

## **Decorative Religion**

**Nathan Stone, S.J.**

*Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Mark 12:41*

There is a new religion on the market. You can do whatever you want, think whatever you feel like and treat your neighbor like trash. All you have to do is observe certain formalities. Any formalities will do, actually. There are all kinds, for every taste and preference. You can pick and choose. The only thing is that they must project an appearance of seriousness. They must give off an aura of what they are not: sincere.

This is the decorative religion of pomp and circumstance. It looks a lot like Christianity on the outside. It uses some of the same discourse, to rationalize its existence. But it's like some of the great old houses from long ago, that have been completely remodeled on the inside. Of the original intention, all that is left is the façade. Façades are valuable, in real estate, because they make property look respectable.

In the Church, sometimes, we pride ourselves on exemplary participation. We go to Mass. We sing loud. We put cash in the collection. We attend catechism. We follow all the rules. We fill out the forms, and sometimes, we even receive the sacraments.

But, what about the deeper issues? If the religion of the religious is just a decoration, if it is no more than social protocol, then it is all sound and fury. It would be far better if there really were nothing there. It is much easier to build on a vacant lot. Distorted Christianity for appearances does more harm than good. It poisons the project, and disillusiones the innocent.

Some might think they can cash in their apparent participation for eternal life. If so, then we are the heirs of the scribes who walk about in their fancy clothes, hoping to be recognized in the public square, and expecting the best seats in the synagogue.

If we are to be heirs to the Kingdom, we must look to the widow who put in all she had to live. If we are to become disciples of Jesus, and missionaries of the Good News, we must look beyond social rituals and formalities. A partial commitment does not go to the heart.

This does not mean you can save yourself by emptying your purse in the collection basket, either. The goodness of the widow is that she trusts in infinite love, and gives back her whole life. Final judgment does not depend on rules, forms and pretty words. It does not depend on how many activities you participated in. It depends on giving back with all you have.

If protocol is applied with mercy and justice, if it guides you to a more authentic understanding of divine compassion, then, go with it. On the other hand, if it is an end in itself, if it is for appearances and not for the cause of Jesus, then it is an obstacle in the way of faith.

The authentic followers of Christ will bear abundant fruit of justice and compassion. Those who participate sincerely in the Church will be marked by the style

of Jesus. They will live his way, and commit to his project. They will be passionate about the Kingdom. Disciples of Christ are not the false prophets of institutional rigor. They do not get caught up in bureaucratic labyrinths. They go out to the crowd. They do justice to the oppressed, give bread to the hungry and free the prisoners. That is their mission and they take it seriously.

njs.sj.amdg

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1 Kings 17:10-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44