

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – November 5, 2017
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A number of years ago, I spent part of my vacation in Atlanta where a few of my seminary classmates are serving in the Archdiocese. We gathered on a Friday evening for dinner and one of our group was a little preoccupied. At the time, he was one of the associate pastors of a very large parish in the suburbs. His pastor was on vacation and his fellow associate had been suddenly called away for a funeral. That left my friend with 5 Sunday Masses to celebrate. He had tried all day to get the help of another priest, but was unsuccessful on such short notice. It took him all of 30 seconds after my arrival at our dinner to ask me what I was doing on Sunday. You have to go to Mass anyway, he reminded me, so please come and take one of the Masses at our parish. I agreed. Everyone was quite welcoming, the parish was indeed large and the church was packed and overflowing. Things were going well; they even chuckled at my impromptu homily. I got to the preparation of the gifts and I was pouring wine from the carafe into the chalice. The carafe had a lid attached to it – well, not exactly attached, as I quickly discovered. As I poured the wine, plop – the lid fell directly into the chalice and wine went everywhere. The altar server was trying hard not to laugh when I said to her, “I guess I was supposed to take that off.” It seems that whatever good impression I had made as a substitute priest, quickly went out the window as the sacristans changed the altar cloth after Mass. For some reason, I’ve never been invited back to that parish.

It seems to work out that way, doesn’t it? Every time you think too highly of yourself, begin to think you know exactly what to do and how to do it – well, you are just setting yourself up for a fall. I knew things were going too well at that Mass. I was bound to make a fool of myself somehow. Jesus even predicted it in the gospel today. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Though in the first reading the prophet Malachi is referring to the Levitical priesthood, to the priests of the old covenant, we tend to hear the readings of this Sunday in terms of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Today’s gospel, which warns against hypocrisy and pride, is meant for all of us to hear, but it is certainly an apt admonition for priests, even as we begin this National Vocations Awareness Week. We priests get a lot of thanks for our service, but these readings seem to be saying – don’t let this go to your head. We honor the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but you’re still as much of a klutz as you ever were. And that is an important distinction. We often confuse our respect for the ministerial priesthood, our gratitude for the availability of the Eucharist and the other sacraments with a need to put priests on a pedestal, with an expectation that each priest is – or will be – perfect. That’s a dangerous approach. It is dangerous for priests because sooner or later we will be tempted to believe our own press. If people tell you how wonderful you are often enough, you might begin to believe it – that’s when the lid will fall off the wine carafe. But this approach is also dangerous for the people. It is wonderful to think well of priests – but when we assume that they will be perfect, then

we will become disillusioned when they are not, when I am not. If we place our faith on the foundation of human perfection – then it is only a matter of time before it will crumble. Our faith must rest firmly on the rock of God’s grace and perfection – not on the sandy soil of any frail human being. We cannot expect anyone – even our priests – to be perfect.

Now, admittedly, that’s not the problem it once was. These days, surrounded as we are by external attacks on all religious beliefs and by the internal, self-inflicted wounds of the sexual abuse scandal, priests are more likely to be vilified than admired. That’s probably what happened in Jesus’ time also. There had to have been some decent, conscientious scribes and Pharisees in first century Palestine – but the hypocrisy of a few – those who, in Jesus’ words, preached but did not practice – poisoned the reputation of all. And so it is with priesthood. Almost no one can tell you of the many times they saw a priest smile in the face of constant arrivals and departures during Mass or offer a prompt and courteous response to the unreasonable demand of some loyal parishioner who faithfully comes to Mass almost every Christmas. But they can recite every instance when a priest was less than enthusiastic, when his homily went a little long or when they had company coming to town and decided at the last minute that they needed to borrow tables and chairs and the priest didn’t interrupt his hospital calls to respond to them. You see, there is a little scribe and Pharisee in all of us. Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees tied up heavy burdens hard to carry and laid them on people’s shoulders, but did not lift a finger to move them. We priests have to be very careful not to expect perfection from our parishioners – not to ask them to carry alone life’s heavy burdens without offering them the love and support of our good and gracious God. But the people of God have to be careful not to expect every priest to be perfect, indeed, not to expect any priest to be perfect. Just like you, we get tired, hungry, over-scheduled, irritable – sometimes we have good days and sometimes we do not. And each individual priest cannot be expected to be all things to all people. I may meet one person’s definition of the perfect priest but fall far short of that definition in the eyes of another. Yes, each of us recognizes that it is impossible for us to carry the burden of perfection – but that doesn’t stop us from trying to place that burden on others. Recognizing my weaknesses and imperfections, I strive, in Jesus’ words, to be a humble servant. I strive for perfection too – but in that, I always fall short, and, fortunately, I have an entire parish who is eager to let me know every time that happens. Today’s gospel calls all of us to that humble service. And from time to time, we will all fall short there as well. Sometimes our service will be less than generous, sometimes our pride will get in the way. Sometimes we will be true disciples – and sometimes the scribe and Pharisee within us will shine through. We must remind ourselves daily that we are invited to lay our burdens on the Lord – and not on the shoulders of one another.