

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time A - The Challenge to Be who we are, Catholic

November 5, 2023

God himself is the source of all grace, all light, and all hope. If we look anywhere else for stability in our lives, sooner or later, we will be deeply disappointed. This is the point Malachi makes in this Sunday's First Reading (He is trying to get selfish, corrupt priests to get back to basics).

He wants them to stop fighting amongst themselves and creating their own little cliques of self-absorbed followers. And so he reminds us: "Have we all not the one father? Has not the one God created us?" Jesus is trying to tell us the same thing in today's Gospel. He is explaining to his followers that the scribes and Pharisees have lost touch with the source and purpose of their service to the people of God. They have become conceited and self-centred, thinking that their wisdom comes from themselves. They are being hypocrites, not practising what they preach. Many of us are like that sometimes, showing one face in the public but displaying a different one when we are with our own family and friends. Jesus wants us to avoid that mistake. He wants us to mean what we say if we are to be true followers of him. He wants us to humble ourselves before God who is the source of all wisdom, goodness, and grace. He is the Father of us all. The rabbis, priests and we are simply his messengers, not his managers. Even St. Paul, in this Sunday's Second Reading, expresses his joy because the Thessalonians recognized the message he brought them as being from God, not from him. It's easy for us to forget this most important truth. It's easy for us to start expecting fulfillment, happiness, and meaning to come from our achievements, relationships, reputations, or any number of other transient things. In this way, we tend to put ourselves on the pedestal in the public eye and forget that what we do should only be for the glory of God. We will lose our way when the search for human approval becomes uppermost in our lives. True, lasting meaning and happiness can only come from God. As we accept and absorb that truth, we will begin to experience a spiritual stability in our lives, an interior peace that nothing can disturb, just like that peace described by today's Psalm: "In you Lord," the Psalmist writes as he describes his soul as being like a little child in his mother's arms, "I have found my peace."

Only this interior peace, which comes from knowing who we are in God's eyes, can give us the inner strength we need to be faithful to our life-mission, to show leadership no matter how hard it gets. Father Vincent Capodanno, a Maryknoll Missionary who became a marine chaplain and served in the Vietnam War, exemplified this during his final hours. In the face of great personal danger, and in the midst of the chaos of a battlefield, his inner peace and strength enabled him to keep putting the needs of others before his own, in a dramatic way. Here is an eye-witness account of the last mission of Fr. Vincent, also known as "Fr. C" and "the Grunt Padre": Over here [Vietnam] there is a written policy that if you get three Purple Hearts you go home within 48 hours. On Labor Day our battalion ran into a world of trouble, when Fr. Capodanno arrived on the scene it was 500 Marines against 2500 North Vietnamese Army regulars... Casualties were running high and Fr. C had his work cut out for him. Early in the day, he was shot through the right hand which all but shattered his hand - one corpsman patched him up and tried to medivac him but Fr. C declined, saying he had work to do. A few hours later a mortar landed near him and left his right arm in shreds hanging from his side. Once again he was patched up and once again he refused evacuation. There he was, moving slowly from wounded to dead to wounded using his left arm to support his right as he gave absolution or Last Rites, when he suddenly spied a corpsman get knocked down by the burst of an automatic weapon. The corpsman was shot in the leg and couldn't move and understandably panicked. Fr. C ran out to him and positioned himself between the injured boy and the automatic weapon. Suddenly, the weapon opened up again and this time riddled Fr. C from the back of his head to the base of his spine - and with this third Purple Heart of the day, Fr. C went Home. Not all of us have to face bullets from automatic weapons each day, but we do have to face challenges and we do - each one of us - have a mission to accomplish in life. As we learn to find our peace in Christ, to put our confidence in God's grace, we can do so with that same calm, humble, self-sacrificing, Christ-like love.

A priest from a Midwest farming community tells the story of an encounter he had after Sunday Mass one time. He had been preaching about the Gospel passage where Jesus invites all of us to "come to me, you who labor and are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Matthew 11:28-30). After Mass, while he was greeting parishioners, a man came up and told the priest

about his boyhood days. "My grandfather used to plow with a team of oxen. And he used a yoke, but it never balanced. So, he built it heavier on one side and then hitched the stronger ox there. The other side was lighter and he put a weak ox there because he could not pull as much." That's what God wants to do with us; that's why he sent his son to be one of us and accompany us through life. We are not meant to plow the field of life all by ourselves. We make little progress when we try, get frustrated, and maybe even give up entirely when the crop of happiness and fulfillment we are hoping for never materializes. We were made to live in communion with God, to be dependent on him. To find the interior peace and stability we long for so much, we have to accept Christ's yoke, letting him take the heavy part and carrying our part right by his side. This shows us no matter how difficult our journey could be, God is with us and He is in control. That is exactly what the Pharisees and scribes forgot, and that is exactly what Jesus wants to make sure we never forget.

All the saints illustrate this capacity to be at peace in the midst of storms, because all the saints have learned to put their trust fully in God. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was one saint who openly shared her struggles with scrupulosity in her autobiography. Of this struggle, which she referred to as "oversensitivity," she said, "One would have to pass through this martyrdom to understand it well, and for me to express what I experienced for a year and a half would be impossible." However, she eventually experienced what she called a "complete conversion" by which the heavy burden of oversensitivity was lifted. Though this oversensitivity oppressed her in various ways, one way it affected her was that she feared that even some of her random thoughts were mortal sins and that she would be condemned for them. Saint Philomena was a daughter of a Greek king who, along with his wife and family, converted to Christianity. At 13, Philomena consecrated herself to God and took a vow of perpetual virginity. Around that time, the Roman Emperor Diocletian threatened war against her father. Her family was constrained to go to Rome to seek peace. Seeing the beautiful young girl, the Emperor lusted after her. When she refused his advances, he subjected her to a series of tortures from which she was delivered by heavenly aid, until at last she was beheaded, and earned the palm of martyrdom. The symbols on her tomb in the catacombs -- two anchors, three arrows, a palm branch, and a flower -- were taken as the symbols of her martyrdom. As Pope Francis said at his All Saints Day Angelus: "Everyone is encouraged to know more about the lives of the Saints and learn from them how to face their own challenges in life". He also suggested personal reflection by "remembering that in receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit we are called to holiness and always sustained and helped along the way. And the Saints are close to us, we can turn to them in prayer, in communion with them in our gratitude to God for all He has given us and the eternal happiness He calls us to." The saints are saints because they practise what they preach and believe. Actions speak louder than words. They match their external behaviour with their inner genuineness.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God himself is the source of all light, strength, and grace. The more deeply we believe this and make this the foundation of our lives, the more we will experience true interior peace and lasting fulfillment. But it takes time for this truth of our faith to migrate from our heads down to our hearts. We believe it, but we still act, sometimes, as if we didn't believe it. We need to strengthen our faith in this truth, in order to experience its blessings. One excellent way to do this is to give a bigger place in our lives to the Holy Eucharist. In every Mass, at the words of consecration spoken by the priest, Christ himself becomes truly present under the appearance of bread and wine. In Holy Communion, he nourishes our life with that real presence, forgiving our sins, healing our spiritual wounds, and strengthening our good desires and intentions. After Mass, the Hosts that haven't been received in Communion are kept in the little gold box called the Tabernacle. And for the rest of the week, Jesus waits there, patiently, humbly, quietly. He is thinking of us all the time, continuing to offer himself as a sacrifice to the Father for our sake. And we can come and visit him at any time, for five minutes or for five hours, sharing our joys and sorrows, begging for his help, praying and meditating, or simply sitting and letting his grace penetrate our minds and hearts. Let's renew our faith in God as the one source of lasting, interior peace, and let's promise him that this week, we will reinforce this true foundation of our lives by spending a little more time with our Lord in the Eucharist.