

31 Sunday Ordinary Time, A

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At first look, it seems that following Jesus involves abandoning all formal names and official titles - teacher, father, master. And there are at least some Christians who look upon the Catholic custom of calling priests “father” as sure proof of their ignorance of Scripture. However, not even the first generation of Christians took Jesus to be condemning all names of social standing. After all, the Evangelists didn’t doubt to call Joseph and Mary the “father and mother” of Jesus. St. Paul even calls himself the “father” of the Church in Corinth, reminding them, **“I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”**

But if Jesus isn’t simply condemning the words “teacher,” “father,” and “master,” what is he up to? There is a similar episode from the life of the Chinese Philosopher Confucius that may give us a clue.

A disciple posed Confucius the following question: **“The ruler of Wei has been waiting for you, in order with you to administer the government. What will you consider the first thing to be done?”**

Confucius replied, **“What is necessary is to correct names. If names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”**

From this isolated saying, Confucius seems to be attacking names themselves. A mysterious suggestion. However, Confucius clarifies his

words elsewhere: “Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son.”

What Confucius is suggesting, in other words, is not the correction of words, but the correction of behavior. But he also seems to think that words pick out timeless standards of conduct, “the truth of things.” And the project of correcting names means persuading people to live up to the “truth “of each title.

Christ perhaps intended something similar with his prohibition of the names “rabbi,” “father,” and “master,” demanding not a reform of titles, but that those who bear the titles reform themselves according to the “truth of things.” And Jesus is clear about where the “truth of things” lies: **“You have but one teacher, you have but one Father in heaven, you have but one master, the Christ.”** The true standard for all our titles is God, and not just any God, but the God who suffered and died for us.

If we understand the Gospel this way, our examination of conscience can be more searching. The modern-day Pharisee isn’t only an uptight legalist or a religious snob. He is anyone who gladly accepts titles of position without accepting their divine standard into his heart. He is anyone who wants to write his job description rather than abide by the description written in the heavens.

Given this spin, playing the Pharisee becomes more natural than we think. Deacons, priests, and bishops can meditate on this image of the

Pharisees with a good measure of holy fear. But parents also have a lot to live up to in their titles; they are father, mother, and as the Rite of Baptism puts it, the “first teachers in the faith.”

By insisting on but “one Father in heaven,” Jesus makes the true standard of parenthood the love of His Father, who puts his children’s interests before His own. In light of this standard, we can see why the Church opposes family arrangements now common in our society, such as men and women living together and raising families without marrying in the Church. Every year sees the publication of new studies showing that, in order truly to flourish, in order truly to feel at ease in the world, children require the stability that only marriage provides.

Other arrangements are inevitably ways of putting the interests of adults before children’s, of accepting fatherhood and motherhood “on one’s own terms” rather than according to the “truth of things.”

There is also a lot to meditate on in the title, “first teachers in the faith.” The Gospel presents Jesus as the true standard for teachers because, unlike the Pharisees, he practices what he teaches. Applying the standard of Christ to our own lives, there are countless questions we can ask: Do my children ever see me study the faith at home? Do they see my love for the poor? Do they see me pray?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In summary, today’s Gospel leaves us with a question we can all ponder. How can I better imitate Christ in the living out of my

“names”? Happily, Christ is different from Confucius on one other important point. He never points out the standard without giving the grace necessary to meet it. He offers us strength in his sacraments. He offers forgiveness for our sins. His whole life promises that resurrection follows every sacrifice. He gives us not only our “names,” but the power of his name too. **Amen.**