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GOSPEL PEARLS

A useless custom

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The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, follow the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture: This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations. You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.' And he said to them, 'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition! For Moses said: Do your duty to your father and your mother, and, Anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death. But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother: Anything I have that

I might have used to help you is Corban (that is, dedicated to God), then he is forbidden from that moment to do anything for his father or mother." In this way you make God's word null and void for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this. (Mark 7, 1-13)

Jesus reminds us that devotional acts must be at the service of faithful observance of the commandments and cannot be an excuse to transgress or overshadow the commandments as the Pharisees and scribes did. For God, what counts is the love with which we try to honour Him and, consequently, the mercy with which we treat others. For example, saying the rosary is certainly a good and holy practice, but if it distracts us from the tenderness with which we should treat those we meet in our day, then it becomes an end in itself and a useless practice. Instead, recited with faith and to increase our charity towards God and neighbour, the rosary is a powerful weapon against the Evil One.