

HOMILY

The Consistent Christian

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Homily for Friday of the First Week of Lent

Ezekiel 18:21-28; Psalm 130:1-8; Matthew 5:20-26

Chapel of the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception

March 18, 2011



Today's Gospel passage makes it clear that the people of Jesus' time were spellbound by his teaching: "because he taught with authority, and not like the Scribes and Pharisees."

How so? The Scribes and the Pharisees were experts in the law. Their task was not to "invent teaching" or to give their own opinion of things which would have been the height of "un-orthodoxy." Rather their task was to faithfully interpret the law as given by God, *not* to extemporize about it. Kind of like the writing of a doctoral thesis: people are not much interested in *your* opinion [i.e., cite the experts] until you yourself are awarded your doctorate.

Surely degrees are one helpful indicator of a person's level of education, which is why it is good for those who would proclaim God's Word and preach from a church ambo to be credentialed in the normative academic way. However, it is also true that one can discern just how beneficial will a person's expertise prove to be after that individual begins speaking.

Enter Jesus. Consider the utter shock of the Scribes and Pharisees as, on the one hand, he speaks with such compelling knowledge of the law and the prophets while, on the other hand, he purports to "go beyond them," if you will, with his "but I say to you" statements. And yet these same scholars of the law can hardly be blind or deaf to the absolute sway which Jesus clearly exercises over the crowds who are completely mesmerized by his teaching. For them,

Jesus' credibility came from the very *person* he was. His *words* were compelling because *he* was compelling.

I remember my experience years ago of seeing the powerful movie *Godfather I*. In my opinion, like many other "series" movies, they would do better giving us *one* great movie experience rather than insisting on sequel after sequel. Kind of like *Jaws*: once you see the shark, it's not all that scary anymore. But what truly concerned me, when I saw *Godfather I*, was the almost universal reaction of the rest of the audience when Michael's sister confronted him and demanded that he tell her whether or not he was responsible for "eliminating" her husband. He gave it a lot of thought and then solemnly declared to her that he had nothing to do with it—even though, of course, he had been completely responsible for the killing. At which point the audience *broke into applause*.

Now the movie wasn't the problem. Remember the baptismal scene when Michael's son is being baptized:

Do you renounce Satan? Yes.

Boom, boom, boom, boom.

And all his works? Yes.

Boom, boom, boom, boom.

And all his empty promises? Yes.

Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Rather it was the audience-reaction to Michael's lie that was so horrifying.

We all know that the Mafia is famous for raising "compartmentalized living" to an art-form. There's the "business" part of my life over here, where I "rub out" anyone who gets in my way. And then there's my "family life" over there, where I am the very hallmark of the virtuous person. But the one never touches the other. How convenient.

How frightening that the reaction of those movie-goers that day seemed to be ready to canonize such a duplicitous approach to life, not only approving of it but perhaps also inclined, should the opportunity present itself, to make it something of a template for their own uncritical lifestyles.

In today's Gospel, with his "I tell you" sayings, Jesus gives a clear death knell to "compartmentalized living." Jesus demands *utter consistency* in the living of the Christian life. So, for that matter, does the prophet Ezekiel in today's first reading. It is not enough to be virtuous *some* of the time. It is not enough to hold yourself back from sinning in terms of external action while, at the same time, sinning internally by nursing viciousness and malice in one's heart. It is not enough *not* to sin simply because one didn't have the *opportunity* to do so.

The scribes and Pharisees, while external observers of the law, which is to be admired, were unfortunately more about self-righteousness than a right

relationship with their God. Herein, of course, lies the great temptation of the pious practitioners of religion: performing their religious acts, as we were warned on Ash Wednesday, “that people may see them” in order to “win the praise of others.”

Happily the Jesus of our Gospel not only underscores the utter lie that is “compartmentalized living,” he also gives us the perfect antidote to such hypocrisy, an antidote which should have been known to the religious Jews of his time, except for the fact that some of them felt their religious obligations ended at the altar. And yet even the most well-executed liturgy, if not truly prayed, can wind up being merely an exercise in futility—if not worse—for no sacrifice can serve to repair one’s relationship with one’s God if offered from hearts filled with vindictiveness towards the neighbor. In light of which how very powerful is Jesus’ final homily prior to his death when, from the altar of the Cross, he who knew no sin nonetheless proclaims forgiveness for his persecutors who “know not what they do,” prior to acquiescing in total abandonment to his Father: “It is finished . . . Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Perhaps “compartmentalized living” works for the Mafia. It might even be admired by a number of less-than-reflective movie-goers. But it cannot work for the true Christian believer. Being a Christian means being so *consistently*, in *all* areas of one’s life. No “compartments.” No separation between “internal” and “external.” No fracture between mind and heart, or word and action. One cannot be “a little Christian;” one cannot be a “sometimes Christian.” Belief in Christ is an “all or nothing” proposition, which is true for every baptized believer, and which must be especially true for those who would shepherd God’s people as ordained ministers.

Hear now the words of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger back in 1969—something of a “prophecy,” if you will, uttered at a time when student riots in both the United States and Europe seemed to be exploding, as Catholics “on the right” were decrying the teachings of Vatican Council II, while Catholics “on the left” were vilifying Pope Paul VI for his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*:

From today’s crisis, a Church will emerge tomorrow that will have lost a great deal. She will be small and, to a large extent, will have to start from the beginning. She will no longer be able to fill many of the buildings created in her period of great splendor. Because of the smaller number of her followers, she will lose many of her privileges in society. Contrary to what has happened until now, she will present herself much more as a community of volunteers . . . As a small community, she will demand much more from the initiative of each of her members and she will certainly also acknowledge new forms of ministry and will raise up to the priesthood proven Christians who have other jobs . . . It will make her

poor and a Church of the little people All this will require time. The process will be slow and painful.”

And yet, mightn't we actually wind up a lot better off in the long-run?

Here's another quote – now I'm not too sure who said it, but I really do like it: “Our Catholic Church started in Palestine as a *relationship*, went to Greece and became an *idea*, went to Rome and became an *institution*, came to America and became an *enterprise*.” Maybe it's time to get back to Church as *relationship*, as “honest” relationship, with the Holy Trinity as our paradigm.

At the risk of briefly raising a terribly painful topic concerning which we might feel we have heard more than enough already, how very different would things be in our Church right now had not some of those called to leadership in our Church engaged in “compartmentalized living” themselves, as if their “covert sins” in one area of life would not eventually infect their public ministries, not to mention our Church's very credibility.

Not that it is necessary for one to be “perfect” prior to ordination. Were that the case, I still wouldn't be ordained. However, one must *never* “settle for” inconsistencies in any area of one's moral life, which is why we need spiritual directors and advisors *both before and after* ordination.

No, religious leaders in our Church do not leave their humanity behind at the time of ordination or profession, but they are expected to work at being honest in their role as leader or shepherd or consecrated religious. And, when those ministries, those Church relationships are built on honesty, then and only then will the whole Church be well, as Christ's body continues to be built up to its full stature.

May *all* of our relationships, both personal and professional, be *honest* so that our gift offered at God's altar may be *sincere*. May our righteousness surpass that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, and let us leave “compartmentalized living” to the mobsters.