

Homily based on the readings from November 5, 2023 (Malachi 1.14b-2.2b, 8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2.7b-9, 13; Matthew 23.1-12)

“Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven.”

When I was growing up, I frequently heard people from certain Protestant denominations using this passage to criticize Catholicism. In particular, they claimed that Christ was prohibiting his followers from referring to clergymen as “Father” – which, of course, is something Catholics do on a daily basis. That interpretation not only contradicts 2000 years of Church history, but also misses the point of what Jesus was actually telling us.

There are three titles that Christ specifically mentions in this reading: *teacher* (which is the same word as *rabbi*), *father*, and *master*. He tells us plainly that we have only one teacher, only one father, and only one master. Nevertheless, we use the word *teacher* all the time to describe the courageous souls who are entrusted with educating our youth.

Likewise, we all use the word *father* – and similar words like *dad* – in

reference to our male parents. Although the word *master* has become somewhat outdated, we still employ similar expressions such as *employer, manager, and supervisor*. If we did not use these terms, we would have to invent new ones – because these human relationships will always exist within our society.

So what is Jesus actually saying here? He is definitely not telling us that our fathers are not really our fathers. Instead, he is making the point that all fathers – throughout human history – have been copies, replicas of our one *true* father. “Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us?” If we think back to every time our earthly fathers demonstrated love or patience or kindness or wisdom, they were embodying the original fatherhood of God. Conversely, whenever fathers falter in their responsibilities, they are displaying the degree to which they are imperfect reproductions.

As a quick aside, there is a hymn I used to sing when I was growing up: “Our Father by whose name, all fatherhood is known.” As an act of

mercy, I will refrain from singing it now – but it basically echoes and expands on this theme. It is a beautiful hymn, particularly for families to sing together.

It is fairly clear *what* Jesus is saying here, but perhaps a better question is *why*. What is the lesson for teachers, fathers, and masters – not to mention mothers, mayors, doctors, coaches, judges, and anyone else in a position of responsibility? The point is that none of us exercise authority based on our own merits. At best, we are simply acting as proxies, as stand-ins. What Christ is denouncing is the misguided mindset that we *deserve* the responsibilities we have been given. This misperception invariably results in haughtiness and hypocrisy – an unfounded sense of superiority over other people and the rules that govern them. More often than not, this perspective also leads to greed and cruelty.

Unfortunately, history is replete with examples of powerful individuals who have abused their positions. Even in our own time, we are

bombarded with headlines about unprincipled individuals exploiting the people under their care. In most cases, the issue is not that the perpetrators started off intending to do evil, but rather that they lost sight of the true source and nature of their authority. The most painful example for many of us is the atrocity of clerical abuse, the legacy of which we have witnessed unfolding over the past several decades. The problem is not that we call priests *father*. The problem comes when the people we call *father* forget that their fatherhood has been entrusted to them by God.

Lest we succumb to pessimism, we must remember that Christ not only identifies the problem but also offers the solution. The answer, it turns out, is remarkably simple: “The greatest among you must be your servant.” Simple, but not easy. The *only* way to exercise authority with compassion and wisdom is to understand that authority as a form of *service*. Motherhood is service; fatherhood is service; teaching is service; holding public office is service; ordained ministry is service. God almighty – the prototypical example of teacher, father, and master –

fulfills all these roles with complete and utter *gratuitousness*. He is perfect and self-sufficient in himself. There is absolutely nothing we can give him that he does not already possess. While we will never be in that position ourselves, that is the model we are called to imitate.

“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

This is not a new insight, but it is one we must continuously rediscover – as successive generations take on the duties and responsibilities of adulthood. This is always a difficult lesson to learn, but one that is essential to humankind – both as individuals and as a society. While we have many positive examples to instruct us – holy men and women from “from every nation, race, people, and tongue” – they are all facsimiles of the one, true, eternal servant: “the Son of man,” who “came not to *be served* but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” As long as we keep our eyes fixed on him, he will guide us along the path of servanthood – *wherever* that path winds up taking us.