

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Uncontaminated By The World

Can one keep out the scruffiness of the world? The Pharisees made a religion of trying. I often wonder how near they were to the compulsive-obsessive hand-washers of our own day. Quentin Crisp once said he never cleaned his house, and after about four years it never seemed to get any dirtier. I can believe that; but the other end of the equation is also true: you can spend all hours God sends trying to clean, and still the world never stays clean.

The Self-Dirtying World

On the model of the self-defrosting fridge and the self-cleaning oven, we have a self-dirtying world. Babies come into the world as engines of pollution: I'm told one of the most noxious weapons of mass infection is a soiled nappy. From then on it is a lifelong battle between the forces of good and evil. It takes people different amounts of time to decide whether they are on the side of the cleaners or the dirtiers. Walk through Bridlesmithgate behind any three teenagers: you'll be very unlucky if at least one of them doesn't throw a piece of packaging over his shoulder before Long Row. Personal hygiene is also a negotiable term; I'm afraid many University students could benefit from a car-wash as term nears its end. Dry-cleaners are obviously charging too much for their services.

My Dirt

I've heard that Rebekah and her baby are living in a tent on the lawn, because the house they have just moved into is unspeakably unclean: not uniquely polluted, you understand, but still impossible. I am about to move house, and I can see that my house is full of dust...but of course that is *my* dust. Whereas the dust in my next house will be other people's dust, and will need cleaning. This is translatable in moral terms too: we tend to wink at the morally dubious in ourselves, whilst retaining an exquisite sense of other people's heinous crimes (Jesus' parable of the plank-in-the-eye). Thus we are all at risk of hypocrisy, in that we have different standards for our own lives from the ones we acknowledge as binding others. This isn't anything we would easily confess to, because it creeps up on us without our

awareness. Hypocrisy is something the Gospel attributes to the Pharisees, in the sense that they present a fair face to the world and *within are full of every kind of corruption*. That is a shivery prospect.

Taking Care Of The Heart

The clear inference is that the cleansing of exterior surfaces isn't the point. *Keeping clear of the contamination of the world* means starting from the very middle, keeping the heart set on God. The story of the man who had the demon driven out is relevant here. He loses one demon, but his religion is negative, fundamentally empty, all based on *Thou Shalt Not*. The demon returns to the clear spaces of his heart with ease, and his last state was worse than before. Cleanliness, even if next to it, is not Godliness. When the heart is possessed by love of God, then everything is clean to it as well as within it; cleanliness is a symptom of Godliness, but it is no kind of a substitute. As I contemplate the prospect of moving into an old, empty house, I think how it doesn't much matter what the surfaces are like. As, in a family built on love and founded on love, all kinds of imperfections and difficulties become insignificant, so with a house. The way to seek for happiness is to begin with the heart, and not to be diverted into fiddling with the outside of things. Away with the colour-supplements, and the present-lists, and the style gurus, and the make-over programmes: look inside, and dig for treasure where the real thing is buried in each one of us, disregarded, unthought-of, but up-for-grabs.

Fr Philip

