



Things to Ponder

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It's What's Inside That Counts

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

The Scottish theologian, William Barclay, tells the story about an old rabbi who was in a Roman prison. He was on a minimal ration of food and water, but enough for him to survive. However, the rabbi grew weaker and weaker and a doctor diagnosed him as suffering from dehydration. This puzzled the doctor because although his daily ration of drinking water was minimal, it was adequate. He told the guards to watch the old man closely and see what he was doing with his water. It was then that the mystery was solved. The guards discovered that the rabbi was using almost all his water to perform religious ritual washings before praying and eating. As a result, he had little water left to drink.

This story helps us to focus on a basic dispute between Jesus and the Scribes in today's Gospel. This ritual washing was rather complicated. Only pure ceremonial water could be used. The hands were held with the fingertips pointing upward; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist. The minimum amount of water used was specified as the equivalent of one and one half eggshells. Then each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other. The hands were still wet, but the water was now unclean. Therefore, more water had to be poured over the hands, this time with the fingertips pointing downward.

The person so washed was thereby rendered pure in the eyes of God. Washing one's hands before prayer and before eating was meant to signify an interior cleansing of the heart so as to make prayer to God and conversation at dinner more genuine and sincere. We still observe a remnant of this ritual during the offertory rite of the Mass when the priest washes his hands and says, "Wash me, Lord from all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sins."

The problem was that the Scribes had lost the connection between the ritual cleansing of hands and an interior cleaning of the heart. This is why Jesus quotes Isaiah (29:13) in calling not just for clean hands and lip service, but also for a clean and converted heart. Setting aside the objections of the Scribes and disproving the validity of their arguments, Jesus then encapsulates His teaching on the matter of purity in one powerful pronouncement. He begins with the words, "Hear Ye," the same words Moses uses in today's first reading from Deuteronomy, a kind catch phrase indicating that what was to follow was official teaching. Nothing external can render a person unclean; such evils originate within the human heart: evil thoughts, theft, greed,

malice, deceit, envy and arrogance, to name but a few.

Today's Gospel invites us to look into our hearts to see what may make our participation at Mass less genuine and sincere than it should be. We admit our unworthiness to receive the Eucharist at the very beginning of the Mass with the penitential rite in which our venial sins are truly forgiven.

Remember that old cigarette ad that went, "It's what's up front that counts?" Today, Jesus reminds us that it's what's inside that counts. With the onset of the flu season we are urged to wash our hands repeatedly. Perhaps every time we wash our hands this week, we may call to mind the real cleanliness that Jesus seeks: a clean heart.

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