

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
English 30B

## **Cleanliness**

by Thomas Hunt

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness." He said as he stepped out of the shower, he toweled off, got dressed and headed downstairs to breakfast. He had an egg white omelet with a glass of orange juice, no pulp, on the side. After breakfast, he buttoned the top button of his shirt, tightened his tie, glanced at his appearance in the mirror, washed his hands and drove to work.

He drove fifty-five in the slow lane of the freeway. His eyes wandered back and forth between the obscene bumper stickers on the car in front of him and the piles of garbage on the side of the road. Despite his slow driving he knew he would make it to work exactly as he planned at nine fifty-five. He didn't really have any good reason to be at work so early, but he liked to work on his sermons and make sure that the church was nice and clean for the day's services, which started promptly at eleven.

He parked his car in his usual spot, in the right back corner of the parking lot. It was always open, because it was quite a walk from there to the church. He didn't mind the walk through the desolate wasteland of the parking lot,

it gave him time to think about all the good work mankind had been doing down here on earth for God, and all the good work he would be doing in heaven, when God called him back home. He arrived to the church right on time at nine fifty-five. He blessed himself with holy water and went promptly to the bathroom to wash his hands.

As he walked up the stairs to his office and noticed a thin layer of dust on the rail. The janitor had been slacking off, again. He'd have to talk to him after the service about how he should take pride in his work, and how important it is to keep the house of the Lord spotless. "A dirty church is a house of sin", he always said. He'd talked with him before, but the janitor hadn't cleaned up his act. Perhaps this time he'd have to get down and dirty and threaten to fire him. Of course he could never fire him, as Jesus always taught to give everyone a second chance, but he would surely threaten him. Enough was enough. He had gotten dust all over his hands climbing the stairs, but fortunately the package of handy-wipes in his desk drawer would make quick work of that.

He found his sermon on the computer, right where he left it. It was in My Documents, in a directory named Sermons, in a sub directory named after the date it was to be used with a sub header of the general message of the

sermon. Today's sermon was for the baptismal mass and the message was one of forgiveness, explaining how baptism wipes away the sins of the child and gives the child a clean start in the world. He had been using the sermon for the past few years, and had been making small changes here and there, but he felt that this version was absolutely perfect and he looked forward to reading it at mass that day. He double-clicked on the sermon, then printed it out on his laser printer.

After he had read through the sermon a few times, checking once again for any grammatical errors or unfamiliar words, he felt it was ready and placed it in his folder. He then decided to read over the local newspaper. He opened his right desk drawer and pulled out a pair of small white gloves, which he then put on. He then picked up the newspaper and began to read. He enjoyed the newspaper because of it's positive outlook on the community and because of it's excellently written family section, which contained articles and letters about how to live a more spiritual life. He despised the newspaper because of what it did to his hands. It was printed on very cheap paper and with some disgusting ink. Ever since that day when he was covered with ink and had spent twenty minutes in the restroom trying to scrub every last speck of black

ink from his pale alabaster skin, he had refused to even pick up the paper without wearing gloves. He had to throw out the gloves and buy a new pair about once a week because the ink buildup would get so bad he would fear it seeping through the gloves and on to his fingers. But on the whole, the newspaper was a good thing and if he stopped reading it, he would miss it dearly.

He finished reading his newspaper and checked his watch. "Oh my!" he thought, "it's almost time for mass, I'd better get dressed". He put the paper down on the desk, turned his white gloves inside out and threw them in the trash can. They were looking a little less than pure today and he felt it was best to dispose of them, rather than to take a chance. He went back downstairs, slipped into the bathroom to wash his hands and then darted across the lobby to the walk-in closet where he kept his robes. He picked out a white robe and a red and orange sash and began getting dressed. He carefully removed his shirt and tie and placed them in the closet on a wooden hanger. He then donned the robe, and put on the sash. He walked back across the lobby to the bathroom and checked his appearance in the mirror. He adjusted the sash until it was perfectly lined up and then, noticing a speck of fuzz from the sash on his hands, he washed them thoroughly with soap, making

sure no other pieces of fuzz had surreptitiously attached themselves to his person. He didn't see any other pieces, so he walked out into the lobby to begin greeting the early worshipers.

He checked his watch, it was ten thirty five. He was right on time. The first worshiper arrived at ten forty. It was Mr. Carlyle, a regular at church and a leading member of the church's senior activities group. He greeted the priest with a hearty smile and said "Howdy Father Mark. How are you doing this fine day?"

"I'm doing just fine, Bob" Mark said, taking his hand and shaking it firmly. "You're the first one here today, congratulations."

"Ah shucks, I didn't plan to be the first one, I just wanted to get here on time, ya know? Thair just isn't as much traffic on the way here as there once was, I guess. I suppose at least this way I get to choose where I sit, right?"

"Right you are Bob, go on in and sit wherever ya like." Mark said.

"Thank ya much, Father." Mr. Carlyle said as he crossed the lobby and headed into the church, removing his cowboy hat and stopping at the baptismal to bless himself. After the blessing he continued on into the empty church,

reaching a pew in the middle, he stopped, kneeled, made the sign of the cross, then slid into the pew and began reading a small bible he had brought with him. Mark smiled as he watched the old man take his seat. The business about the traffic was nonsense. The old man was always first, it didn't matter if it was snowing, hailing, raining, or even if the Super Bowl was on. Mr. Carlyle was always the first one here.

Mark turned around and went back to the center of the lobby. He greeted the rest of the regulars with smiles, handshakes, and the occasional hug. He was a kind preacher and he loved his flock. Well, he loved most of them anyway. There was one family he really couldn't stand. The Gundersons. And they were walking up to the church right now. It wasn't that he hated them, because Mark was a religious man and he didn't hate anybody, it was just that the Gundersons weren't like any normal family. They had moved to the community a few months ago, and Mark had sighed when he learned they were Catholic, and that it wouldn't be long before they'd be rolling into his church. The Gundersons were definitely lower class, but that wasn't what made them undesirable in Mark's eyes. There were dozens of lower class families in Mark's congregation, and they were all fine upstanding Christians. In fact, several

of them had extended invitations for Mark to dine with them and several times Mark had graciously accepted. But the Gundersons, they were different. While the rest of the flock understood the solemn nature of church and would dress up in their finest clothes every Sunday to come to the Lord's house and pray, the Gundersons always arrived wearing ratty t-shirts and torn up jeans. Mark supposed that they had no money to buy new clothes, but he saw no reason why they couldn't sew up the holes and at least wash them once a week before coming to church. Also the Gundersons had a certain smell about them that led one to believe that they had never take a bath in their life, and to them a shower is something you threw for a bride before a wedding.

Mark's train of thought was brutally derailed when Bart Gunderson walked right up to him and grabbed hold of his hand and started shaking it viscously like he was trying to tear Mark's arm off. "Howya doin' there?" Bart asked the stunned preacher.

Mark usually tried to avoid physical contact with the Gundersons, but with his hand stuck in Bart's vice grip, he had little choice in the matter. "I'm doing fine, Mr. Gunderson, how are you today?"

"Doin' gr'at fath'r. Just gr'at. I ev'n got a tr'at for ya. I brat ma naw grandsan to be bapt. . . baptaze . . . well, ta be blassed by ya. Haws dat fa excit'n?"

"That's very exciting Bart, where is the young'in?" Mark responded, trying not to mimic Bart's countrified tone.

"H's raigth hare fath'r." Bart said, motioning to his teenage daughter, who a few months ago had been the talk of the town, her being pregnant out of wedlock and all, but now she was the spitting image of the Madonna with child, and no one ever passed another bad word about her again. "H's naam is Rufus McGee Gunderson. Ya laiike him?" Bart was just overflowing with pride in his young bastard Grandson.

"I sure do, Mr. Gunderson, I sure do." Mark said. "Why don't you folks take him inside, and Maggie" He said to the teenager, "you be sure to sit in the front row, for the baptism and all, okay?"

She smiled shyly at the preacher and said "'Kay Fathar Mark."

The Gundersons, Bart, Faye, Joey, Maggie and Little Rufus smiled once more at Mark and made their way inside. They each stopped to bless themselves before they entered the church. Mark watched them, wondering if the holy water

could cleanse them of any dirt. He saw that it made no difference on Bart and his white skin remained ever brown, even after he dipped his hand in the water and made the sign of the cross. Mark sighed, closed the front doors to the church, and went into the bathroom to check his appearance once again, and to try to get a quick hand washing in, before the service started.

Mark finished washing and dried his hands using a paper towel from a roll mounted next to the sink. He walked back into the lobby and popped his head inside the door to the church and signaled to the organist. She began playing the processional hymn. Mark picked up his incense burner, lit it and began walking slowly toward the pulpit. The congregation rose as he walked in. Mark smiled at them and they smiled back. Today the largest grins belonged to the Gundersons. They were the only ones with a new family member waiting to join the flock, and thus they were the only ones sitting in the front row. The joy of this honor was clear just by looking at their grinnin' faces, especially Bart, who despite the fact that nobody knew who Little Rufus's father was, you'd be damned sure that you knew Bart was his grandpappy. Mark walked slowly by the front pew, swinging his incense burner back and forth, hoping that the sweet smelling smoke would camouflage some

of the odor of the Gundersons. Today was not his lucky day however, as the odor of the incense was a pale Jerry Quarrie, unable to go even close to ten rounds with the Champ, a brutally foul Muhammad Gunderson.

Mark took his place behind the altar and began reading his sermon for the day, on baptismal, and what a special day it is, as we are to welcome young Rufus Gunderson to our flock. The congregation was docile and content as they listened to his sermon. No one was jumping up for joy, but then again no one was falling asleep or walking out. This pleased Mark very much and he knew that this sermon was truly one of the best ones he had ever written.

When the bulk of the mass was over, Mark signaled to the Choir leader and they began singing the baptismal hymn. All of the congregation joined in the beautiful music, letting their united voice sing up to the heavens. While they sang, Mark walked behind one of the large tapestries hanging down from the ceiling to the sink and began preparing the baptismal water. Mark turned on the cold nozzle and hot nozzles and began filling the shallow tub. Then, he had a thought. It was quite a chilly day, even inside the church and he didn't want the water to be too cold for the little tyke. He turned off both nozzles and emptied the tub. He then turned on only the hot nozzle and

went back out to the church to sing the rest of the song with his congregation. The hymn was "Joy Joy Joy", one of Mark's favorites. He sang along and clapped his hands, as did the rest of the congregation. He was so happy up there and his flock could sense his joy. They all stood up, clapped and sang along with their preacher, a good man who had been their spiritual guide for neigh on five years now. The song finished and Mark remembered he forgot the baptismal water in the back. He dashed back and carried it out to the altar. He went back to his podium and asked Maggie and Rufus Gunderson to please come up on stage with him. He failed to notice that the tub was steaming.

Maggie proudly climbed the stairs to the stage. The audience, imbued with joy from the singing, smiled and clapped for the young woman and her little child. Little Rufus, clutched tightly in Maggie's arms, smiled and laughed as though he could feel the happiness in the room. His little mouth hung open and he was blowing spit bubbles as though he were a major league pitcher warming up for the big day with a half a pack of gum. Mark glanced over at them and thought to himself, "Maybe I was wrong about the Gundersons. Maggie doesn't seem that bad, and Bart sure is proud of his new grandson, regardless of his somewhat spurious origins. That is a noble family that can forgive

their daughter's transgressions so quickly. Perhaps I was wrong. . . .perhaps I was wrong." But Mark still thought they were dirty and dirt was the one mark of the devil he hated above all else. He had been avoiding sin his whole life and hated to be confronted with dirt's sinful nature. Mark walked over to the altar and Maggie, her smile ten feet wide, handed the baby to him. Mark recited the baptismal rite from memory and placed the baby next to the baptismal tub. He dipped the ladle into the water. It filled with the boiling hot liquid. He looked out at his congregation, and saw Bart's enormous grin. He glanced over at Maggie, and saw that the girl could not get more excited. Even the Choir leader, Mrs. McGaffe, a normally uninterested worshipper was rapt with attention. He looked down at little Rufus, the young child was cute as a button. But he was absolutely covered in dirt. He lifted the ladle above the child's head and as he began to pour he said slowly "Remember Little Rufus. . . . .Cleanliness. . . . .is next to Godliness."