

## THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – 11/5/17

My dear people of God:

I wish to start our reflection today with these two pleadings: First, please pray for me and for all priests so that we will practice what we preach and so that we will not use the church nor manipulate the people to satisfy our vested interests. Second, please pray for your fellow parishioners so that they too will become grounded on humility, and thus; reach out to others in joyful service to the Lord.

Having said such, allow me to go to our Responsorial Psalm: **“In you, Lord, I have found my peace”**.

By interiorizing the responsorial psalm, we will be able to get a good grasp of the good news from Jesus’ lips about honesty and humility, joyful service to our neighbor, and a humble/joyful submission to God.

I wish to paint/describe the English word “Peace” or the Hebrew word “SHALOM” in the Hebrew way. The Jews of old would not describe SHALOM without involving the concept of ABBA(Father).

In the picture I am painting, there is a bearded father sitting on his rocking chair. The father is holding his one-year old child on top of his lap. The little boy is jumping while he is on top of his father’s lap. The father then pretends to allow the boy to fall between his thighs by spreading them. The boy would not fall because the father would close his legs and the boy would clutch on the beard of the father with delight, while he babbles, “Abbababa, Abbababa” in a gibberish fashion. He knows that his father (ABBA) would not allow him to get hurt. He is at PEACE, CONTENTED, AND SECURE. They have a good and solid bonding.

I want you to keep this picture in your mind: a picture of delight between father and child. And this is how our picture of God and us should be.

Please pray that every priest would find his delight in his model: Jesus, the only High Priest, the only Teacher, the only Master.

Let me go now to the First Reading: We heard that Yahweh, in the Book of Malachi, admonished the priests of the Temple to be true to their calling. The worship in the Temple is to be pure and according to the instructions handed down from God. Their teaching is to be true and they are not to lead the people astray otherwise they will quite definitely incur God’s anger.

Pray for me and all priests, so that, as ministers of the New Covenant we must pay attention to what we are doing. We must celebrate the liturgy in accordance with the instructions handed down to us. We must do so in a way which is worthy of the dignity of this great sacrament of God's love. We must do so with real reverence. I want to celebrate every Mass as if, it was my first Mass; as if, it was my last Mass; as if, it was my only Mass.

Saint Paul in today's Second Reading, in his first letter to the Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13 recalls the love and care he has shown to them:

*“We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.*

*We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers”.*

Today's second reading unleashes a challenge to me and all priests: We are supposed to live up to what we were ordained for. We are called to live by love, love in its deepest sense.

Jesus gave the supreme example of the real meaning of love in His life, death and resurrection. And He calls us to share personally in His selfless experience. If I am to be truly an alter *Christus*, I must in turn undergo a certain dying to my ambitions and non-priestly aspirations and the perks that go with the priesthood.

Allow me invite you to watch the movie, *“A Man for All Seasons”*. This is about Saint Thomas More, patron saint of lawyers and government employees. Sir Thomas More was Lord Chancellor of England during the reign of King Henry VIII who was lusting for Anne Boleyn. History teaches us that Henry VIII wanted to make her his paramour (as he did with her sister) and eventually promised to marry her. But he was married to Catherine of Aragon. So, he asked Sir Thomas More to endorse his petition for annulment to Pope Clement VII. The Lord Chancellor refused and was sent to prison at the Tower of London. A series of events would lead to England's monarch to detach himself from Rome and to start the Church of England which is the present day, **Anglican Church**. Until now, the head of the Anglican Church is not the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is currently, Justin Welby. The current supreme head is the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. She is the head of all Anglican Churches in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and in other countries where there are churches under the Anglican Communion, including the USA.

Now, going back to the movie: there is a scene in which Margaret, Sir Thomas More's daughter, pleads with her father to stop opposing king Henry VIII and swear to the Act of Succession. Only in this way can he save his life and get out of jail. But Sir Thomas refuses to agree to something he believes is wrong:

*“ . . . if we have to choose to be human at all, then perhaps we must stand fast a little, even at the risk of being heroes.”*

When Margaret still begged him to compromise: *“Haven't you done as much as God can reasonably want?”* her father gave this answer: *“Well.. finally.. it isn't a matter of reason; finally it's a matter of love.”*

In the end, as a priest, I shall be judged on that *standard of love*. And for that matter, all of us. Our own efforts to bring direction and meaning to the “animated aimlessness” of our lives will, if touched by the love of God and expressed through love of our fellow human beings, have an eternal value.

Besides the movie, please read through the internet the letter that Sir Thomas wrote to Margaret. When he wrote that letter, he was already aware that soon he will be beheaded. This letter is a real treasure for those who struggle to be good, whether one is a public servant or an ordinary daily wage earner. I find it so profound and edifying.

Now, to the gospel: The Catechism of the Catholic Church (number 2367) beautifully puts it this way: *“spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God.”*

Today's Gospel presents us with a bit of a dilemma since Christ forbids His disciples from using the title father or teacher and yet we find ourselves using these titles all the time.

As always, we must look at the context and then look below the surface. The context is the teaching of Jesus about practicing what we preach. He points out that the Pharisees do not practice what they preach and He is instructing His disciples to be sure that they do not follow this example.

The Pharisees relish on the thought that the people call them Rabbi or Master; but these are titles to be earned and not claimed as a right. Anyone who wishes to be called Rabbi, must fully live up to the title. He must have something to teach, something worth communicating to others, something people want to hear. All the more so if he claims to be preaching the message of God to the world.

These titles of Father, Teacher and Master strictly speaking only belong to God. Only He can be called Father since He is the unique Creator; only He can be called Master since it is solely to Him that we all owe allegiance. He is the only true Teacher since

all revelation comes from God and is communicated to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

It is this basic attitude that Jesus was speaking about. He was concerned that the Pharisees did not have the correct attitude towards the title they carried, worse, they never had any deep and right relationship with His ABBA. How can He allow them to claim such a precious title?

We, too, should have a right and deep relationship with God and especially those with leadership positions in the Christian community. We should not interpose ourselves between God and the people. We must acknowledge from whom these titles originate, and we ought to walk in His way with great trepidation and in all humility.

Hypocrisy is the great sin which Jesus is constantly accusing the Pharisees of. The greatest tragedy of all would be for His own followers to fall into the same trap. This is why He stresses the point.

The trouble was that the Pharisees were seeing God's words but were not keeping God's words. They were just putting on a show of holiness so that others could be enlightened as to what wonderful people they were. Jesus' point was that the Pharisees were making religion about themselves, not about God.

The Catholic priest is ordained to continue the loving work of the Father. His fatherhood comes from God and must point to God. I am called father because the mandate of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is to make the Father's love real for His people. When I don't do that, then I don't deserve to be called father.

It is easy for a priest to use his position in the Church to point to himself instead of pointing to God. When that happens, priesthood is replaced by a sort of demagoguery. The priest acts as though he is the source of wisdom for all. People then look to him as their guide instead of to God. Sadly, there are many people who are so concerned with following a particular priest that they feel abandoned when that priest is no longer in their parish or no longer holds a position of authority in the Church. They made too much of the individual and not enough of the One SUPREME HIGH PRIEST the individual was pointing towards.

St. Paul ran into this difficulty after he left Corinth. The people there were divided into groups. One group said that they belonged to Paul, who brought them the faith. A second group said that they belonged to Apollos, a Christian missionary who came after Paul and who nurtured their faith. Paul wrote the Corinthians that we all belong to God, not to this or that individual. He reminded them in 1 Corinthians 3:6, *"I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant, but it was God who gave the growth."*

The basic message of today's gospel is that everything we do must be about Jesus Christ, never about ourselves. We have to understand that we are His servants. We, priests must manifest God's Fatherhood, not ourselves, for we share only in His fatherhood. We and the parish catechists are part of the teaching ministry of Christ, and are teaching for His glory, not teaching for our own glory. In all things, God must be exalted. If that means at times stepping back while another continues the Work of God more effectively than we can, so be it. It is better to humble ourselves and be exalted by God than to exalt ourselves and be humbled by God. That is the conclusion of today's Gospel. We pray today that we might have the humility to be servants of the Lord. Amen.