

# 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Year

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I expect that most of you get occasional calls from Jehovah's Witnesses – I certainly do! One of the points they often make to Catholics is the use of the address 'Father'. I do not think clergy should get hung up about how people address them. The use of the term 'Father' towards diocesan priests is comparatively recent – mid-Nineteenth Century. However, the danger is that Our Lord's criticisms can be trivialised. It is not a superficial complaint about forms of address. After all, we do not hesitate to call our human parents 'father' or 'dad', or to those who give instruction in schools 'teachers'.

Our Lord's point is really about religious leaders building around themselves a cult of personality. They then become the message, and the Fatherhood of God is obscured. He saw this in the Pharisees. Even today the leaders of various schools of Hasidic Judaism are called 'Rebbe', which means 'Great one'. We can see it in political leaders of an ideological kind: Mao Tse Tung liked to be called the Great Helmsman and Kim Il Jong – the Dear Leader. Our Lord saw the same dangers in his disciples. Remember how he caught two of them arguing about who was the greatest, but they were ashamed to admit it.

The same often happened in the past, when priests were among the few educated people in the community. They could be put on a pedestal – or worse climb on to the pedestal themselves. No wonder disillusionment set in when their human frailties became apparent. Priests carry a heavy responsibility. When they fail they are responsible for those they lead astray. This is the true meaning of 'scandal', a stone for people to stumble over. So often when you ask Catholics who no longer practise their faith the reason, they will talk about some personal encounter with a priest that has disillusioned them.

The first point I would like you to reflect on is this: the priest is not God, contrary to the three year old in a previous parish who always said, 'Hello God' to me! The priest is only a frail earthenware jar bringing you God's treasures in the Word and Sacraments. Their humble and imperfect wrappings do not diminish God's gifts. You would be foolish to throw away a Christmas present because you did not like the paper it came in. Your Father and Teacher is God. He is the one who gives you life. Do not be put off by human failings in the clergy, not even by serious sins. Weep, be angry as Our Lord would be, but do not lose sight of the person who really matters.

The second point is that, like you, priests are on their way to holiness, not yet arrived. St Augustine said, "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian." We are all on the same journey but Priests and Bishops have a special responsibility to lead by example. One of the reasons God calls us to be a priest is for our own salvation. Our perfection needs your help. It is a two-way relationship. One of the greatest spiritual aids to a priest is the humbling example of holiness and love of God in so many of his parishioners. Priests also need the humility to accept constructive criticism. It is no help to the priest if people grumble behind his back but say nothing to him! If you have concerns, have the courage to say something. The priest may be able to explain and clarify, or he may learn about himself. If he does not, at least you have tried, and the Lord will reward you for it! Finally, pray for your priests every day. You often ask for our prayers, and we pray for you at every Mass, but we also need the support and graces that can come only from your prayers. Only in this way can we become those Our Lord will call 'shepherds after my own heart'.