Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Gospel text (*Mt* 23:1-12): Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted"

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Today, the Lord paints us a picture of the prominent figures of Israel during his time (Pharisees, teachers of the Law, etc.). These men lived a superficial and shallow existence: "All their works are performed to be seen" (Mt 23:5). Moreover, they are hypocrites, "for they preach but they do not practice" (Mt 23:3), and become slaves of their own deceit by seeking only the approval or admiration of men. By themselves, they are nothing but pathetic vanity, absurd pride, emptiness... foolishness.

Since the beginnings of humanity, the most frequent temptation continues; the ancient serpent keeps whispering in our ears: "God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil" (Gn 3:5). And we keep on stumbling through, letting ourselves be called 'rabbi,' 'father,' and 'guides'... and so many other pompous titles. Too often, we want to occupy the place that is not ours. It is the Pharisaic attitude.

Rather than be like this, the disciples of Jesus should be quite the opposite: "The greatest among you must be your servant" (Mt 23:11). And since they have only one Father, they are all brothers. As always, the Gospel makes it clear that we cannot disconnect the vertical dimension (Father) and the horizontal dimension (other). Put simply, as specified in last Sunday's Gospel, "You shall love the Lord, your God...

You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39).

The entire liturgy of the Word this Sunday is at once full of the tenderness and demands of discipleship. St. John's words thus reverberate in our hearts: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 Jn 4:20). The new evangelization —increasingly urgent— asks us for fidelity, trust, and sincerity in living the vocation we have received through the Baptism. If we do this, then the path of life will be illuminated for us — “abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever” (Ps 16:11).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “We are leaders and we are servants. We may preside, but only if we serve” (Saint Augustine)

- “What is needed is the willingness to “lose ourselves” for the sake of others rather than exploiting them, and to “serve them” instead of oppressing them for our own advantage. “The ‘other’ – whether a person, people or nation – [is to be seen] not just as some kind of instrument… but as our ‘neighbor’, a ‘helper’” (Francis)

- “… You have heard that it was said to the men of old. . . But I say to you…" (Mt 5:33-34). With this same divine authority, he disavowed certain human traditions of the Pharisees that were “making void the word of God” (Mk 7:13)” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, nº 581)