoured by the Divine for scrupulously adhering to every minute detail of rite and rubrics.

5. Fundamentalism and Religious Bigotry

- Extreme ritualism also breeds corporate pride. The ritualistic ‘loyalists’ tend to click together and feel superior to the ‘innovators’ and ‘rebels’.
- A good deal of the religious bigotry and fundamentalism with which society is plagued today, can be traced to the blind and passionate observance of rites.
- It cannot be gain-said that many of the fights, scandals and schisms in ecclesiastical history, were basically due to the clinging to formulae and symbols of worship with the utmost jealousy and fanatical rigidity by the institutional churches.
- Differences and schisms within a religion and between different religions, are accidents of history and culture not necessarily due to the essence of true religion.
- All religions try to mediate similar transcendental realities and religious experiences; their differences spring mainly from their articulation through rites, norms and institutions.
- We keep quarrelling over what is accidental and peripheral, and in the process we miss what is essential!
- Let us have the courage to honestly see the difference between essence and accident, between the perennial and the passing, between Rite and Reality, between the ‘sacred’ and ‘sacred cats’!

6. Arbitrary Meanings and Exaggerated Symbolism

- Human nature is so caught up in a total web of meaning that we try to find meaning in every single action that goes into the performance of a rite: for instance, the type of vestments a priest wears performing sacred actions, washing the tip of his fingers after the offertory, the pouring a few drops of water into wine, the use of candles, etc. Many of these things started out of sheer necessity or of accidental circumstances.
- At the beginning, they had no sacred meaning at all. For instance, the washing of the hands at the offertory at Mass arose because the Priest had soiled them by receiving fruits, grains, and other gifts as offerings in kind.
- The pouring of some drops of water into the wine was the custom of the Jews to temper down the wine by dropping a little water before drinking it. Now, we want to find sacred meaning in those accidental actions. We create artificial and arbitrary meanings.
- We need not find deep symbolic meaning in every minute action we do in the performance of a rite. We have to take the rite as a whole and relate it to the reality we want to signify.

- A peep into the history of ritualism will reveal that many of the material ingredients of rites- wax, oil, lamps, grain, bread, wine formed part of man's ordinary day life as it was lived in those days. The only meaning and purpose those things had at that time, were utilitarian ones. They had no symbolic connotations.
- It is we, who later on, arbitrarily, attributed to them symbolic meanings they never had at the start. Thus, bee-wax candles and oil lamps that were the ordinary means of illumination in former days, we take them to mean Christ the light of the world.
- It is good to realize that many of the things making our rites of today are like the sacred cats of the story. The passage of time has invested them with meaning they never had. The result is "Arbitrary and inflated symbolism".

7 Let us adopt The Attitude of Jesus.

- We – human beings, made of the lime of earth - yet endowed by God with a spiritual nature, need both to communicate with God and also to express our God experience to others. For that, we need a language that goes beyond the spoken words. Rites and rituals are a symbolic language that serves the purpose.
- We cannot discard rituals only because they are fraught with dangers. All sorts of human communication – be verbal or symbolic – may lend themselves to deception, pretence, distortions, exaggerations, misinterpretations, misunderstandings even cheating. Yet we cannot do without them.
- We should neither "absolutise" our rites and rituals nor "discard" them.
- Being aware of the dangers therein, we have to use them meaningfully and critically.
- We have to respect and honour our old traditional Christian rites, but not make "fetishes" out of them.
- Let the essentials of our Christian Religion always occupy the centre of the stage, not our sacred cats.
- Sacramental rites, religious practices, sacramentals, even our dogmas and formulas of our faith are means both to reach God and to express our God experience, they are not God Almighty.
- After death all of them will cease. Whilst on earth, they should never become obstacles to our path to God.