

ORDINARY SUNDAY XXXI “C”  
NOVEMBER 2/3, 2013

The hotel wake-up call was 5:15 a.m. A quick breakfast, and then board the bus at 6:45 a.m. Arrival at the security check-point was 7:15 a.m. After passing through security, I found a chair in the section that corresponded to the color of my ticket around 8:00 a.m. on a bright sunny, warm and humid Roman morning and with about two-hundred-thousand of my closest friends waited for the arrival of Pope Francis for his Wednesday morning General Audience one month ago today (yesterday), October 2<sup>nd</sup>. As I waited I visited with those around me, did some praying, some reading, but mostly just waited. Looking up at one of the giant television screens nearest me in St. Peter’s square at 10:00 a.m. I shouted, “Here he comes!” Straddling two chairs, I hoisted myself up in time to make visual contact with the Holy Father as he passed about eight yards in front of me. It was a Zacchaeus moment!

The theme of the Pope Francis’ address was one that has become constant since his election as Pope in March—the mercy of God. Early in his address the Holy Father stated that each member of the Church is sinful—sinful men, sinful women, sinful priests, (and turning to the bishops and cardinals seated on the dais with him) sinful bishops, sinful cardinals, a sinful pope! Everyone.

“We are a Church of sinners; and we sinners are called to let ourselves be transformed, renewed, sanctified by God. There has been a temptation for some to say: the Church is only the Church of the pure, the perfectly consistent, and expels all the rest” (in the vein of the Pharisees in today’s Gospel). Continuing, the Holy Father said, “This is not true! This is heresy! The Church, that is holy, does not reject sinners; she does not reject us all; she does not reject because she calls everyone, welcomes them, is open even to those furthest from her, she calls everyone to allow themselves to be enfolded by the mercy, the tenderness and the forgiveness of the Father, who offers everyone the

possibility of meeting him, of journeying toward sanctity. ‘Well! Father, I am a sinner, I have tremendous sins, how can I possibly feel part of the Church?’ Dear brother, dear sister, this is exactly what the Lord wants, that you say to him: ‘Lord, here I am with my sins.’ ...The Lord wants to hear us say to him: ‘Forgive me, help me to walk, change my heart!’ And the Lord can change your heart. ...When you have the strength to say: I want to come home, you will find the door open. God will come to meet you because he is always waiting for you, God is always waiting for you, God embraces you, kisses you and celebrates. That is how the Lord is, that is how the tenderness of our Heavenly Father is. The Lord wants us to belong to a Church that knows how to open her arms and welcomes everyone, that is not a house for a few, but a house for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost. The Church offers all the possibility of following a path of holiness, that is the path of the Christian: she brings us to encounter Jesus Christ in the Sacraments, especially in Confession and in the Eucharist. ... Are we a Church that calls and welcomes sinners with open arms, that gives courage and hope, or are we a Church closed in on herself? Are we a Church where the love of God dwells, where one cares for the other, where one prays for the others?’”

Jesus scandalized the righteous among his listeners by going to the home of Zacchaeus one of the most despised sinners and sharing table fellowship with him. In every Mass, Jesus comes and dines with us. Jesus will not force himself, his forgiveness, his love, his life on us. While open to the invitation to come and dine and dwell with us, like Zacchaeus, it is each of us that must open our home, our heart, our life in invitation to him.

May our response to Jesus who comes and holds audience with us today be that of every Mass: **Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.**