

Homily based on the readings from September 22, 2024 (Wisdom 2.12, 17-20; James 3.16-4.3; Mark 9.30-37)

As many of you know, the pope – the Holy Father – has a large number of official titles. The most basic is the one that describes his fundamental role within the Church, namely *Bishop of Rome*. Some of his other titles are designed to convey a deeper theological meaning, such as *Vicar of Christ* and *Successor of the Prince of the Apostles*. Still others pertain to the pastoral authority with which he is entrusted: *Metropolitan Archbishop of the Roman Province, Primate of Italy, Patriarch of the West, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church*. One title even refers to a political office: *Sovereign of the Vatican City State*. It is the last of the pope's titles, though, that I think is the most important: *Servant of the Servants of God*.

A common objection, which I am sure we have all heard, is that there is too much *opulence* surrounding the office of the papacy – that Saint Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel are too ornate, that the vestments

worn by the pope and the other bishops are too elaborate. There may be some validity to those criticisms, although I tend to think they are somewhat overstated. In their own way, the monumental structures in Washington, DC – the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the White House – are just as extravagant as any buildings in Rome, yet no one seems to be offended by *their* grandeur. There is an important distinction between elevating the dignity of an *office* and inflating the value of an *individual*.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the Church has been increasingly sensitive to these types of concerns. Most notably, beginning in 1964, the popes have abandoned the traditional practice of wearing the papal tiara – the ornamental crown that had previously been associated with the position. This change was intended as a gesture of humility, to emphasize the pastoral role of the papacy rather than its worldly trappings. In case anyone is curious, the last papal tiara – which was worn briefly by Pope Saint Paul VI – is permanently on display in the crypt at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

On the other hand, the papal title *Servant of the Servants of God* is not a recent innovation. In fact, it goes back at *least* as far as Pope Saint Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century. The *point* of that title, of course, is that no matter how much authority, how much responsibility, or how much *dignity* is associated with the office of the papacy, the fundamental responsibility of *any* Christian minister is to be a *servant*.

This principle, of course, comes directly from Christ's teaching in today's Gospel. Apparently, Jesus had overheard his apostles arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest – who deserved the most illustrious title, the most magnificent outfit, the most exalted place in the procession. He did not just put an end to the debate – he completely dismantled the premise of the conversation. Worldly greatness simply *cannot* be a consideration for anyone who is dedicating his life to the Gospel: “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”

Two of the most familiar titles for the pope are not actually official titles at all, but simply terms of affection: the word *pope* itself, which just means *father*, and the related phrase *Holy Father*. Even though these titles ought to inspire *respect* and even *reverence*, they have more in common with *Servant of the Servants of God* than with lofty titles such as *Supreme Pontiff* or *Patriarch of the West*. As anyone who has ever cared for children is *well* aware, fatherhood and motherhood are not exalted positions that lead to glory and wealth and power, but are the most relentlessly demanding form of *service* that any human being will ever experience. It is no accident that, in today's Gospel, Jesus illustrates his mandate to serve other people by embracing a *child*: "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name," he declares, "receives me."

Every single Christian – man or woman, young or old, clergy or layman – is called to a life of service: service to God, but also service to our brothers and sisters. That is why the pope is not just a *servant*, but a *servant of the servants*. It is not our place to quantify or to rank our own

contributions, as the Apostles were attempting to do. Nevertheless, whatever merit we attain in this life is not the result of our strength or our intellect or even our wisdom, but of the *service* we are able to offer to our Lord and to the people around us.

It is worth noting that both Ordination and Matrimony are classified as *Sacraments of Service*, in that they both “confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God” (CCC 1534).

Whether we follow the call to ordained ministry or we accept the responsibility of marriage and parenthood – or we pursue an entirely different path – service *must* be the organizing principle around which we structure our lives. Whatever titles people are accustomed to calling us – father, mother, teacher, coach, soldier, sailor, deacon, priest, bishop, or pope – the greatest titles to which any of us can *hope* to aspire are *servant, disciple, and Christian*.