

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 5 November 2023 + Matthew 23:1-12

In our Gospel today, Jesus presents a special challenge to us who would be leaders in His Church. But His warning is applicable to all, regardless of whether or not we hold an official role in the Church. To begin, it's interesting that Jesus still recognizes the teaching authority of the scribes and Pharisees, if not their moral authority. And this is consistent with the whole Biblical tradition in regard to anyone who holds legitimate authority over us. One's parents, for example, may have been far from perfect in their lofty vocation as role models. And yet the divine precept still holds to *honor your father and mother*. One may not have to agree with them or every choice they made, but we still must honor them.

Next, Jesus goes on to explain why the scribes and Pharisees have no moral authority: in a nutshell, they are hypocrites. They do not practice what they preach, and worst of all, they were likely keeping people from coming closer to God by the *heavy burdens* they placed on the peoples' shoulders. Sometimes people today charge the Church with doing the same thing: they say our moral teachings are too hard or rigid. And so our call is to be faithful to the Lord's teachings, no matter how difficult or countercultural they may be. But, at the same time, be willing to lend a hand to help others reach their call. For instance, we are unashamedly pro-life. But this also means that we must walk with mothers and families in need, just as we are doing in our many special collections and drives especially this month.

Jesus then turns His attention from the scribes and Pharisees to His own followers. Before we get into the heart of his teaching, first a few words on semantics. Sometimes, non-Catholics will use the teaching *call no one on earth your father* as a means to prove that our faith is a corruption of the teachings of Jesus. But there is a problem here. First, 'Rabbi' simply means 'teacher.' People of all faiths call teachers "teacher" all the time. People of all faiths use the word 'father' for the paternal figure in their family all the time too. And the Greek word translated as "master" can also be translated as "instructor", "teacher," or even "leader"; again, words we all use. So what is Jesus really getting at here?

Well, His next instruction sums up all that has gone before: *the greatest among you must be your servant*. That's why we have to be careful with honorific titles: we too easily forget the human "rank" of person means nothing to God. We are all children in His sight. And as we heard in our Gospel a few weeks back, in the Kingdom of God, *the last will be first, and the first last*. And so for those of us who have human honorific titles, we have to be even more careful. We all know how priests, politicians, professors, and so on, who abuse the deference given them, can do and have done enormous harm to the Church and to society.

And so I'd like to now consider someone who exemplifies Jesus' teaching in our Gospel today. Bernard (or "Barney") Francis Casey was born in 1870, as the 6th child in a family of 16 children, a family that was deep in faith and prayer. Seeking to supplement his family's

income, young Barney was unsuccessful at work: in logging, as a prison guard, and later as a streetcar conductor. He was also unsuccessful at love: when he proposed his hand in marriage to a certain young lady, her mother whisked her off to boarding school! At age 21, Barney entered St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. But he wasn't successful there either.

Unable to master Latin and German, Barney's teachers suggested that he seek to enter a religious order, and so he made his way to the Capuchins in Detroit, where he received the religious name Solanus. Solanus continued to receive only passing grades, and so his superiors decided that he didn't have the mental gifts for all of the duties of the priesthood. So on July 31, 1904, he was ordained a "priest simplex" or a "simple priest," meaning he was not allowed to hear confessions or preach doctrinal sermons. But as usual, Solanus took this disappointment in faith and humbly resigned himself to "God's holy will."

Fr. Solanus Casey went on to be assigned hidden roles in the friaries in which he lived, such as sacristan and altar server trainer. However, it was his role as "porter" or "doorkeeper", which many would think of as a menial task, where he began to shine. Very soon, his simple wisdom and love for the poor made him very popular; people sought out his spiritual advice, and most especially his prayers. When Simple Fr. Solanus prayed, many of the sick were cured. Even now, decades after his death in 1957, miracles are still being attributed to his prayers. But Fr. Solanus refused any human praise.

When people for whom he had prayed came back to him to report a miracle, he would say *it wasn't me [who healed you]; it was God*. Fr. Solanus was a deeply humble man. In all of his so-called failures, he never gave up on God. He didn't complain or become bitter. He just trusted. In fact, two of his most well-known proverbs were: *blessed be God in all His designs*, and *thank God ahead of time*. He truly believed, and He prayed. And it was that trusting humility that allowed God to work miracles through him.

Now, in honoring the Saints like Blessed Solanus Casey, some say that we here too disobey Jesus' teaching in our Gospel today by praising human beings in calling them Saints. But we praise the Saints not because of what they did, but because they allowed God to accomplish His beautiful will in their lives. After all, many of the Saints were unknown, hated, or even killed on earth. So in honoring the Saints, we are only honoring God. As the prayer found in the Preface of the Saints so poetically reminds us: *[Father], you are praised in the company of the Saints, and, in crowning their merits, you crown your own gifts.*"

And so especially during November, we recall that the Saints in heaven are our elders in this great family of faith, who pray for us and cheer us on to join them someday. And they never cease to remind us that if we wish to be truly great, we must first become a servant, and that the prize of heaven is worth more than anything here on earth.