

HOMILY SUNDAY 31-A (Homily 02)

“On Servant Leadership”

(Malachi 1:14 – 2:2, 8-10; Psalm 131; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13; Mt 23:1-12)

In Washington, D.C., there is a store-front church that is strong on social justice concerns. They regularly put on what is known as a Servant Leadership School. The late Henri Nouwen, renowned Catholic spiritual writer, used to visit them whenever he was in that part of the country. In many ways, his attempt to grow in servant leadership ties in with his connection with L’Arche, and his desire to learn from the mentally handicapped.

The readings today call us to model servant leadership in the Church, in our society and in our homes.

In the first reading, Malachi laments about the abysmal leadership shown by the religious authorities of his day. They have been unfaithful to the covenant. They have not listened to God’s word nor taken it to heart. They have not given glory to God, but sought it for themselves. Bluntly put, they have turned away from God’s way. They have misled others with their biased teachings. They have not genuinely cared for the people under their care. Ultimately, they have corrupted the revered covenant of their ancestors. Malachi had not one good word to say about the religious leaders of his day.

Centuries later, Jesus calls the religious leaders of his day to task for their hypocrisy and lack of genuine caring for the people. They do not practice what they teach, and they seek glory for themselves. One could simply transfer everything Malachi has to say, to the leaders of Jesus’ day. The perverse human tendency to twist the institutional religion of Judaism into a self-serving oppressive system has wormed its way through the centuries and now finds itself confronting not only a prophet, but the Son of God.

In confronting this unfortunate reality of twisted religion, Jesus resorts to an easily misunderstood expression, that we are to call no one teacher, father or instructor, for we have only one teacher, father and instructor, God in heaven.

This one sentence has been lifted out of context and used by non-Catholics to question why we call our priests “Father.” The answer is simple. We have to look at this question in the light of the whole body of Scripture. In countless other places in the bible, the word “father” is used to describe both fathers and religious

leaders. For example, in Luke, Jesus asks what father would give his children a stone, when he speaks of the Holy Spirit. As well, many times Abraham is spoken of as our father, and the father of many tribes. What is meant by this expression is not that we should not call anyone “father.” That would be a literal interpretation that is not accurate. What is meant by this saying is simply that God our Father must come first in our lives, that we should never ascribe to humans what belongs solely to God our Father.

Ultimately, the bottom line is that Jesus is calling us all, leaders and followers, to a radical Gospel simplicity that seeks to serve and to care, rather than to dominate and to accumulate riches or honors. The life of a follower of Jesus must be one of genuine caring and servant leadership.

The question is sealed in the second reading. There we see Paul portrayed as true father to his people, He is a model of Christian leadership, gentle, like a nurse tenderly caring for others; He even shares personally of his own life with the people. Paul teaches the Gospel and works hard at providing for his own needs so as to not be a burden. Ultimately, he is able to rejoice that the disciples have accepted God’s word

Jean Vanier’s recent little book, *The Scandal of Service*, is an example of humble leadership. Hear what he writes about authority: “The word ‘authority’ comes from the Latin word ‘augere’ (to grow). All authority, whether it be civil, parental, religious or community, is intended to help people grow towards greater freedom, justice and truth. Often, however, it is used for the honor, power, privilege and positive self-image of those who exercise it. By stooping down to wash the disciples’ feet, Jesus calls us all to exercise authority humbly, as a service.”

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a humble meal. Humble gifts of bread and wine are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross.

We who receive are then molded into the Body of Christ and sent out to model servant leadership in the Church, in our society and in our homes.