

## On Housecleaning by Dr. John Koessler

It has been said that all men are pigs, and while I can't speak for all my gender, I know that this has been true of me. Neatness has never been my strongest point. Like other families in the 50's and 60's, I grew up in a home where mom stayed at home, cooked the dinner and cleaned the house. Granted, she generally didn't get out of bed until noon, but I still remember her washing and waxing our kitchen floor on her hands and knees. Whenever she did this, you could be sure that someone would spill a glass of milk on it before the day was through. She sprinkled Ajax in the sink and Clorox on the counter top. But somehow our capacity to make a mess outpaced her ability to clean it up.

Keeping things neat was never one of my father's values either. When he and my mother got engaged, my grandmother took her into my father's bedroom to show her what she was getting herself into. Years later, she confessed to me that she should have taken the warning more seriously. Our basement was so cluttered with junk; it became something of a legend in the neighborhood. Children lined up to peer into the windows and see the wreckage.

These days, stay-at-home moms are harder to find. But for some reason the division of labor hasn't changed. For most couples housework is still women's work. Indeed, the institution of marriage seems to have a strange effect on men and housework. A recent George Mason University Study of 17,000 people in 28 countries revealed that married men do less housework than live in boyfriends. Ironically, this was true even of couples where the men held egalitarian views of gender roles. Perhaps this isn't surprising. But it is a shame, in every sense of the word.

Theologically speaking I am not an egalitarian. When it comes to leadership roles in the church, I believe they have been defined by gender. But I do not think house cleaning is necessarily one of those roles. There is no biblical reason a married man cannot pick up a broom or a dish cloth and share the load. If Jesus did not think it was beneath his dignity to wash the disciples' feet, we husbands should not think that it is beneath us to wash the floor or clean a sink.

Despite my family background, I've come to see house cleaning as a spiritual exercise. It is a good antidote to the megalomania that comes so naturally to me. Like Jeremiah's scribe Baruch, I am prone to seek great things for myself. There is nothing like discipline of scrubbing a dirty toilet to bring a person back to reality. As I move from room to room, it helps me to turn my thoughts from myself to my wife and children. Perhaps that's why the sixth century Rule of St. Benedict required all monks to perform kitchen duty. Every Sunday after morning prayers the servers were to gather and pray for one another. When one server finished his week of duty, he was to say, "Blessed are You, O Lord God, who did help me and console me." After this, the monk who was just beginning his week of kitchen duty was to say, "O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me."

Nicholas Herman, 17<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite lay brother who took the name of Brother Lawrence and whose sayings are preserved in the classic entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*, described his experience serving in the kitchen this way: "The time of business," said he, "does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different

things, I possess GOD in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.”

Like him, I have found that the common work of house cleaning is its own kind of sacrament. Not in the sense that it conveys spiritual merit or saving grace. But because it gives me a chance to take up the basin and the towel and serve those I love. And like Brother Lawrence, I often find that Christ meets me there, reminding me of the many times he has done the same for me.

For Prime Time America, this is John Koessler.