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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We find in the Gospel one of the fundamental themes of humanity's religious history: the question of the purity of the human being before God. In turning his gaze to God, man recognizes that he is "contaminated" and finds himself in a condition in which he has no access to the Holy One. Thus the question arises as to how he can be purified, and rid himself of the "dirt" that separates him from God. This has given rise in the different religions to rites of purification, to processes of interior and exterior cleansing. In today's Gospel we encounter rites of purification that are rooted in the Old Testament tradition but are nonetheless performed in a very unilateral manner. Consequently they no longer serve to open man to God, they no longer lead to purification and salvation but become elements of a self-contained system of fulfilment which to be fully implemented even requires specialists. The human heart is no longer touched. Man, who moves within this system, either feels enslaved or falls into the arrogance of being able to justify himself.

Liberal exegesis says that this Gospel seems to reveal that Jesus would have replaced worship with morals, he would have set aside worship with all its empty practices. The relationship between man and God would then have been based solely on morals. If this were true it would mean that Christianity was essentially morality that is, that we make ourselves pure and good through our moral action. If we reflect more deeply on this opinion, it is obvious that this cannot be Jesus' complete answer to the question on purity. If we want to hear and understand the Lord's message fully we must listen carefully we cannot be content with a detail, we must pay attention to

the whole of his message. In other words we must read the Gospels, the whole of the New and the Old Testament in their entirety and together.

Today's First Reading from the *Book of Deuteronomy* offers us important details that provide an answer and make us take a step forward. We are listening here to something that we may find surprising: God himself asks Israel to be grateful and to feel humbly proud of knowing God's will and therefore of being wise. In that very period humanity, in both the Greek and Semitic contexts, was seeking wisdom: it was seeking to understand what matters. Science says many things and many aspects of it are useful to us, but wisdom is knowledge of the essential knowledge of the aim of our life and of how we should live in order to live life in the best possible way. The Reading from *Deuteronomy* mentions the fact that wisdom, in the final analysis, is identical to the Torah to the Word of God that reveals to us what is essential, for what purpose and in what way we should live. Thus the Law does not appear as a form of slavery, but is as the great *Psalms* 119 states a cause of great joy: we do not grope in the dark, we do not wander in vain seeking what might be righteous, we are not like sheep without a shepherd who do not know which is the right path. God has manifested himself. He himself shows us the way. We know his will and with it, the truth that counts in our life. We are told two things about God: on the one hand, that he manifested himself and that he shows us the right path to take; on the other, that God is a God who listens, who is close to us, answers us and guides us. With this we also come to the topic of purity: his will purifies us, his closeness guides us.

I believe that it is worth reflecting for a moment on Israel's joy at knowing God's will and thus having received as a gift wisdom which heals us and which we cannot find on our own. Is there among us, in the Church today, a similar sentiment of joy at God's closeness and at the gift of his Word? Anyone who wished to show this joy would soon be accused of triumphalism. In fact it is not our ability that shows us God's true will. It is an undeserved gift that makes us at the same time humble and glad. If we reflect on the world's perplexity in the face of the great issues of the present and the future, joy should arise again within us at the fact that God has freely shown us his Face, his will, himself. Should this joy manifest itself again in us it would also move the hearts of non-believers. Without this joy we are not convincing. However, where this joy is present even involuntarily it has a missionary power. Indeed, it makes human beings wonder if this might not truly be the way if this joy might not effectively guide us in God's footsteps.

All this is found in greater depth in the passage from the *Letter of James* that the Church presents to us today. I especially like the *Letter of St James* because it gives us an idea of the devotion of Jesus' family. It was an observant family. Observant in the sense that it lived the joy at God's closeness, described in *Deuteronomy* and which is given to us in his Word and in his Commandment. It is quite a different kind of observance from what we encounter in the Pharisees of the Gospel, who had made it into an exteriorized and enslaving system. Moreover it is a kind of observance unlike that which Paul, as a rabbi, had learned: that was as we see from his Letters the observance of an expert who knew everything; who was proud of his knowledge and of his

righteousness but nevertheless suffered under the burden of the Law's prescriptions, so that the Law no longer appeared as a joyous guide to God but rather as an exigency which, ultimately, it was impossible to fulfil.

In the *Letter of St James* we find that observance which does not look inwards but turns joyfully towards the caring God who gives us his closeness and points out to us the right way. Thus the *Letter of St James* speaks of the perfect Law of freedom that perseveres to reach a new and deeper understanding of the Law given to us by the Lord. For James the Law is not a requirement that demands too much of us, which stands before us and can never be satisfied. He is thinking in the perspective that we find in a sentence of Jesus' farewell discourse: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15: 15). The one to whom all is revealed is part of the family; he is no longer a servant but is free precisely because he himself belongs to the household. A similar, initial introduction into the thought of God himself happened in Israel on Mount Sinai. It happened again in a definitive and grand way at the Last Supper and, generally through the work, the life, the Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus; in him God told us everything, he manifested himself completely. We are no longer servants, but friends. And the Law is no longer a prescription for people who are not free but is contact with God's love being introduced to become part of the family, an act that makes us free and "perfect". It is in this sense that James says in today's Reading that the Lord has created us by means of his Word, that he planted his Word deep within us as a life force. Here he also speaks of "pure religion" which consists in love for our neighbour particularly for orphans and widows who are needier than we are and in freedom from the ways of the world that contaminate us. The Law, like a word of love, is not a contradiction of freedom but a renewal from within by means of friendship with God. Something similar occurs when Jesus, in the discourse on the vine, says to the disciples: "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you" (Jn 15: 3). And the same thing appears again in the Priestly Prayer: sanctify them in the truth (cf. Jn 17: 17-19). Thus we now find the right structure for the process of purification and of purity: we do not create what is good that would be mere moralism but Truth comes to us. He himself is Truth, Truth in person. Purity happens through dialogue. It begins with the fact that he comes to us he who is Truth and Love he takes us by the hand and penetrates our being. Insofar as we allow him to touch us, insofar as the encounter becomes friendship and love, we ourselves, on the basis of his purity, become pure people and then people who love with his love, people who introduce others to his purity and his love.

Augustine summed all this up in a beautiful saying: *Da quod iubes et iube quod vis* grant what you command, and command what you will. Let us now bring this request before the Lord and pray to him: yes, purify us in the truth. May you be the Truth that makes us pure. Obtain that through friendship with you we may become free and thus truly children of God, make us capable of sitting at your table and spreading in this world the light of your purity and goodness. Amen.

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