

11/05/17 31 A

-- When I became the Ecumenical Officer for our diocese as a fairly young priest, I had many opportunities to visit different Christian churches. I also met lay leaders in these churches and was surprised at how many of them addressed me as “pastor.”

-- Having been a Catholic priest for a number of years, I was used to people calling me “father.” It was different, and at first it was awkward, but I got used to it. Perhaps they were taking very literally Jesus’ words in today’s gospel *Call no one on earth your father.*

-- Jesus was speaking in a very different situation here, and I’m sure he didn’t have in mind a title of respect Catholics traditionally give to their priests. But he was making a point about titles of honor in general, especially when people cling to these titles.

-- I suspect Pope Francis had that in mind when he limited giving the honorary title of Monsignor to priests over 65. The word *Monsignor* is from the French for “my Lord.” It was often thought to be a sign that a priest was “moving up” on the hierarchical ladder.

-- Jesus was more concerned with attitudes than titles. He was criticizing religious leaders who were focused on their personal comfort and honors rather than serving the people they were leading.

-- That’s a perennial temptation for religious leaders, and not just in the Catholic Church. Just witness the high class lifestyles of some television evangelists. The culture of clerical privilege is hard to crack in all denominations.

-- It’s no secret that Pope Francis has faced some resistance for his efforts to reform Roman offices and encourage simpler lifestyles. Even in our own country, after sexual abuse, the greatest scandals have been pastors embezzling parish monies for their personal benefit.

-- These habits go back before Jesus’ time. The prophet Malachi went after those in the priestly class who abused their offices. They would

offer for sacrifice blemished lambs, probably because they were less expensive. They would not give their best to God.

-- The point wasn't so much the cost of the lambs. The point was their attitude. They would skimp on the sacrifice while providing lavishly for themselves (from the offerings of the people that supported them).

-- God's word provides a good examination of conscience for those of us in religious leadership. Are we truly serving our people, or looking out for our own comfort? Are we more concerned with our public honor and being noticed than we are with the needs of the people we serve?

-- I don't think, though, that this word is limited to religious leaders. For all of us have the temptation to use whatever positions we hold in life to focus on our personal comfort and gain rather than what we can do for the people we lead and guide.

-- Those running for public office this week would do well to heed these words. Those who teach and administrate in schools should take to heart Jesus' words about being servants.

-- And those of you raising children should realize that, as you give your children appropriate guidance, it is not an excuse to manipulate them for your own purposes. They are not means for you to live out the things you wish you would have done when you were younger.

-- *The greatest among you must be your servant.* The Lord has laid down the challenge: to religious leaders, to those in public office, to anyone who has the task of leading and guiding others.

-- Titles of respect are fine in their place. But they are not means to obtain personal perks. May we, in whatever positions of leadership we may happen to hold, recommit ourselves to an attitude of humility and commit ourselves to serve our sisters and brothers.