True Purity
(From Conversation with God, Fernandez Carvajal)

Saint Mark, who wrote his Gospel primarily for converts from paganism, in various passages explains for his readers' benefit the meaning of certain Jewish customs, the value of coins and so forth, so that they would be better able to understand Our Lord's teachings. In the Gospel of today's Mass he tells us that the Jews, and especially the Pharisees, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.

These purifications were not done simply for hygienic reasons or out of politeness; they had in fact a religious significance, symbolizing the moral purity needed in order to approach God. In Psalm 24, which was part of the liturgical rite of entry to the Jerusalem sanctuary, it says: Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. Purity of heart appears as a condition for approaching God, for taking part in his worship and being able to behold his face. But the Pharisees hadn't got beyond the purely external level and even added to the intricacy of the rites while neglecting their fundamental aspect, namely, cleanness of heart, of which all the rest was merely a sign and a symbol.

On this occasion the Scribes and Pharisees who had come to Jerusalem were surprised that some of Jesus' disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed, and they asked Our Lord: Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled? Our Lord reacted strongly to this empty and formalistic attitude. You hypocrites, he said, you leave the commandments of God, and hold fast to the traditions of men. True purity is more meaningful than washed hands - has to begin with the heart, because from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All man's acts originate in his heart; and if this is unclean, then the entire person is unclean.

Sensuality, that is, the capital sin of lust, leaves a profound scar on the soul. However, this is not the only manifestation of impurity: also included is the inordinate desire for material goods, the attitude that leads a person to exploit others, to scheming, envy, or animosity; and also the tendency to think only about oneself to the exclusion of others; and interior sloth, the origin of daydreams and fantasies which undermine presence of God and application at work. Our external behaviour is coloured by our internal dispositions. Many external faults against charity can be traced to feelings of touchiness or irritability that should have been firmly rejected as soon as they first appeared.

What Jesus rejects is the mentality behind all those prescriptions; by then they had completely lost their original purpose. Instead, he teaches us to love that purity of heart whereby we are enabled to see God in our daily lives. He has told us so very often that he wants to reign in our feelings, to be with us at all times, to give a new meaning to everything we do. Let us ask him to always keep our heart clean of these disordered tendencies.