

Homily for Saturday, 20th Week of Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 43:1–7ab

Psalm 85:9ab, 10–14

Matthew 23:1–12

I want to tell you a fable. Once upon a time there was a man with the unusual name of Horville Sash. Horville had a very humble job in a certain company, a job in the lowest basement of a building. He was a mail room clerk. As mail room clerk, there was no one who was lower than he was.

One day he came across a bug scurrying across the floor. Horville may have the lowliest job in the whole company, but he was bigger than the bug! So he raised his foot to flatten the hapless bug. But this story is a fable, and the bug speaks. "Spare me," said the bug, "and I will grant you your fondest wishes." Horville spared the bug. His reward: a wish. "I wish to be promoted to the second floor." And his wish was granted. Zap! He found himself working on the second floor.

But wait. Horville heard footsteps on the ceiling of floor number two. A higher level meant higher wages. The next day, Horville rose to the third floor job of sales coordinator. But that didn't end his ambition. He wished for still more promotions. He went to the tenth floor, then to the twentieth, the fiftieth, the seventieth. Still he was not satisfied. Horville was sitting by the indoor pool on floor ninety-six, when he discovered a stairway leading up...to another floor? He scrambled up the stairs, and found himself on the roof. At last, he was the highest, the greatest.

Finally content, he headed for the down stairway, when he came across a boy on the edge of the building with his eyes closed. "What are you doing?" "Praying." "To whom?" The boy pointed a finger skyward, and replied, "To God." Panic gripped Horville. Was there a floor above him? He couldn't see it, and he couldn't hear any footsteps shuffling around up there. Just clouds. "Do you mean that there's somebody above me? Someone greater than I?" "Yes."

The bug was summoned. "Make me God. Make me the greatest. Put me in the type of position that only God would hold if he were on earth." That very day, Horville began working in the mail room.

Well like Horville Sash the Pharisees wanted to be not only promoted but respected, not for their character but for their position. Jesus challenges their attitude. By their religious practices they were drawing attention to themselves and not glorify God.

Jesus then elaborates his warnings against seeking to be exalted over others. The faithful should not desire to be called **Rabbi** or **Master** (NIV: "teacher"), for their true instructor is **the Messiah**. Nor should they hope to be called **father**, since their true **Father** is divine (see 6:9). Fundamentally, despite differences among them, Jesus' disciples are equals: **you are all brothers**.

Jesus is stressing that humility is essential for the ministry, lest those who are placed in authority over others think of themselves as superiors rather than servants. No one, after all, can compare to the "Father" in heaven or to his "Messiah," whose teaching authority is unique. The disciples of Jesus will

share in the mission of the Father and the Son through their commission to teach the gospel (28:19–20), but theirs will be a derivative participation in something divine. Hence, the titles in question apply absolutely only to the Lord.

Finally, Jesus warns that one who **exalts himself** can expect the day of reckoning to bring humiliation. However, the one who **humbles himself** will be exalted by God (see Phil 2:5–11).

Catholics are sometimes criticized for addressing their priests as Father. On the surface the practice does appear to contradict Jesus' teaching in Matt 23:9. However, there is reason to think that Jesus is stressing the fundamental equality of his disciples, rather than establishing a literal prohibition against the use of religious titles. The earliest Christians did not understand Jesus to forbid such a practice. Both Stephen and Paul address Jewish crowds with the words, "Brothers and fathers" (Acts 7:2; 22:1), and the word father appears in other New Testament passages with reference to natural fathers (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21; Heb 12:9) as well as spiritual fathers (1 Cor 4:15; Phil 2:22; Philem 10). Likewise, spiritual leaders in the ascetic movement of the third and fourth centuries were addressed as Father, just as tradition commonly refers to the great teachers of the early centuries as the Church Fathers. The practice of the Catholic Church is consistent with these biblical and historical precedents.

Today the Church remembers St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century religious who although born to nobility chose the mail room over the 96th floor. He wrote in his book "On Loving God"

"The faithful know how much need they have of Jesus and Him crucified; but though they wonder and rejoice at the ineffable love made manifest in Him, they are not daunted at having no more than their own poor souls to give in return for such great and condescending charity. They love all the more, because they know themselves to be loved so exceedingly..." [1]

When we know this love we will desire all the more to discover greatness in service as we discover more fully this spiritual principle:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Mt 23:12). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.