

Priests' Convocation Homily
 St. Ignatius of Antioch // Wednesday 28th Week Year I
 Ski Liberty, Pennsylvania
 17 X 2018

I. Introduction

- A. As it happens, the readings to which we just listened are the same ones that I preached on during a previous Convocation. Like many a preacher, I was tempted simply to touch up that homily and use it again. Of course, recycled homilies never really work too well, even our best ones. There's something about a re-used homily that's more like "yesterday's mashed potatoes" than "fine red wine".**
- B. Besides, we are met in very different circumstances than was the case previously. The crisis gripping the Church, including our local church, is now part of our outlook, a lens through which we view ourselves, our ministry, and the Church as such. In recent weeks, some of you mentioned to me that, in the midst of our woes, the Scripture readings have spoken powerfully to you and to your people; that the readings chosen for those Sundays seemed to shed a great deal of light on "the grief and anguish" of the present hour – and I would agree. Today's readings are no exception to that rule. They raise the essential question of whether we shall respond to this crisis, (or for that matter, any other challenge in our ministry) according to the letter of the Law or in the power and freedom of the Spirit – the Spirit who enables us to say with one accord, "Jesus is Lord!" Please allow me to explain.**

II. The Clerical Mentality of the Scribes and Pharisees

- A. Pope Francis has identified clericalism as a leading cause of the present crisis. And in spite of his clear description of clericalism, all of us have our own ideas of just what it is and just who is guilty of it. Speaking only for myself, I can attest that it is sometimes very difficult to perceive clerical attitudes lodged deep within my heart. What's more, Clericalism is an equal-ideological danger. Neither the right nor the left is exempt.**
- B. We can see this in the Gospel passage just proclaimed where Jesus reveals what clericalism is and then he puts it on trial. Here again, we meet the Pharisees and Scribes, the experts of the Law.**

Ironically enough, they were not of the priestly class, but they nonetheless formed a privileged and influential caste. Steeped in the Law and skilled in observing its slightest commands, many Pharisees and Scribes looked down on others as unenlightened and doomed. Instead of helping ordinary people to find God in the observance of the Law, they made it more and more difficult for them. Jesus condemns those leaders for burdening others with heavy obligations without lifting a finger to help carry them.

C. A closer look at Pharisaical “clericalism” brings matters into focus for us.

At the heart of it are two malign tendencies.

The first of these is *hypocrisy* which uses religion as a cloak for one’s sinfulness.

On the outside, the greatest delicacy of conscience; on the inside, hardness of heart.

Just beneath the surface, layers of moral corruption are found.

That’s what Jesus saw many of the Pharisees and Scribes.

In Jesus’ memorable phrase, they resembled

“unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk.”

What infuriates Catholics as well as many others is

that those who inflicted grave harm on innocents continued to present themselves as worthy representatives of Jesus Christ and the Church.

Hence, the urgent and continuous need for the Gospel to cleave our inmost heart, to cleanse us of hidden corruption, to create in us a heart contrite, humble, and pure.

Humility, the antidote for clericalism, is also the bridge

between personal unworthiness and the sacredness of our priestly office.

D. A second malign feature of clericalism, then and now, is a penchant for yoking the Word of God to suit one’s own purposes, using it to create for oneself a comfortable, secure, and ennobled existence, all the while robbing the Word of God of its freedom, sovereignty, and salvific power.

The Servant of God, Romano Guardini, put it this way:

“The Law was meant to take possession of the people for God;

its every clause was to lay his hand upon them.

In reality, the people took possession of the Law,

making it a frame for their worldly existence.

It was used as a claim to greatness and authority in the world –

God and his promise were simply incorporated into the claim” (*The Lord*, p. 197).

Thus, Jesus calls out the Pharisees and Scribes in their fondness for places of honor.

Hearing his words, I am reminded that I sit on, not *one*, but *two* cathedra,

actually *four* if you count the two in West Virginia! So you see, I’m doomed!

Jesus’ words admonish me not to sit comfortably on *any* of them.

In truth, any cathedra, any presider's chair in any parish church can become a place of honor of which we can grow overly fond and imagine ourselves its worthy occupants.

Clerical assertions of preeminence in the face of scandal greatly anger many people. Not for nothing do I refer to myself in the Eucharistic Prayer as an 'unworthy servant'. Not for nothing do we confess our sins, just as we invite our people to do.

III. O Stupid and Foolish Galatians

A. All of which brings us to St. Paul's "intemperate" Letter to the Galatians.

Paul manifests a decided lack of patience with the Galatians, mainly I think, because he knew firsthand the world of the Pharisees, having been one himself, and now he sees them falling into the Pharisaical trap.

Apparently, after Paul left Galatia, the Christian community there was visited by other preachers who enjoined that community to follow the prescripts of the Law.

Writing fast and furious, Paul upbraids them for getting off track, for falling for the illusion that they could be saved

by observing the ever-expanding provisions of the Judaic Law.

Paul accuses the Galatians of being "stupid" and "foolish"

& that probably lit up the Catholic Center switchboard, then located in Jerusalem!

B. Uncanny, isn't it, how history repeats itself.

Oh, the circumstances and the players differ but the essentials remain.

In our day and age, no matter how well and wisely we preach and minister, our people are often visited by other preachers, especially on social media, and these seem bent on imposing a Gospel other than the one we are authorized to preach.

Some peddle blind hatred, others calumny and detraction,

still others stringent rules and disciplines to be executed by new sheriffs.

Everything will be fixed if only the long arm of the civil law reaches in.

Everything will be fixed if only we strengthen our policies or change our polity.

According to *these* preachers, on both the right and the left,

salvation lay in adherence to the rule of law, whether old or new.

C. Let me hasten to add that I fully support cooperating with civil authorities and strengthening our policies and adhering to them honestly,

but we should *not* imagine that, alone, such steps will lead us out of this crisis.

There is just no way around that conversion of heart that Paul describes for us today.

Thus Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

In his listing of the works of the flesh, we see behaviors that got us where we are:

‘immorality, impurity, licentiousness, drinking bouts, orgies’ – to be sure – but also the hallmarks of clericalism including: ‘hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, and outbursts of fury’ – all of which constitute idolatry (cf. Col. 3:5).

In that list is found ample room for the abuse committed and the abuse covered up. In that list are behaviors that produced excruciating pain in numberless survivors.

- D. Paul calls us to a radical change of heart, the crucifixion of our flesh and its desires coupled with the opening of our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who changes our hearts to resemble the Christ of the Beatitudes, such that our lives and the communities we shape are characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Brothers, we owe this to one another, we owe it to the people we serve, we owe it to the memory of brother priests who have gone before us. And, it turns out, that the change of heart critical to evangelization is also critical to finding our way beyond this crisis and emerging as a Church in which people can put their trust. Let us ask St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose feast we celebrate today, to pray for us, that each of us may have the courage to imitate his example in our readiness to die to self and to sin for the sake of Christ and his people. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!**