

Holy or devout?

With the following deliberations I will try to demonstrate that being devout does not suffice, but that God demands that we are holy, as is written in Leviticus 19:2: „*Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.*” He issued this summons to the Hebrews amongst whom He wanted to dwell.

The commandment of circumcision as a covenant, the prohibition of interfaith marriages as a sign of segregation, the commandment of Sabbath observance and the commitment to the sacrificial, food and cleanliness dictates reified this demand.

All these commandments and prohibitions relate to human dos and don'ts and not to the alignment of the heart.

Even so, God asks mankind to „*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*”

(Deuteronomy 6:5)

Joshua, too, urged the people: „*So be very careful to love the LORD your God.*” (Joshua 23.11)

This clarifies that the alignment of the heart is also of vital importance and, how history has shown, it is not possible to follow the commandments without this alignment.

One would presumably be able to maintain a cult and observe certain dietary rules, but to please God requires more than that, as is written in Isaiah 58:5: „*Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?*”

The Prophets repeatedly called for justice, for the correct judgement, for compassion. “*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*” (Micah 6:8) Jesus of Nazareth summarises this as follows: „*Be merciful, as your father is merciful.*”

(Luke 6:36)

He condemns self-righteousness in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9).

It frequently happens that particularly God-fearing and pious individuals acquire a smug attitude towards sinners as they often lack the awareness that it is a blessing to be able to withstand sin; that faith

is a gift of grace. They elect themselves as judges, are unmerciful, parsimonious and unforgiving. This is how the scholars acted when the lame man was taken to Jesus. It was they who tried to prevent him from meeting Jesus. And when the lame man did find him, after all, they condemned Jesus' behaviour. Pious people frequently even judge God's actions instead of faithfully devoting themselves to Him!

Jesus very strictly invoked them to separate themselves from everything that tempts one into evil, be this one's own family or one's own limbs.

Many a devout individual believes to do God a holy service by killing others. A deed like this, which is frequently accompanied by the greed for power and possessions, destroys the faith in many people. This is often also accompanied by ambition which, although not always obvious, nevertheless presents a major obstacle to God's truth, justice and honour.

It gets even more difficult when trying to overcome one's own will, be it out of the love to God or one's neighbour, as this requires a daily and often extremely strenuous effort which does not entail any glory. Is it not so much easier to carry out pious prayers, songs and rituals than to dedicate oneself to the service to mankind, the service to the truth?

The Koran says: „*You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong.*” (Surah 3:110).

This is the summary of the commandment of the love to God and one's neighbours.

Surah 2, Verse 177 illustrates the difference between piousness and the fulfillment of God's plan even more emphatically when it specifies one's love and generosity towards one's neighbours out of love to God as the measure of one's piousness.

There are many more passages in the Holy Scriptures exemplary of the holiness or fulfillment of God's will, but at this point I would like to present some other thoughts.

In Christian circles it is customary to encourage children to attend Mass and practise various rituals. Much more rarely are they

instructed in personal prayer and obeying God's word, let alone in the strive for holiness. One urges the children to learn and asks them about their career and life plans, but neglects to convey the importance of deep prayer which could help them to master life's storms and to discover God's plan for them. It is even worse when children in religious institutions are indoctrinated with prejudices against other religions and the fear of people of other religions. This makes them bigoted and repressed and therefore more proof of a punishing than a loving God. In other cases, however, they are raised according to society's wishes and the prevailing zeitgeist or, as often customary in old times, they have to serve financial or political advantages. For this reason they were either suitably married or joined the clergy.

The most important objective of any religion is the compliance with its respective scriptures and rituals. Even where various splinter groups have emerged, they are all the more concerned with defending their specific beliefs against others. One isolates and protects one's convictions by any possible means and does not shrink back from threatening eternal damnation to those who deviate from their beliefs. The preservation of religious buildings or art is deemed to be of such great importance that other values are sacrificed and even money from criminals and exploiters is accepted. Furthermore, God's word is not infrequently adjusted to please the backers whose wrongdoings are glossed over, thus bending the law.

Time and again the faithful are indoctrinated with the same theological interpretations while their spiritual growth, the devotion to God and the work on their hearts is not in the least supported. Not even the simplest things are demanded of them, or at least advised, such as the reconciliation with their neighbours, the acceptance of the offspring they sired, or making charitable donations. (At times even donations advanced from the backers' surplus abundance are viewed as heroic.)

At the present day, people also pay increasingly less respect to their elders, towards life and creation in general. The seven Acts of Mercy, the physical as well as the spiritual, are hardly present in today's

religious preaching. Instead, the Church spouts terms such as tolerance, kindness and other cheap, fashionable vocabulary. One's own comfort, fame and wealth are more important than God's Kingdom on Earth. This is being "preached" and paraded by all the media and endorsed by many religious authorities.

All the more urgent is the believers' task to strive for hallowing to create a counterbalance. The thought and practise of reparation have nearly entirely been forgotten; a missing element in present times. It is a commonly concealed truth that consciousness is shaped by action and this may well be the reason that God's word is not being understood, on the one hand, and being reinterpreted, on the other. This obscures the mind, which becomes deaf and blind while the heart turns to stone.

It is increasingly viewed as unacceptable that children obey their parents, that women accept a subordinate role to men and that marital partners should be faithful to one another. Instead, one's neighbour, yes, society as such, is being used to satisfy one's own needs.

In the past, various practices of self-denial were widespread to withstand life's temptations, which, incidentally, presented a major obstacle for unbelievers to adopt the faith. Nowadays, these practices are rarely performed, rather the opposite extreme, namely the pursuit of lust and entertainment without limits. It is the religious authorities' task to stand up together against mankind's degeneration and to lead it back to a way of life agreeable to God.

When will the religious hierarchies finally comprehend that God loves all those who fear Him, who are just and do good works, or will they continue to sow discord, hatred and controversy among the faithful of different religions?

There are devout believers who reach holiness through their unwavering piety and the staunch performance of their duties; so, a discrepancy between piety and sanctification does not always exist. This is, however, not the case when piety serves as a smokescreen for egotism.

Some are led to holiness through good deeds and the performance of their duties; others through the constant forgiveness of their

neighbours' unkindness without practising much piety as well.

When will the faithful finally compete in their honouring of God and the love of their neighbours?

It would be heavenly to live on earth if people would passionately seek God's glorification instead of lusting for material goods! This would surely result in a lower suicide rate, less or no poverty in our times, and people would not only enjoy God and prayer, but also life itself as well as that of their children and grandchildren. God, too, would enjoy his works and would be able to bestow plentiful blessings!

So, what is a Saint like? Jesus claims that it is everyone's logical conclusion that the grain of wheat cannot bear fruit if it does not die. What is so obvious in nature, is for many difficult to comprehend in their spiritual life because it means surrendering oneself in a certain situation, at a certain moment, be it in a material, mental or physical respect, to fully trust in the one true God, to solely act on his behest and not of one's own accord. The devout believer who obeys God's commands and performs his duties to his neighbours is well on the path and can receive God's invitation to Sainthood at any time. He can accept this invitation, reject it or miss it through the most diverse circumstances and influences. But also, individuals who have not led a pious life up to now can receive this invitation from one moment to the next as God's benevolence knows no limits.

Lastly, every religion has pious individuals who content themselves with religious rituals, but neglect their obligations and works of compassion because, overwhelmed by prayers, masses, religious events or other intellectual activities, they lack the time and will.

In today's world it is a sad fact that indulgence is more highly rated than the duty to fulfill God's commandments although the Creator wants to lead each and every one of us to the best possible evolvment of our potential, to our true goal! Unfortunately, HE only very seldom finds willing believers. And HE tirelessly waits for the individual to make peace with himself, his brothers and eventually with HIM!

K.H.