

When a rosary does not help

A friend of mine has kindly loaned me his car – together with his driver, Ketut, – while he is in the States. This has a great boon, especially as I am in the process of packing up and moving my belongings to the new house. However, before he handed over the car, he hung a rosary from the driving mirror – whether that was because I might be driving it or whether he just wanted a rosary in his car, I am not sure – but, either way, this is one occasion when a rosary has not been a help!

When I have travelled to places I do not know, I have asked Ketut to drive, but otherwise I have driven myself, so as to leave him free. However, this constant change of driver means that the driving mirror has to be adjusted with each change - and here lies the crux of the matter, for when the mirror is adjusted the rosary gets caught in the hinge and this has been straining the mirror holder. Well, two nights ago, after another adjustment, the holder gave up the struggle and the mirror fell from the socket. Fortunately, in Bali, rear mirrors do not seem to be used very much and so I managed to reach home safely – but, I have decided that here we have an occasion when a little bit of religiosity – hanging a rosary from the mirror – is a danger and not a help and so must be dispensed with. Our religious practices are meant to help us live richly – not to help cause traffic accidents.

A few days ago, I read an article about someone, who converted from Christianity to Islam and one of the reasons he gave was that Christianity had rejected the dietary and other ritual laws of the Old Testament. He obviously thinks that authentic worship of God should include dietary and ritual laws etc., however, I noticed that here, as on other occasions, the question of why these rituals are important was not raised. A healthy spirituality needs to understand the place of ritual in our lives, for if we do not ask what ritual is intended to do, we may well think that we practice them merely because God demands it and then we are in danger of putting ritual law and practice on a par, or even in a superior position, to moral law – a dangerous position to be in and one which, in the Gospels, merited the anger of Christ.

Ritual law finds its *raison d'être* in giving us a way to show our devotion to God and by so doing it helps us to become aware and appreciate that we belong to a community – the community of all those who serve God in this way. But it is the community, which is the bottom line and not the ritual which helps it to be born. God makes us for people, not ritual. He makes us to respect people, to care for people – to slowly come to love people, for when we find ourselves amongst people, we find the road to becoming ourselves, which is also the road to God. There is an ancient hymn in Christianity: *“Ubi caritas et amor...”* *Where there is love and friendship, there is God. We can also turn this around – where there is no love and friendship, God is not present.* And it is for this reason that ritual is so important, for it brings us into the company of others and so gives the opportunity to set out on the road of life.

For the ten years before I came to Bali, I worked as Chaplain at a University in England. I was asked to become so by Bishop Crispian of Portsmouth Diocese, who himself had been a Chaplain at one time. When I asked him what a Chaplain was supposed to do, he answered, *“Loiter with intent!”* – meaning: *take any opportunity to meet people.* After my ten years, I would add: *“and gather people together”*, for this togetherness is the raw material the Holy Spirit uses to bring us into friendship and life.

Here, in Bali, I see this at work, not only in Christianity, but also in Hinduism and Islam etc. I see how the Spirit uses ritual to draw people together and how, in that “togetherness”, compassion, caring and goodness is born. I have also seen,

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here and elsewhere, how ritual, if its purpose is not understood, has been used to alienate, divide and destroy – such as in the Bali bombings – and this leads some people to say that “religion” – meaning “ritual” - should be thrown out. But without it, how will we be drawn into community? A community is not a group of people who happen casually to meet each other; a community is a group of people, who are committed to each other, who accept the good and bad in each other, who walk down the road of life with each other. This is vital, for the face of God is to be seen in the one who is true to me, not the one whom I happen to casually meet at a party.

Ritual is vital – all ritual – for it helps bind us into a people; it helps us find God – and in so doing, helps us discover who we are – for we can only know this when face to face with others. So, it has a vital place, a vital place in our “love making” - but only a place, not all places. There are times and situations, when it needs to take second place, when it becomes less good and maybe even dangerous – such as when a rosary is hung on a driving mirror.

Diary

As I write this, I am aware that today, 1st September, it is one year since I came to Bali. I came knowing only one person here, and even him I did not know very well. On Tuesday, I will be going to Sarawak for two months to teach in the seminary there, but this time I leave behind me a family, a family which has come into being over the last year. There is the BICC, or chaplaincy, family and this is part of the larger family of St Francis Xavier Parish, which has made me so much part of itself. When I look back, I wonder at all this and I catch a glimpse of what salvation is and what the Lord is bringing us to. He is bringing us together, he is bringing us into family, he is bringing us into God, for God is “family” – that is the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity.

While I have been here in Bali, I have been having trouble with my teeth. Two crowns and a bridge broke, about seven or eight months ago and I have been having preparatory treatment for implants, thanks to the kindness of my dentist – a Catholic – who told me two weeks ago that “Jesus has already paid the bill”. Last night, I went again for some last preparation before putting the new teeth in. While I was in the chair he said, “I am not going to put the new teeth in now, nor will I tell you what type of implant I have used. Then you will have to come back to Bali to be with us again!” What a nice sentiment to go away with!

So, you may not hear from me for a couple of weeks, but I will be back online when I have settled.

God bless,

Terry