

One of my assignments as a priest was that of Master of Liturgical Ceremonies to then Archbishop Daniel Kucera for five years. As Master of Liturgical Ceremonies I was responsible for aspects of the liturgical celebrations presided over by the archbishop. Some of these liturgies, especially major archdiocesan celebrations, involved the participation of many priests, bishops, archbishops, on a couple of occasions the Papal Archbishop Ambassador to our country, and on one occasion, a cardinal archbishop. For the major celebrations at which bishops participated I would brief the bishops about the particulars of the celebration prior to its start. Once finished, it was time to line up the procession to begin. Like other hierarchical organizations the bishops were lined up according to rank (auxiliary bishop, bishop, archbishop, cardinal) as well as “rank within rank” (most recently appointed to most senior). At one ceremony as the bishops were lining up, I overheard one bishop say to another bishop, “Did he say we were to line up in order of seniority or senility?” I quietly smiled, kept my counsel to myself, and moved on!

Jesus has some harsh words for the scribes and Pharisees in today’s gospel. In a college community such as ours, it is not hard for us to identify with the situation Jesus and Malachi address. Many of us live and work in an environment where the title before our name and the initials after it determine all sorts of things. Jesus isn’t implying that titles are bad and should be done away with in favor of some form of biblical “communism” nor work for advanced knowledge in our particular field of expertise. What Jesus *is* insisting about is that we must always keep our eyes on God as central in our lives, remembering our fundamental identity as members of the body of Christ through baptism, and that the title “Christian” which arises from it, clearly is the “title” that we glory in and that is experienced by others in all their interactions with us.

Jesus clearly teaches that who we are is defined by how we are with God and one another as we heard last weekend as Jesus reiterated the “Great Commandment”: love of God demonstrated through love of neighbor, neighbor being every human being in whatever stage or circumstance of life. We are to be learners of the one true Master, all

children of the “one Father in heaven,” humble servants of Christ and each other. How we *are* reveals most truly who we are. How we *do* reveals most truly who we are. In this sense humbling ourselves, as Jesus enjoins us, isn’t beyond us—it is simply living in right relationship with God and others.

St. Paul in today’s epistle from his first letter to the Thessalonians gives us a model of such servant living when he says: “we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children.” If any of us have ever witnessed a mother physically nursing her baby you cannot help but be moved by the gentleness of that moment of physical and emotional communion. In a world and culture which values aggression, getting ahead at all costs, power plays dressing are as the signs of success, even if in the process other people are trampled underfoot, Jesus’, the prophet Malachi’s and Paul’s words offer a different vision, a clear divine challenge to how we speak, act and live in the everyday of our lives.

The cancer patient sat with others in the area outside the chemo-treatment area of the hospital. In time the technician called out his name, “Joe.” Joe got up and went into the treatment room. The technician as he readied Joe for his treatment struck up a conversation with him, mostly about the weather, the local sports team, ordinary everyday stuff. At one point the technician noticed the unusual ring Joe wore. “Whoa! Joe,” he said. “That really is quite a bit of bling you got there on your finger. Where did you buy it?” Joe calmly replied, “I didn’t buy it, it was given to me as a gift.” “From whom? If I may ask,” said the technician. “From the pope,” Joe said. “Wow, you know the pope?” the technician said. “Yeah, I do,” Joe replied. “How could I get a ring like that?” the technician asked. “Well, the pope gives you it when he names you a Cardinal,” Joe replied. “A Cardinal?” the astonished technician replied. “You’re a Cardinal? One of those “big guys” in the church? I’m a Catholic but I’ve never met a Cardinal.” “Well, now you have. I’m Joe Bernardin, your archbishop.”

If there be any title, any honor, any seniority we strive for, let it be this: “Servant of the servants of God.”