

Why do you care?

If you have ever been to a priestly ordination, they have these prayer cards they usually hand out as a nice memento and gesture for all the guests. If you notice, however, most of the time they have a little scripture passage that in some ways encapsulates how they envision their priesthood. "You are a priest forever like Melchizedek of old" or "into your hands I commit my spirit." I think one of the most profound quotes I have seen on an ordination card comes from the Gospel for today: "he must increase, and I must decrease."

It is a beautiful reflection. As one's priestly ministry begins, the emphasis and the focus is not on oneself, but on making Jesus more known and glorified. The ministry of the priest is to increase the knowledge of Jesus the hearts of the faithful, and the priest must decrease or rather his humanity and his becomes an instrument of Christ.

However, this passage does not just apply to priests alone but to all Christians, yet the question for us is, 'how does Christ increase in us while we decrease?'

The call to 'decrease' sounds more like a rejection or negation of our own humanity. It sounds like 'I'm' in the way, my personhood prevents God from being known, and this is true to a certain extent. The proper way to see the call to decrease is similar to the call to crucify ourselves, to crucify our false self so that our new self can arise, our true self can arise.

I was asked a question by a bible study group a couple of months ago about 'why did God injure Jacob in the hip?' I too had wondered about that as well and the potential deeper spiritual meaning and I found that Pope Benedict gave a beautiful reflection about this particular point. What happens in the story is that in his struggle with God, Jacob seeks a true blessing because he had received a blessing previously, but he had to steal it from his brother and deceive his father in order to receive it. In other words, he had to put on a false identity to receive the blessing, the affirmation of his father.

So when God injures Jacob, he is in a sense injuring the false identity of Jacob; Jacob which means 'to supplant.' God then gives him a new name and a new identity: 'Israel' and instead of being the supplanter his identity is found in God for Israel means 'God is strong, God is victorious.'

That is the key to what it means for Christ to increase in us and for us to decrease: it is the call to allow our false self to be crucified, to be wounded, so that our identity in God can be found, our identity as creatures made in his image and likeness. As we grow closer to God, as his light shines brighter within us, as he increases within us, our true self increase and our false self decreases; we become more of who we were called to be as beacons of his light.

What can prevent Jesus from increasing within us is the temptation to increase our false self rather than decrease it. We can begin to build up walls that obscure his light because we find our identity in something other than who the Father sees us to be.

Christopher West, a popular TOB speaker, was on NBC nightline for an interview, but after that interview he was attacked by many people, theologians, bloggers etc. He himself acknowledges that there were some things he could have nuanced better or he could have used a different example, but he realized that the criticism was extremely painful. When he was speaking with his mentor, Monsignor Albicete who was a personal friend of St. John Paul II, Monsignor said these four words that would forever change Christopher's life: 'Why do you care?' It became clear that Christopher was looking to others to feed his false identity rather than to the Father.

Lord today we pray with St. John the Baptist that you will always increase within us while our false self will decrease. Help us to know our true identity and if you find it necessary, wound and injure our false self so that we may see how it prevents you from increasing within us. Help us to see that our true identity can be found in the Father, and that as your love increases within us, the knowledge of his blessing increases in us so that we may find our true validation in you.