

Homily Sun 16B 22 July 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

A few years ago I served on the diocesan priest personnel board. That's a group which advises the bishop on which priests should be sent to which parishes. And one lesson I learned is that it is hard to move priests from one place to another. Priests get ensconced in a community: they develop a network of relationships, they have their own way of engaging the staff and volunteers, they have their distinctive gifts, parishioners get used to them and grow to like them. And so it's disruptive for both Father and his people when the familiar priest goes and a stranger takes his place. Yet with the shortage of clergy, the need to move men around is more urgent. When a parish loses a pastor due to retirement, death, whatever, there simply is not a corps of priests waiting in reserve who can step in to replace him: no, another priest has to be taken from another parish and put into the vacant one. And that is stressful for the priest and both the community which loses him and the community which receives him. However, I think it is a good thing that parishes over the course of years be served by multiple shepherds, despite all the hardships involved in such transitions. Notwithstanding the difficulties created, this sort of change enriches the people's experience of the Church. More importantly, these changes reflect better the authentic nature of priestly ministry by underscoring the relationship between the priest and the Lord Jesus.

The gospel selection today illustrates this point. What has happened here is that the apostles have had a fair amount of success in their ministry. You may recall from the recent readings that Jesus sent them out to anoint the sick and preach the good news. Apparently they have made quite a few converts, because these big crowds are milling about them. When they try to escape for rest and repose, the people follow them. So Jesus has pity on the masses and teaches them at great length. After he is done teaching, he will work the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. And in John's account, this miracle sets the stage for the magnificent Bread of Life discourse, in which the Lord lays the basis for the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist.

The point to be emphasized here is that the apostles fulfill their mission, they realize their reason for being, by bringing people to Jesus. The Twelve act in obedience to the Lord: they are sent by the Lord to proclaim his gospel; empowered by the Lord they work miracles of healing. And the happy result of their missionary efforts that they bring people to Jesus. And when the people get to the Lord he communicates more sublime teachings and he works even greater miracles than his apostles ever could. When the apostles get the folks to Christ, they step aside and let the Lord do what only he can do.

Priests, and all ministers for that matter, should be like the apostles in this respect. Priests are to draw people to Jesus. Priests serve in obedience to the Lord, an obedience further specified thru their promise of obedience to their bishop. They proclaim the Lord's gospel, not their own ideas. Whatever works of healing they perform are made possible by Christ's power. If priests do their job well, they lead people to Jesus, not to themselves. The rock solid

foundation of the parish is Christ, not the human ministers who represent him. And the fact that priests come and go from parishes reinforces this lesson.

There is lesson here for the laity about the nature of priestly ministry. There is a human tendency to form cults of personality around charismatic leaders, to place them upon a pedestal and make idols of them--hence the appeal of the TV show *American Idol* and its various knockoffs. This phenomenon of hero worship also happens in the religious realm. It's definitely not a good thing. Priests are human ministers; they are not the Lord, but merely his representatives. Whatever of good and true one finds in these men, has its ultimate source in Christ. Granted, some ministers reflect the Lord better than others. In many cases, different priests simply reflect different aspects of the Lord; they serve parishioners at different stages in their faith journeys and at various phases in their lives; they minister in parishes at different periods in their evolution; at times priests must challenge and correct, at other times console and comfort; their diverse characters complement one another and complete the picture of the Christ which God projects to his people thru the priestly office. Through it all, priests should strive to lead their people not to themselves but to Christ in whom all find redemption and salvation.

At every Eucharist, every priest acts *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. That is, the priest presides over the assembly in Christ's name, he proclaims Christ's gospel, he says Christ's words of institution in the Eucharistic prayer--this is my body, this is my blood, he offers Christ's Body and Blood to the faithful. Let's pray that all the Lord's ministers may pattern their lives more closely on that of Jesus Christ. And may this Eucharist draw us all closer to Christ and to one another in the mystery of his love.