

Homily - Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

There isn't much that can undermine someone's reputation and credibility more than hypocrisy.

We've probably all had encounters with people who claimed to profess certain values or faith and then in a clear and obvious way failed to live up to them.

Or perhaps they very noticeably held themselves to a double standard, expecting integrity and sacrifices from other people that they were unwilling to make themselves when push came to shove.

Whatever the case, hypocritical words and actions are, in a very real way, a source of what we would call 'scandal' - all the more so if they come from someone claiming, as Christians do, to hold themselves to the highest standards of all - a faith that encompasses every dimension of our personal, moral, and spiritual lives.

Christ warns, for instance, about the hypocritical teaching of the Pharisees:

"Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example."

But the power of our witness cuts in the other direction as well.

One of the greatest examples of the power of example to move hearts comes from Saint Paul, who repeatedly acknowledged his own role in modeling Christian life for his church.

Blessed James Alberione, the Italian priest and religious founder who was possibly Saint Paul's most devoted follower of the modern age, points out that Paul talks about what he calls the "apostolate of example" on no fewer than 21 occasions in his writings.

But he goes on to observe, “The Apostle, however, was not content of recommending the apostolate of example. He himself and more than everybody practiced it.”

To follow Paul’s example, he concludes, we must “not give any scandal so that our ministry may not fall into contempt.”

What is he saying about our lives as Christians?

If we’re going to actually change the world, make it a better place, and bear good fruit when we try to share our faith, it is of absolutely paramount importance that we do so with integrity.

This is no easy task.

We all know far too well, or we should, just how limited we are and how prone we are to struggle to live out our call to holiness.

It’s easy to tell someone else they need to try praying more.

It’s a lot harder to actually show up to pray, day after day, at the same time, with the same consistency, without recognition or reward.

How often do we judge our neighbor for their moral failures while hiding our own with barely a second thought?

This idea that our example itself can be an apostolate - in other words, a means by which we can give Christ himself to the world - shouldn’t make us assume that we’re automatically going to do it.

Our pride, the very flaw that makes us think that we can actually live up to those expectations, is often far more likely to be the very thing which undermines us.

And so we come to Jesus's warning:

“The greatest among you must be your servant.
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled;
but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Saint Paul understood this.

In fact, even right after his conversion, he immediately put this principle into action in his own preaching.

If you think about it, it's kind of crazy that the first place Paul started his preaching was in Damascus, the very town where he'd traveled for the express purpose of arresting and killing the followers of Jesus Christ.

These people had less reason than anyone to want to listen to what he had to say.

So why there?

Blessed Alberione explains, in his reflection: “The answer is: he wanted to repair the scandal.”

Paul knew that his witness had damaged the Body of Christ.

He knew that his actions and the persecution he'd brought bore witness against everything he'd claimed to profess when he'd done all those murderous deeds in God's own name.

But he also knew that if he could repent and begin to preach the Gospel in a spirit of full humility, not hiding any of his brokenness or failures, his example could change lives and convert souls as well.

And he would do the same in Jerusalem. Blessed Alberione observes,

“In Jerusalem he had been among the most ardent persecutors of the Church. Well, it’s exactly there that he went repeatedly and with every insistence to preach. Why? The reason he himself said it: hoping that the example of his conversion might influence his countrymen.”

That’s a powerful witness to the Lord’s ability to change his heart, and it was only possible when he set aside his pride, acknowledged the hypocrisy of his past, and proclaimed what Jesus Christ had done in his life.

What does St. Paul’s witness, or the message of the Gospel, mean for us today?

It’s very simple.

We need to stop pretending.

We need to stop pretending we’ve achieved everything we need to in our spiritual lives.

We need to stop pretending that we’ve prayed enough and as deeply or as passionately as we ought, or that we know exactly what we’re doing.

We need to stop hiding the reality of our own sins and brokenness, not so they can be aired out for all the world to see, but so they can actually be redeemed - brought to the Lord’s healing mercy, most of all in the sacrament of Reconciliation and the healing intercession of those who love us and can hold us accountable in the future.

We need to stop pretending that we were born to be anything other than who we are: beloved sons and daughters of a loving Father, who wants us to live his Gospel in every moment of every day of our lives.

If you believe that, and live that, you will change lives and convert souls.
There is no doubt about that, not for a moment.

Will we do that? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But if we do, it will take humility, and integrity, and a willingness to offer everything to the Lord - not just our good days and our highlight reels and our most eloquent prayers, but the ugly and confused and frustrated moments as well.

Especially those, because that's what the Lord wants to redeem.

He wants to take the Sauls of this world and this parish, the broken and confused sinners, and forge Saints who will be lights to the world.

He wants to reconcile the broken, revive the mediocre, and inspire the despairing, and make something new with all of it.

That's what he does, and who he is - the one who is truly Master, in the ancient and powerful sense of the word, the one who teaches and embodies that which he taught - and shows us, even in our weakness, what it means to be an Apostle and a child of our Heavenly Father.

As we offer him our sacrifices today, call that weakness to mind. Don't hide it from him, but rather, offer it to him now in your hearts in the transforming power of this Eucharist, and let him make you whole.

Let him make you into something new, a shining example, a witness of his love, now and for eternity.