

December 17, 2017 The Shoeshine Homily: After a long, protracted struggle, the North African country of Algeria earned its long sought after independence from France in 1962. Ahmed Ben Bella was one of the intrepid leaders in the fight for freedom and later became the first president of the newly liberated state. Tellingly, one of his first acts as President was to outlaw an enormously popular trade and an important source of income for the poor: shoe shining. The painful memory of native Algerians kneeling at the feet of the French colonialists was too upsetting for Ben Bella. In his mind, it was a task reserved for slaves and not that free persons.

In the third century of the Christian era, a prominent rabbi, Joshua Ben Levi, gave instructions to his disciples. "Every service which a slave performs for his master, a disciple will perform for his teacher. However, there is one notable exception, "No disciple is required to untie his master's sandals". Such a service would be too demeaning and undignified for a Jew who enjoys a life of freedom.

John the Baptist considered himself unworthy to perform the simple task of a slave in the service of the Messiah. In John's gospel, we read, "But there is one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am unworthy to untie". (Jn. 1:27) The mission of John the Baptist is to prepare people to welcome Jesus. He is called to testify to the Light, and the Light is Christ. Once he completes his mission, John exits the stage and is not heard from again.

On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples of his intention to wash their feet. Peter was dismayed if not infuriated. "Master, you are going to wash my feet?" "You will never wash my feet!" (Jn.13:6, 8) And Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me". Simon Peter said to him, "Master, not only my feet, but my hands and head as well". (Jn. 13:9)

One often thinks of a humble person as rather dull and joyless. His demeanor often seems a little too solemn. But one can also be exuberant in serving the Lord, even when performing the most menial of tasks. Those who are deep in the faith, "rejoice in the Lord always". (1 Thess. 5:16) They carry out their duties, not begrudgingly, but in a spirit of gratitude.

The words of a popular song from days gone by may help to illustrate my point. In 1953, the Red Foley Band recorded the song, "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy". Shoe shine boys worked for a pittance and were often not appreciated; here are the words of the song:

Have you ever passed the corner of fourth and Grand? Where a little ball o' rhythm has a shoe shine stand.

People gather round and they clap their hands. He's a great big bundle of joy. He pops the boogie woogie rag. The Chattanooga shoe shine boy.

He charges you a nickel just to shine one shoe. He makes the oldest kind of leather look like new. You feel as though you want to dance when he gets through.

He's a great big bundle of joy. He pops the boogie woogie rag. The Chattanooga shoe shine boy."

In their reflections on the mission of John the Baptist, many of the Church Fathers emphasized his humility. "He must increase, I must decrease", declared John. No task is unworthy of a disciple of Jesus, "who emptied Himself and took the form of a slave". (Phil.2:7) If you should ever witness someone who, while doing a menial task, is singing a happy tune, know that he has the spirit of the Living God in his heart.

Amen!