

Homily Sunday 32B: 11 Nov 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

This past week our diocese laid to rest a couple priests, Frs. Tom Ward and John Eldringhoff. This somber sort of event and others involving men in ministry have impressed upon me the fragility of the priesthood. When I was an altar boy way back when, priests were superhuman figures. Even when I reached adolescence and started to see the faults of parents, teachers, and every other adult around, there remained a certain aura around priests. Perhaps it's a sign of middle age, and having an inside perspective has something to do w/ it, but I look at priests differently than I used to. I'm more critical, I like to think I'm also more understanding, but I've most assuredly changed. I know priests are human. I have seen more of their faults and failings. These numerous priest funerals I've attended constitute the most dramatic evidence of these human limitations.

The letter to the Hebrews is also focused on the priesthood, that of the OT, and it dwells on the limitations of these ministers. The priests offered sacrifices year after year. The priests who offered them would pass away to be replaced by others. This multitude of sacrifices and ministers hinted at the imperfect character of the Old Testament priesthood. The sacrifices and the priests were innumerable because none was able to reconcile human beings to God, which was the objective of the entire Temple cult. Instead, the Levitical priesthood served only as a foreshadowing of the perfect high priest who was to come and achieve the communion that his predecessors' ministry only prefigured.

The objective of the priesthood is to unite human beings to God. Every priest--be he pagan, Jewish, or Catholic--is a kind of intermediary between God and man. The notion of the priest is all wrapped up with the idea of sacrifice. In sacrifice, the profane is rendered sacred by the ritual action of the priest. By the offering of sacrifice, the priest tries to effect union between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human. The sacrifice may be one of atonement for the forgiveness of sins, it may be recognition of the Lord's dominion that is actualized by rendering to him the first fruits of the harvest. Whatever type of sacrifice the priest offers to God, the common goal of all is to draw the people he serves into communion with their Maker.

It in this light that we come to understand the priesthood of Jesus Christ. He is the perfect high priest, for he brings about perfect communion between God and man. Jesus offers the totality of himself upon the altar of the cross in the perfect sacrifice. In his own person he sanctifies our human nature and thereby allows all human beings to share in God's life.

The priesthood of Jesus Christ is the foundation and inspiration for the Catholic priesthood. The Lord desired that his once for all sacrifice on the cross should be perpetuated throughout all of history so that all human beings might benefit from it. And so he established the priesthood for this purpose. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, men are empowered by God to make

Christ's sacrifice present whenever and wherever they celebrate Mass. Although these men are themselves burdened by sin and weakness, the Holy Spirit more than compensates for their human limitations, ensuring that the faithful may still share in the power of Christ's sacrifice at the Eucharist. Whether the priest be personally holy or not, the Spirit ensures that the power of Christ's redemptive death is communicated to the faithful without fail at every Mass.

Alongside the priesthood of the ordained ministers, there is also the universal priesthood of all the baptized, an idea brought out most clearly at Vatican II. The idea here is that all the faithful, not just ordained clergy, are called to transform the world into the kingdom of God. All are called to make of their lives and labors a kind of sacrifice to the Lord whereby what is profane and sinful is purified and elevated into something holy. This is the dynamic we witness with the widows of the readings today, both in the first reading and in the gospel. In a spirit of trusting faith, they sacrifice their all to God: the widow of Zarephath gives the last of her food to the man of God Elijah; the widow in the temple puts the entirety of her livelihood into the treasury. Through these sacrifices, these women become holy and their offerings stand out as greater than those of all the rest, for with sincere faith they give of their very substance. We're all invited to imitate them. At every Mass, we have the opportunity to bring our successes and failures, our joys and sorrows, and offer them to God, asking him to transform them into something holy, to make his kingdom more present on earth. In this way, God becomes more alive in our hearts and in our world: his justice, peace and joy are more firmly established; his goodness, beauty and truth shine forth with greater splendor.

During the offertory rite, the priest invites the assembly: pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father. We're being asked to join Christ our high priest in offering our lives and labors to God the Father, asking him to sanctify them and make us holy. Let's pray that our offerings this day may bring God's grace in greater abundance into our world.