

Homily: Nov. 5, 2023

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

Today, we celebrate God, who loves us and has mercy on us who are good but limited and weak human beings. We often have difficulty accepting ourselves as this mixture of good and not-so-good—a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Thankfully, our God is compassionate. Therefore, we call upon God, “Lord, have mercy!”

Prophet Malachi chastises the priests for not keeping God’s way by showing partiality and violating the covenant. People will deem them contemptible. Our painful church experience, especially since the US Conference of Bishops in 2002 declared zero tolerance for church personnel who have done sexual misconduct and abuse. Our church lost many followers but also gained respect in many eyes whenever church and religious leaders were honest and opened their books to trustworthy legal authorities. Church leaders began to take responsibility for behavior that broke precious and expected trust between church leaders and lay Catholics. Much healing has occurred, and better training of new church leaders occurs in many places. More healing and training improvement must continue. Honesty about cases of abuse and care for the victims has been critical in this whole process. As St. Paul said in the second reading, “The word of God is now at work in you who believe” (1 Thes 2:13).

In the Gospel, we hear Jesus criticize the religious leaders, too. “For they preach but do not practice [what they preach],” Jesus calls them out for burdening the people and for making a big show of themselves. They seek honor and glory.

Jesus, who declared himself a servant rather than one to be served, reminded leaders that they are the greatest when they are servants. People will respect humble leaders but be disappointed in leaders who exalt themselves and seek their glory.

As a priest, I see Jesus firmly and seriously reminding me through this Gospel that I must walk the talk and live consistent with what I preach. I usually perceive my homilies to be for both you and me. As a human being, I am your brother and do not wish to consider myself, humanly speaking, as better than you. I am humbled when I realize God called me to be a priest and leader in his church and my Order of the Holy Cross. Being humble means that who I am and what I have materially and as skills and good personality qualities are not my own.

God gave me life through my parents. Through their parenting and the input of many people, I have become a human being who is still a mixed bag. I have strengths and gifts, but I also have flaws and weaknesses. Thanks to Pope Francis, I can say along with him, “I am a sinner.” Being humble does not mean beating myself up. Instead, it means recognizing AND accepting oneself as a beloved mixed bag, primarily good qualities, and some weak elements, yet BELOVED IN GOD’S EYES.

I realize, for instance, that since childhood, as the first of seven children, I grew up thinking I was special. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents, so I learned many ways to be remarkable. I did everything to be a well-behaved kid and tried not to make any mistakes. I played the game of comparison—by being the student with the best grades in my class. I played music and had a stamp collection—all to win the favor of my parents and many others.

When I faced ordination to the diaconate and priesthood, I wondered whether this was one more way to be special. If that was my only reason to be a priest, I had better quit now. During a challenging pre-ordination

retreat, I struggled with that question but learned that no human being's motivations are pure. Hopefully, my primary motivation was healthy, loving, and in accord with the will of God.

Many times, to this day, before I step out to lead the Eucharist or give a homily, I pray that I am doing this for God's glory as much as possible rather than for compliments and praise from people as they are shaking my hands after mass. I find strength in Jesus' appeal, Mat 5:16, "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

That's what Jesus wants from me. My German grandmother used a two-word proverb, "Eigenlob stinkt." That means "self-praise/bragging/self-exaltation stinks." Last Thursday, in our Bible reflection on this Gospel, a mother said, "Seeking praise is not just a problem of church leaders, but also of us who are parents. We can brag about ourselves, even using our kids' achievements for our own glory, too."

She was so right. Teachers, directors, civil and church leaders, social workers, and missionaries—every one of us human beings can fall into the trap of not practicing what we preach or seeking our glory rather than God's.

What is Jesus calling us to do as glory-thirsty human beings? Hopefully, you and I hear the call to:

- 1—Deny our [selfish] self, take up our cross daily, and follow our humble Jesus.
- 2—Let our light [actually God's light] shine through us so others will praise God.
- 3—Avoid bragging or seeking exaltation/praise.
- 4—Rather, let thanks, praise, and affirmation come to us as gifts—not as products of our manipulation.

As Jesus said, "Whoever humble themselves, will be exalted" (Mat 23:12b).