

Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 5, 2017
Fr. Rick Lorenz

Reflection

Each week I visit the three elementary schools within our parish territory: Holy Redeemer, St. Martin de Porres, and St. James. I've been speaking to the students about baptism. Remembering baptisms that they've witnessed, they've learned about its effects: forgiveness of sins, membership in the Church, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and adoption as children of God. But not all children in the schools have been baptized. We do welcome children of other denominations and religions. Their parents recognize the value of education at a Catholic school. They accept that we do not water down our teachings in order to further diversity, but include their children with respect. In other cases, students come from Catholic families that chose not to have them baptized as infants. I once encountered one who felt distraught. He questioned his membership in his family and in his school. "I'm the only one in my family who hasn't been baptized! What's wrong with me!" We told him that maybe his parents wanted to leave him with a choice; to accept baptism when he felt ready; that maybe his parents had a bad experience of the Church so didn't want to compel him. I told him that his status within the Church is that of "inquirer"; one with questions, growing towards union with God within the Church.

Mal 1:14-2:2, 2:8-10
Ps 131
1 Thes 2:7-9, 13
Mt 23:1-12

I forgot to tell him that his tears were a sign of the Holy Spirit at work within him; an overwhelming love of God with repentance for sin; evidence proving God's love for him; a growth in faith, hope and charity planted by God; a moment he should remember and treasure; an infusion of grace that will lead his soul to peace in its Creator and Lord.

Today's readings remind us of what the catechism makes clear. Christ is present within his ministers, but we are not free of "human weaknesses, the spirit of domination, error, even sin (1550)." For this reason, people can have a bad experience of Church; they can have trouble feeling the love of God. Malachai proclaimed the word of God as he criticized the priests of Israel: "You have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi." Our separated brethren just marked the 500th anniversary of the nailing of the 95 theses; don't forget that Martin Luther was a Catholic priest. We're all subject to pride: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; they do all their deeds to be seen by others; they love to have the place of honour, and to be greeted with respect." Pride is at the root of sin. Priestly pride confuses the faithful.

We know that the sacraments of the Church confer grace when celebrated validly and licitly, even by a bad priest; they are the work of the Holy Spirit. But the life of the priest can interfere with their fruitful reception. St. Charles Borromeo was known as the teacher of bishops. He pointed out that diligent study is necessary for preachers, but said "Be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing, but live otherwise, and your words will bring only cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head (Office of Readings)."

But failings aren't confined to priests. We've all been anointed with sacred chrism at our baptism, joining us to Christ as priest, prophet and king. So we all serve Christ as his ministers in various offices. The love within us comes from God, but we choke it and twist it, and then live with the consequences. The limitations of our human fathers taint our picture of God the Father: in small ways for some; for others unbearably. Our early understanding of Church can be shaped by mother's hiss: "Shh!"; by father's growl: "Sit still!" Discipline is necessary but consequential, and kids aren't perfect either. We receive love from our parents, and then manipulate the chasm between them to get what we want. "Mom, can I have a chocolate bar?" "Ask your father." "Dad, can I have a chocolate bar? Mom says it's OK."

But God's love is one love; "God is love (1 Jn 4:8)." He is our father, but his love is also a mother's love, a servant's love.

"I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me." St. Paul understood this in his ministry. "Though we might have made demands as Apostles of Christ, we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children."

For this Eucharist, we pray for God's children, longing for the love that will bring them peace; that our meditation and ministry will make it present in their lives; and that we accept each other's failings as a dark night of purgation, making us ready to receive the light of God's love.