

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

**November 5, 2023
THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

Malachi 1:14 - 2:2,8-10
1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13
Matthew 23:1-12

God will curse those leaders who are unfaithful.
Paul gave of himself as well as the Gospel message.
Religious leaders must practice what they preach.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

You may be tired of hearing this, but I need to repeat it: Matthew is writing around the year 85 CE, after the destruction of the Temple and of most of the sacred symbols of the Jewish faith. His community is made up of Jews who believe in Jesus but who are Jews nonetheless. They know of no other way of being faithful to God other than the way Jesus lived: as an observant Jew, faithful to the Law of Moses in its most spiritual meaning and faithful to the God-given institutions of Israel. Matthew writes for Christian Jews who need to find their way in this new reality: without a Temple, without a sacrificial priesthood, without the stability of an ordered worship in Jerusalem. A new class of leaders is emerging: the rabbis. What are the leaders of the Christian Jews to do with those styles of leadership that are gradually assuming all the privileges formerly given to the cultic priests at the Temple in Jerusalem?

Matthew reaches back into the tradition preserved in his community and finds the teachings of Jesus to address these issues. Christian-Jewish leaders are not to assume positions of prestige and of privilege!

Their Master never called himself a *Rabbi* (which means *privileged one*)! How can the leaders among this community come to have allowed themselves to be called by this title? When Matthew hears the word *father*, he hears in it the Aramaic word *ABBA*, which Jesus used to address his Father in heaven! Can such a title ever be tolerated by a mere disciple? *Sat on Moses' seat*: The past tense indicates that their role has been put aside now that Jesus has taught as Moses did. The Mosaic teachers have been dethroned. Their teaching was from God; it is to be honored. Does *all* that they taught make sense to this community that still respects and practices the prescriptions of the law?

All are *disciples* of the one teacher, Jesus Christ. Anyone who teaches in the Christian community is a spokesperson for Christ, who is the only one qualified to teach in the name of God. All teaching in the community must be derived from Jesus' teaching. No need to invent new teachings now that the definitive Teacher has been here! The title *father* crept back into Christianity despite the prohibition of its use given by Matthew. Greek-Christian communities did not have this sensitivity that we see in the Jewish community of Matthew. In the Eastern Churches, the bishop often was called a *pope*, or a *father*, to his people. In the West, this Greek-sounding word was eventually reserved for the Bishop of Rome.

Malachi:

A book of prophecy (a kind of exhortation to moral reform uttered in the name of God) written sometime after 515 BCE, after the rebuilding of the Temple upon returning from the Exile, Malachi presents six oracles as guidance for the leaders of worship in the re-established religious institutions of Israel. The name *Malachi* perhaps is not a proper name at all but a variation on the Hebrew words for *my messenger* (*mal'aki*). The First Oracle (1:2-5) affirms that God indeed has a preferential love for Israel. In the Second Oracle (1:6-2:9), the prophet utters the harshest possible condemnation for those cultic priests who have been offering as sacrifices those animals that are blind or lame instead of those that are prescribed by the law. The laypersons who provide these sacrifices are also offensive to God. Finally, the priests are condemned for giving false instruction to the people. The issue is *lack of faithfulness to the Covenant*.

Thessalonians:

Paul not only instructed the Church at Thessalonica, performing a male role as a rabbi or teacher, but he went so far as to *nurse* these people, performing a female role also, so much did he love them. He gave of his very self, like a *wet nurse* who gives of the substance of her body, so that they might know how much God loves them. Earning his own living by exercising a manual trade among them, he wished not to be a burden so that the Gospel would not *cost* them anything. In writing to this Church, Paul wants them to remember that the apostles' only motivation in bringing the Gospel was love and nothing else. In this way, they were to know that God loved them in the same way as the apostles had loved them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can we best honor the vocation and the ministry of our priests without placing them on some pedestal that will put them outside the reach of the community they are meant to serve? Do priests and deacons and bishops need to be *above* the community of the faithful in order to exercise an effective leadership? Is there some way they can be *among* the people and still be effective leaders?
2. Can you describe a Christian community where the clergy are truly acting *in persona Christi* when they preside at the liturgy and are still being humble members of the assembly? How can we preserve our authentic tradition of having the leaders represent Christ without their having to assume positions of privilege outside the rank-and-file?
3. Do you think some men have become priests primarily because they felt it was a way to rise above the other members of their family? Do you suppose that there are fewer priests today partly because the role of priest is not so honored any more in society? If we were to dress the priests up again in all their former finery, cassocks, and surplices, do you think we would have more vocations to the priesthood?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Pray for priests. Pray for your parish priest(s). Talk to a priest in a supportive way about his vocation in the Church. Tell him how much his ministry means to the Church. Tell your family, your children, what the ordained priesthood means to you and to the whole Church.

PRAYER

God of power and mercy, only with your help can we offer you fitting service and praise. May we live the faith we profess and trust your promise of eternal life.

Opening Prayer, 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

The role of presider at the Liturgy of the Christian Community gives a great deal of prominence to the one who presides. Facing the people in liturgical attire, on the other side of the altar, even mounting a throne-like seat at the head the assembly, places the presider in a position of eminence and of great prestige. Visibility in the center of the community gathered around the table and altar of Eucharist is very important. Most of those who preside among the faithful are truly humbled by this kind of public exposure.

They need to keep reminding themselves that they are acting *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. The presider is there to make Christ visible to the Church. The presider personifies Christ who is the head of the body. We work through symbols: words and gestures that represent the divine in the midst of the human. Just as Jesus was the visible incarnation of God in the world of men and women, so the Church participates in a sacramental way in making Christ present and visible in the assembly of faith. By way of analogy, the presider is another Christ, in an assembly that is the very body of Christ.

Unfortunately, some of the clergy have taken their roles too literally. They have assumed a rank and a status in the society of the Church which seems to have granted them privileges and exemptions that do not apply to the other members of the Church, the lay members. Some priests claim tax exemptions even when making purchases for personal purposes. Always first in line at a parish potluck supper may be a minor matter, but it speaks of privilege that may be offensive to hardworking mothers and fathers who deserve far greater honors than we usually give them.

A young priest said to me several years ago, "At that restaurant, they know how to serve priests. Let's go there!" I knew him well enough to "go up one side and down the other" on him because of that remark. "How do priests get served that is unlike the way all of God's people get served? The only thing we are more deserving of is the cross of Jesus Christ - his suffering and death! The cross and crucifixion are all that we deserve as priests!"

Clergy privilege has cost us more than it has been worth. It has earned us the contempt of those who have been hurt by the Church and by its ministers. We do not need to claim any privilege on earth, nor to accept any that is offered. To go to heaven is enough.

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