

## 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

They are properly called “cotton swabs,” but most of us know them, whether they belong to this particular brand or not, as Q-tips. It says on the top edge of the box, “A variety of uses.” When I read that, I couldn’t really think of all that many things I had ever used a Q-tip for. But the box tells us what to do with our cotton swabs: they are the versatile ultimate beauty tool for safely and precisely applying, blending, touching up and removing cosmetics. Really. I did not know that. You’re probably thinking, thank heavens. But, it’s also good for first aid, to gently apply ointments and creams; and for electronics, to clean and dust even hard-to-reach spaces; for baby care, to delicately care for sensitive areas. And for household use: for all household cleaning. Although I think if you used them for all household cleaning, you’d better buy a pretty big box, because one Q-tip doesn’t cover a very big area. These little swabs do indeed have a variety of uses, and they have one big non-use, one thing for which they are a big no-no, so much so that it states this explicitly on the box. Q-tips are not for consumption; but the box does not say that. Q-tips are not meant to be used as toys for animals or children; but it does not state that on the box. What are we not supposed to ever do with these swabs? The one thing for which they are probably still most commonly used: DO NOT INSERT SWAB INTO EAR CANAL. If used to clean ears, and mind you they’re not recommending it, only saying that if you do such a crazy thing, then stroke swab gently around the outer surface of the ear only. Well, I can get a washcloth around the outer surface, so thanks but no thanks. Now, I will not deny that the cotton swab’s most tempting use is bad and even dangerous use. I am one who has gone to the ear doctor many times to clean out that ear canal, and I know the lecture well: Keep those things away from your ears. Never mind what we think it would be good to use for, never mind what we’re tempted to use it for, follow the directions on the box—use it as the manufacturer meant for it to be used, not as we might like to use it.

Like cotton swabs, most things in life have a variety of potential uses, and some of those uses are intended by the manufacturer, and some of them very much aren’t. There are numerous aspects to the institution of marriage, for instance. People get married in order to enjoy constant companionship; they get married to enjoy the on-going support of another person, for mutual assistance in running a household or paying the bills; they get married so that they can declare their love to the world around them, they get married for tax purposes. These do not necessarily contradict the real purpose of marriage, but neither do they bring out the truest purpose of marriage. To know the real purpose we have to go to the designer of marriage, and listen to what he had to say about this institution. God revealed of marriage, that it is for the unity of the couple and for having a family; we also know that when both parties to the marriage are baptized, that it

introduces sanctifying grace into the relationship, and hence into the souls of the marriage partners. In the Gospel passage from Luke, we saw the Sadducees as confused about marriage as they were about the afterlife. They saw the afterlife as a continuation of this life: what we do here being what we do in eternity, with the same relationships and works as we had here; Jesus knows that the afterlife is an elevation of this life; for those who choose it, a perfection of what was begun here. Our natural lives and our supernatural lives overlap, in a sense: the life of the resurrection actually begins at baptism, so that while we live our lives on earth of laboring at work and loving those around us, we're setting the stage for eternal life by acquiring sanctifying graces, by increasing over time our capacity to know and love God, by increasing our capacity to enjoy the beatific vision.

Heaven is going to be different from this life, in a lot of ways. Instead of gaining sanctifying grace, we will live with the results of what we gained as we prepared ourselves, here, for eternity. One definite component of heaven, along with living in the presence of God, is the communion of saints: all those in heaven will enjoy a unity which is beyond like that known here on earth, where our unions are often so tenuous and challenged by sin. And so companionship remains in heaven: we retain our individuality, and we will know others as individuals as well. Another component will be the worship of God, but not sacraments: sacraments belong to this age; there will be no need for baptism, for all people will be living in Christ; there will be no need for confession, because there will be no sin; there will be no anointing of the sick, because there will be no illness. And likewise, there will be no marriage: not because there won't be companionship, and not because married couples won't know each other in heaven. That would be a pretty bizarre twist on the communion of saints indeed, if we enjoyed the companionship of all the saints in heaven except for the people that we knew and loved the most during our time on earth. What it means is that companionship, while being an aspect of marriage, isn't the ultimate purpose of marriage: grace is. And in the example given by the Sadducees themselves, the woman who died after having seven husbands, all of them legitimate relationships, will not be setting up house with any one of them in a continuation of their natural life. Rather, assuming all of them are in heaven, they will enjoy perfect unity by living together in God; it will be a continuation of the supernatural life which will be known by those who are deemed worthy to attain to it in the coming age.

The message of the Church then is a pretty simple one: order things rightly. Use them according to the directions of the Creator, who knows how they are best used. In the passage from the second book of Maccabees, the brothers who are being tortured for refusing to go against God's law recognize the true value and the true purpose of God's gifts. Holding out his hands, the third

brother says “It was from Heaven that I received these; for the sake of his laws I disdain them; from him I hope to receive them again.” Think about these hands; we received them from God. And we can use them to feed the hungry, or we can use them to slap another person in anger. Consider the tongue which gives us speech: it can be used to sing a Gloria to God, and it can be used to spew hatred against someone who is not like us. These eyes can be used to admire beauty; they can also be used to feed our lust. These ears can take in beautiful, harmonious sounds; but they can also seek out and listen to gossip. Know what they’re for. They come with directions; these are the commandments, the laws of the Church, and the precepts of faith. Our bodies have a variety of uses, but as is the case with the Q-tips, some of these uses are expressly contrary to the will of the Creator, some of them are of no consequence either way, and some are precisely the reason that God gave us these gifts.

The Sadducees, and many others before and after them, thought that life boiled down to the here and now; but life is for more than the here and now, it’s more for the hereafter, and the now is when we lay claim to what the hereafter will be. And just as we need to know what this life is really for, we should know what the sacraments are for, and use them according to the directions: keep the baptismal promises, observe all the laws of chastity both within marriage and outside of marriage, receive communion worthily and with a proper disposition; make good, integral confessions based not on what *we* feel is sinful behavior, but on what *God* has revealed is sinful behavior. We know what all our hands and eyes and ears and tongues can do; now we must use them in ways which please God, serve others, and benefit *our* ultimate purpose and goals. Some uses of the body help to achieve our final goal; some uses cost us our final goal. We are smart to learn which is which, and then follow the directions accordingly.

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