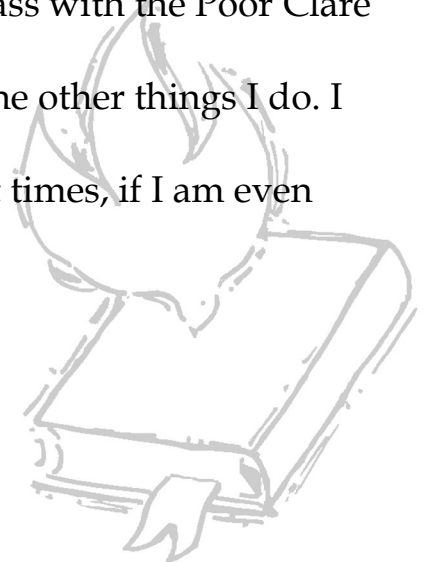


Homily
31st Sunday OT - A
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
November 05-06, 2017

Mal 1: 14 - 2: 2, 8-10
Ps 131: 1, 2, 3
1 Thes 2: 7-9, 13
Mt 23: 1-12

I have to be honest with you, this last month has been kind of difficult for me because with the ebbs and flows we endure in life, with all the church closures taking place diocese (which, oddly enough, is celebrating its 75th Anniversary this year – who wants to celebrate an anniversary when a bunch of churches are closing?), with all the sins that the church leaders have to address within the ranks... this simple parish priest says to himself, “Are you really making a difference with the people in your society? Are you doing what God is asking you to do?” There is one of me and I serve two parishes, I teach courses at the University of St. Francis and I celebrate Latin Mass with the Poor Clare Sisters at the Annunciation Monastery, among the other things I do. I am running around A LOT and I just wonder, at times, if I am even making a difference.



The nice gift in celebrating Mass with all of you is that we have a good number of kids here in church when sometimes we do not see the kids at mass. Sometimes I preach to the kids and they often look like they are sleeping or playing with their hand-held devices or they are doing anything but listening to God's word or reflecting on its meaning. The same applies at the university where I teach. I teach these courses and the students sometimes get it and sometimes they do not. My classes are full; I am tapped out on all my classes. That said, I wonder if I am making a difference to the students that I am teaching.

You think about that at Mass. Are you making a difference? You know, our numbers are growing, everything is good, but every so often I just sit there and reflect. Sometimes I ask to myself, "Am I being a good servant of God?" Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted. I pray and I hope that you are never here for me; I pray and hope that you are here at Mass because God is working through me to communicate with you. When you say, "Fr. Pete," I am hoping you are not calling me "Father," but you are calling

for the Father in heaven, Our Father who hopefully is working through me. I hope that because sometimes I get to the end of the day and wonder if all I do is really worth it. You know, parents do the same thing. Parents have their ebbs and flows with their family like I have with the parishes I serve. Like parents, sometimes those under my care listen and sometimes they do not. This is my constant battle, as it is with most parents in the world.

I have found out in my last twenty-seven years as a priest, I have been saved twice by Albuquerque, New Mexico. Has anybody ever been to Albuquerque, New Mexico? Twice in my life, “Albuquerque” saved me. The first time took place during the first few years of my priesthood. At that time of my priesthood, I was engaged in a type of “bucket list” activity – I wanted to visit every major league baseball stadium around the country, which I did; I actually visited all thirty baseball stadiums in the major leagues.

I went to Atlanta twice to visit the old park and then the new one. The second time I visited, one of my former parishioners was dying in

that city. Outside of Wrigley Field, the park I loved the most was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The worse ones were in Florida – Tampa Bay and Miami had really bad stadiums. I am not big on domed stadiums, although Milwaukee's stadium began to grow on me.

One year, I was travelling to Cleveland and Detroit; the Cubs were playing in both cities the same week, so I decided to follow them in my quest to visit these ballparks. I reserved my Southwest Airline flights, booked my hotel rooms and enjoyed my stay at both stadiums. That said, leaving Detroit, I ended up losing my driver's license on the plane ride home.

As a result, I called the help desk at Southwest Airlines. The nice person on the phone informed me that their staff found my license... it was in the plane seat pouch where I was sitting, but the plane was sitting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The staff ended up mailing my license from Albuquerque to my home in Illinois, which was the closest I have ever gotten to that city in my life!

Last week, with all the problems that the leaders of our diocese had to endure and with all the struggles that I encountered in parish life, I was sitting in the rectory office at St. Anne's thinking, "Is this this over-extending worth my efforts? Putting this effort forward, knowing that a lot of the times what I do seems pointless at Mass or in life, I started getting a little down on myself.

That Friday afternoon at the office at St. Anne's Church, I received a call from Albuquerque, New Mexico. A former student of mine named Carlos wanted to talk to me about an issue concerning the faith. Carlos is one of many students whom I have previously taught them in class. Like other students, Carlos completed his high school studies, graduated college and was now engaged in the working life that most all of us have to undertake. Most of the times I have no idea what happens to these students when they are gone. On this occasion, Carlos decided to get a hold of me because he his girlfriend was in the armed service and stationed in New Mexico, where Carlos decided to join her.

So Carlos followed his girlfriend to Albuquerque and started to ask the basic questions of life and of faith, I guess. Carlos mentioned to me that he was not sure of his place in life on his particular journey. Carlos asked me, “How do you know that God exists? How do you know about this three persons, one God thing? How do I know I am on the right path? What do I do to live this life properly?”

Carlos really laid a bombshell on me for a person that had not spoken to me in years. I also knew that Carlos was not calling me about my opinion about the faith – none of you are here to hear what I think – today’s gospel implores you not even to follow my example! The gospel instructs all of us the same way – listen to the word of God; understand what God wants us to do. This is what I told Carlos; this is what I honestly believe.

Since Carlos asked me about the basics of faith, I tried to teach him about the basics once again, using an analogy that St. Augustine first presented around the Fifth Century (and the relationship between the lover, the beloved and love itself) in a way that all of us can understand.

I told Carlos that if we want to understand God and the Trinity, we have to look at the relationship in this case between a Father and a Son. In this analogy, we have two “persons” that are so in love with each other, who are so deeply connected to each other through a love or bond of a third person called “The Holy Spirit,” that the two persons become one, more than one.

This bond (or “Holy Spirit”) that unites Father and Son really is impossible to explain – how do you explain “love” between a man and woman in Christian marriage? – yet Christian marriage is the best metaphor we have for understanding the concept of God and the Trinity. When a husband and a wife come together we are taught in the gospel (Mk 8: 6-9)...

But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother [and be joined to his wife], and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

In this analogy (which defines Christian marriage), this specific groom (our spiritual Father's Son) was willing to die for his bride on the cross because he loves her that much; and all of us together compose this spiritual bride.

So I asked Carlos, "Are you and I willing to do the same thing? Are we willing to treat the other person as more important than ourselves (see Philippians 2)? Are we willing to do the same for our kids? Are we willing to do the same for our community? Are we willing to do the same because we want to show God that we want to live like God? This serves as the theme of today's gospel and our response to the gospel message: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last; the person who exalts himself will be humbled and the person who humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt 23: 11-12). "Unless a grain of seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12: 24).

I concluded my teachings with Carlos by saying, "If we truly want to call ourselves 'Christian,' then we have to live like Christ. For me to say

that your life is more important than my life, that I am willing to give myself completely to you because I love you and I do in God's name is how we bond with the same Spirit in similar way that the Father and Son are bonded together. The Father and Son's bond infinitely is more intimate and powerful than any relationship we can find on earth but every time we care for another person in this way, we begin to understand the nature of God and who God is.

This is the whole point and summary of our faith – I summarize the two testaments of the bible with a quote from Lawrence Boadt that summarizes the Old Testament story (“Infidelity to the covenant, as given through Moses, will lead to disaster and destruction”) and Jn 3: 16 of the New Testament (“For God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son so that anyone who believes in him might not die but might have eternal life.”). If we show people that we love them and are willing to extend ourselves out to them in God's name, to allow the Spirit to speak through us and to tell the other that they are important,

then all of a sudden God is revealed to us and we understand why we do what we do.

Look at our results of this type of sacrifice – people are now coming to our churches again, as was evident from our October Number counts. We have twenty souls in our RCIA process and we had twenty in our process last year (I do not think the cathedral parish of the diocese has twenty people receiving the sacraments while other parishes are closing)! DRE John Raymer from St. Pat's is telling me we are now overloaded in our religious education classes. Since 2019, our average attendance at St. Anne's has increased by a factor of forty and St. Pat's by a factor of almost 100.

Like our parents in this community, I wonder how much good souls take for granted our faith and how they do pay attention to what we are telling them. Once in a while, you get that phone call from somebody like Albuquerque Carlos who asks, "Is my life worthwhile? Is it important?" So we keep doing what we are doing, knowing that many are not going to like us in the world for what we preach. Sometimes

those in our society (especially the “trolls” on social media) are going to disparage you for what you preach. As Matthew 5: 12 attests, if you live the Christian life, some will hurt you, insult you and utter ever kind of bad word because of God’s name. Yet, the key theme of the scriptures is this bond of love called “The Holy Spirit” that exists in every one of us.

Here in this church, at this Mass, we find the one place where we tell you, every single one of you, that you are important and that your life has value. Here you are told that you are loved. *God is love*. If we do this right, these people praying in church also love you in God’s name.

There are a set of faithful who pray for each of you prior to every mass through the recitation of this “Garden of Prayers,” the rosary, where every prayer is “planted” in this garden for the benefit of each and every one of you. Our faithful before Mass pray for you and sometimes you do not even know it (*they* may not even know it!). Prior to Mass, these good souls pray for the sick; they pray for the dead. They pray for the kids; they pray for adults. They pray for all of you because they are willing to make that sacrifice to tell you that you are that important, to tell me that

none of us will get that guarantee of love from the people of the world because the collective people in our society often act as if “dog eats dog.” At the Garden of Eden, we chose to leave that garden through our Original Sin to live in a world which often perpetuates that sin in the ways that they live.

For that reason, what Albuquerque Carlos asks me is very important to our faith; for that reason, I am so grateful for those of you who constantly pray for him, for me and for every person in need of God’s mercy. That is why we need you to tell you that every single one of you has an important role in this life. The whole idea is every person has value in this room. Every person has a purpose in life. If you let God lead you and guide you, then you understand why the priest is here, why others are here and why you are here – if you let God lead you and guide you, then we live like Christ.

When I was raised in Sandwich, IL and my pastor said to me, “Make sure you do not forget about people in the country parishes, I chose to forgo climbing a ladder (which I cannot stand anyway) and why I serve

you where some priests would consider a set of “dead end” Churches in the diocese. The pope might call these Churches “the peripheries” of faith but most priests see them as the last stop on the train. For this reason, I love to serve here and here I choose to end my working years as a priest. I choose to live here and hopefully die here for all of you, come what may.

Please be like Albuquerque Carlos – please learn your purpose in life. Please remember that you have value. Please learn that you are sacred and you are important and you are loved. Let us learn that lesson well as we teach that lesson with all people that we meet. This is our prayer.