

## THIRTIETH SUNDAY – YEAR “B” (PRIESTHOOD SUNDAY)

“Every high priest is taken from among men and made there representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people.”

The author to today’s selection from the Letter to the Hebrews outlines the divine call and sacramental role of a priest. The priest is called by God to offer gifts and sacrifices for himself as well as for the people. At the same time the author suggests that the priest is “beset by weakness.”

Priesthood and weakness - It seems like an oxymoron. How is it that a priest, a shepherd and leader of the community is weak? Are not candidates for the priesthood supposed to be identified as strong individuals rather than weak?

Interestingly enough, weeks before my ordination into the priesthood, some fifteen years ago, I went on retreat and at one point the retreat master presented this passage and offered some compelling reflections. In the end he offered one powerful question for consideration, namely “Are you weak enough to be a priest?” What did he mean?

Well, as I stood on the threshold of the gift of ministry of priesthood, I have to say that I had no clue. After fifteen years, however of wearing the collar, and ministering the sacraments and praying with God, I have at least now some sense.

The meaning of weakness is not intended to be bad or pejorative. That is that the weakness that the Hebrew author is pointing to is not one of being a pansy or a sissy. The weakness here is one of vulnerability. A vulnerability that feels pain, suffers with and for others, and encourages a faithful surrender, prayerful trust and a daily dependency on God. To be beset by this kind of weakness is to open oneself up to the Cross everyday. For it was on the Cross that Jesus offered His greatest sacrifice as High Priest.

During the past two years, we as a church have had to face a horrific reality with the sexual misconduct of a small percentage of priests. Anyone with a human heart cannot help but feel the pain and hurt of this tragedy. For those of us priests who faithfully aspire to serve the Lord and His Church each day, these have clearly been the worse of times. We not only have been beset by a new weakness that evokes shame, embarrassment and self-doubt; but we also have been riddled with deep sadness.

Nearly a year ago, in the height of the scandal, there was a voice I heard in the huge crowd of negativity and judgment. In the spirit of today’s Gospel it was the voice of someone like Bartimaeus who stood up against the crowd. It was the voice of a friend who said, “Dave, don’t you ever be ashamed to be a priest. You are a great priest and you have given your life to the Church. Don’t stop being a priest.” These words breathed new life into me and my priesthood. In the face of incredible vulnerability, as well as diminishing credibility for the Church, these words gave me affirmation, support and a new focus.

There’s one other voice that has been a constant for me in this turbulent time and that is your voice in the pews. Every Sunday even in the midst of crisis you have come to Church to hear God’s Word, receive the Eucharist and profess the faith. In this difficult time, I have to say that when you stand there and say the Creed, I get chills. You still believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and you believe in the Church and therefore believe in the priesthood and believe in me.

You know that in some respects these are the worst of times to be a priest and for that matter to be a Catholic. And yet when we step back and look at all of this with the eyes of faith, they are indeed the best of times because never before have we been so challenged to identify with Christ and depend on Him.

On this Priesthood Sunday, I want to say thank you for loving the Church and loving the Priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is a blessing to be a priest and a special honor to be your priest. And allow me now to be a voice in the noisy crowd and say this, "Priesthood is a great life, with many surprises. Don't be ashamed to promote it. We need more priests." It remains a divine institution for as the author of the Hebrews states, "No one takes this honor upon himself, but only when called by God." Remember, God still calls!