

22nd Sunday in OT Year B FTG Newsletter

In Albert Camus' novel *The Fall*, the central figure is a nameless lawyer who tells his story to a stranger he meets in a Dutch bar. The anonymous lawyer relates how he had always prided himself on being a selfless servant of humanity, a man of noble virtue and generosity. But then one dark rainy midnight, something happened to shatter his self-righteous image. As he was walking home over a bridge, he passed by a slim young woman leaning over the rail and staring into the river. Stirred by the sight of her, he hesitated a moment, and then walked on. After crossing the bridge, he heard a body striking the water, a cry repeated several times, and then the midnight silence again. He wanted to do something to save her, but stood there motionless for a while and then went home. — The nameless lawyer in Camus' story reminds us in some ways of the Pharisees in today's Gospel. The Pharisees were experts in the law and prided themselves on their scrupulous observance of it. And yet Jesus castigated them for their hypocrisy by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "This people pay me lip service but their heart is far from me"

In the gospel, there seems to be some argument over the head and the hands. The Pharisees and the scribes who have a head filled with the knowledge of the Law and the religious traditions, questioned Jesus as to why His disciples do not respect the traditions of the elders and eat their food with unclean hands, i.e. hands that were washed in ritualistic way. But Jesus moved the question of the state of the hands to the state of the heart, as He quoted from the passage of the prophet Isaiah: "This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless".

In other words, the scribes and Pharisees follow the regulations and traditions like "robots of rituals" and they can even criticize others for not doing so. But the heart is not there. Just like robots have no heart; they only have a CPU (Central Processing Unit) that runs the program. While regulations and traditions have a useful purpose and rituals can help to sanctify, it is the heart that matters. Because it is the heart that gives life to regulations and traditions and rituals, and then they become expressions of love. Without the heart, we become like "robots of rituals" that only look smart but with no meaning or understanding.

There was once a monastery, where the abbot had a very punctual cat. Every morning, just before prayer, it would begin wonder around and distract the monks. After a few weeks of this irritating habit, the abbot gave permission for the cat to be tied up. After a few years, the abbot died, and the cat outlived him, and the practice to tie up the cat continued. Eventually, the cat died.

The monks of the monastery, upon realising that there was no cat to tie up before prayer, brought in another cat, and so, every morning, the cat would be tied up so that prayers could go ahead. The tradition continued and original cord that was used to tie up the cat was revered as a relic. Books on devotions and novenas were written on the spiritual significance of tying a cat before prayers.

Prayers to the "holy cat" were compiled and studied devotedly and pictures of the cat were being mass produced. Just a story to show how absurd traditions can become and people can turn into "robots of rituals". And this can even happen at Mass. We come for Mass and a programme kicks in and we become "robots of rituals". We know when to stand, when to sit, when to kneel,

when to say “Amen” and when to take out some money to put into the collection bag. But is there anything happening to our hearts? Do our hearts feel the love of God that makes us aware of the sinfulness that is lurking in our hearts?

Jesus pointed out what could be the sinfulness of our hearts – fornication, theft, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these make our hearts unclean but we come before the Lord in the Mass so that He can cleanse our hearts with the precious blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross. When we want to be cleansed, then our hearts will change. We won't be “robots of rituals”; we become God's holy people and we offer a worship that is pleasing to God as we offer to God a humble and contrite heart.

We are not called to be smart. We are called to be holy so that we will be holy in our worship and in our relationships and we become truly human and we will also become truly loving. Then we will be able to cleanse this world of sin and evil, and we will also help to turn robotic human beings into persons of love.

Dear friends, Jesus came to cleanse us, to heal us and to make our hearts like His. Let us look at His Heart and let us ask Him to make our hearts clean, to heal our hearts of sin, so that we can offer God a pure and worthy sacrifice.

Stay safe... God bless you.