

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time.
October 22 & 23, 2016

Fr. Andy Szebenyi, SJ
All Saints Parish, Syr., NY

My Dear Brothers and Sisters.

We all heard the parable Jesus addressed to the Pharisees about the self-righteous Pharisee and the tax collector. As they were praying at the temple, the latter went home justified, that is accepted by God's love and mercy, but not the former. Just for our understanding, what was the difference between them that one was justified and the other was not? Simply stated, the difference was that the Pharisee was arrogant while the tax collector was humble. The Pharisee relied on himself and the law, the tax collector humbly put his trust into God's love and mercy.

At the time when the earth was still the center of the universe in the 16th century, and traveling from Europe to other, hitherto unknown continents was the task of the day, some conquistadores discovered an island that has been separated from all other places by a very large distance. The indigenous people on the island had no way to contact other islanders or the continent for hundreds of years. Consequently marriages between close relatives were very common, including brother and sister marriages. Under normal conditions such marriages are called incestuous and are not allowed to take place. The simple biological reason for the avoidance of any form of incest, that is any form of inbreeding, was probably because of the experience that marriages between close relatives resulted in many forms of genetic disorders in the offspring. It was, of course, not known at that time, that marriage between close relatives increases the probability of rendering harmful recessive genes to become homozygous and appear in the offspring as genetic deformities and sickness. But on the other hand, if inbreeding is maintained for many generations, natural selection reduces the harmful genes to their low mutation rates and because of that the appearance of disorders also becomes rare. The other side of the story is that such genetic inbreeding did not occur in the European gene-pool and consequently the genetic load could there increase without harmful results. To maintain this situation it was necessary to avoid any form of inbreeding, that is, any form of marriage between close relatives. Such relationships were labeled incestuous and sinful. Meanwhile, when the conquistadores arrived to this island, they fooled around with the natives women, and brought their accumulated harmful genetic load back into the gene-pool of the islanders. Of course, as a result, the genetic deformities from their European gene-pool all came out in the second generation. Experiencing this, they said, 'You can see how God punishes you for your evil incestuous habits! I believe, there is a great deal of self-righteous arrogance in such a statement. And you know my Sisters and Brothers, arrogance is also a great deal of ignorance.

I remember what Dan Berrigan, a Jesuit priest, who has been much involved in matters of social justice, once said when asked what he would do if he won the 30 million dollars lottery. He said that he would buy a large ship and gather as many native Americans as he could, and then they would go across the ocean and discover Spain.

My Sisters and Brothers, all we have are gifts from God our Creator. Our very life is a gift of God. And the greatest gifts among the so many are our faith, hope, and love. If we want to be real and true we must also be humble and pray as the tax collector did, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' Amen.