

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 5, 2023

“We’re all examples to one another.” This is what Mary and I remind the couples with whom we facilitate marriage preparation: We’re ALL examples to one another. Sometimes, we can be good examples and other times, not. We can learn from others. That’s why, while in high school—early in our lives together—we would talk about various behaviors and actions of our family members. We would identify those actions and behaviors that we would want to emulate in our married life together—the good examples—and, just as important, those traits—the bad examples—that we wanted to avoid. We have both grown, individually and as a couple, as a result of these reflections; however, I would say that Mary has been more successful in putting the good examples into practice in our marriage, while avoiding the pitfalls—the bad examples!

Jesus has similar advice to the crowds and disciples in today’s gospel passage, when he tells them to “do and observe” all the things that the scribes and Pharisees tell them; however, Jesus condemns the example of the Pharisees when he tells his disciples “Do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.” (Which, by the way, is the origin of the phrase “Practice what you preach!”) For you see, the scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus’ time were very legalistic and stressed observance of the 613 precepts of the Mosaic law which covered every detail of the people’s daily lives. They believed it was possible through human means to be faithful to the law and thereby be justified in God’s sight. Their focus was on external appearances and actions, to the neglect of a holy, interior spiritual disposition.

In the first reading, Malachi also has strong words for the religious leaders and people of his time. We hear words of anger and denunciation. What we do not hear is the lead-up to this reading, in which the priests and the people of Israel have been pretending; pretending to give their best in sacrifice to God. In reality, they were taking blind, blemished and lame animals to be sacrificed at the altar of the Lord. They were bringing second-rate offerings while “holding back” their best, what was real and holy, from the Lord.

These are good examples of bad examples. So, contrary to the example of the people in Malachi’s time, who didn’t offer their best to the Lord and the Pharisees who, with great pride, emphasized the external, we’re called to give our very best, to offer ourselves, to the Lord; and to do so with humility.

Therefore, when we “tak[e] part in the Eucharistic sacrifice,” the Mass, “which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life,” we’re called to “offer” Jesus Christ, “the Divine Victim, to God, **and [to] offer [ourselves] along with it.**” (LG11). We have this opportunity toward the end of Offertory, when the celebrant, after offering the gifts of bread and wine to God, calls us, the faithful, to do just that—to also offer ourselves to God—with this invitation:

*“Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice **and yours** may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.”*

Later in the Mass, our offering of bread, wine and ourselves is returned to us infinitely multiplied when we receive the Eucharist—the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Although we aren’t justified in God’s sight by our own efforts, by following the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, who justified us before God through the paschal mystery of his passion, death, resurrection and ascension, we can humbly proclaim ourselves CHRISTIANS.