

THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year C
Sir 3:17-18,20,28-29; Ps 68; Heb 12:18-19,22-24; Lk 14:1,7-14

***TAKE THE LOWEST PLACE BECAUSE
THE ONE WHO HUMBLER HIMSELF WILL BE EXALTED***

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, August 28, 2010, 2:30 p.m., Hilton Hotel
Sunday, August 29, 2010, 8:00 and 11:00 a.m., 1:30 p.m. at the park, and 6:00 p.m.

Humility is the **main point** of emphasis in **today's Scripture readings**.

There is a way to tell.

The church officials in Rome who select the texts we use for Sunday Mass, start with the gospel, and then they review the entire Old Testament to find the best Scripture passage they can find to augment or support the main point of the gospel.

The first reading from Sirach says, "*Conduct your affairs with HUMILITY*" (Sir 3:17); and, "*The greater you are, the more you should HUMBLE yourself*" (Sir 3:18).

The **first reading** from Sirach is an **indicator** that the **main point** of the **gospel** is **HUMILITY**.

In the gospel, **Jesus** was having **dinner** with some **Pharisees** (Lk 14:1a).

The Pharisees were **selfish** and **mean-spirited guys** (Lk 14:1b).

They were always thinking about "**Number One,**" **themselves**.

When it came to **banquets** or **major feasts**, they wanted the **best seats** for themselves; they wanted to be **noticed**; and they wanted an **edge** over others (Lk 14:7b).

Wedding banquets (Lk 14:8) were the **greatest banquets** in the **ancient Mid East**, and beside the **best foods** and **fine wines**, they were quite a **social event** and there was a very **definite social pecking order**.

The **table** usually was **U-shaped** and **long**.

The **middle** of the **head table** was the place for the **wedding couple**, or the **king and queen**, or the **celebrity**, or the **most important person**.

We even see this at the **Last Supper**: **Jesus** sat in the **middle** (Jn 13:2,4,12).

People were **arranged** around the most important person(s) in **rank order**.

The **first** most important person sat immediately to the **left**, the **second** most important person sat immediately to the **right**, then the **third** most important person sat **two to the left**, and the **fourth** most important person sat **two to the right**.

And so it went, in descending order, to the **lowest person** at the **end of the table**.

The **food** was **better** in the **center**.
The **service** was **better** in the **center**.
The **highest-ranking people** were in the **center**.

If the **seating** was **not pre-assigned**, and often it was not,
the **guests**, as they arrived,
would **jockey** with each other to see who would get the **higher place** (Lk 14:7b).

In a **shame-based society**, this is **dangerous business**,
because if the bride and groom, or the king,
or whomever is number one, the host,
when they come out,
and if they see a **guest seated too high** in their estimation,
and if they chose to **correct it**,
they would ask the person seated “too high” to get up and move.
But, they did **not ask** the **other people** to **slide over** one spot.
Everyone kept their seats,
and the **one seated too high** had to go **all the way** to the back, **the end**,
which was a **terrible embarrassment**.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they did not particularly care
if they had to **step on someone** as they **climbed** the **social ladder**.
They were more than willing to **take someone else’s place**,
even if it didn’t belong to them.
It was all about **getting ahead**.
In their attempts to **gain an advantage**,
someone else often was **mistreated** or **cheated**.

But in the Kingdom of God,
no one can get ahead at someone else’s expense.

So Jesus said, “*When you are invited, go and take the lowest place*” (Lk 14:10).

But that does **not** seem **fair**.
What happens if you or I take a lower place,
but we actually **deserve a higher place**?
What happens if the featured person **doesn’t ask us to move up higher**?
What if we go **unnoticed** or **ignored** altogether?

When Jesus says, “*Take the lowest place*” (Lk 14:10);
it is **not** to be taken **literal**; it is a **figure of speech**.

What Jesus is really saying is:
“**Don’t have an exaggerated estimation of yourself.**”
“**Don’t be prideful.**” “**Be humble.**”

The whole point of today’s gospel is that we **grow** in the **virtue** of **humility**.

My mother is my helper in the **virtue of humility**.

She talks to me like no one else. She is very **frank**, very **honest**.

My mother has told me many, many times: “**Michael, there is always somebody better than you and somebody worse than you.**”

There were times that I did well in school. I would have some **A’s** on my **report card**.

She would say, “Remember, Michael, there is **always someone smarter** than you.”

When I was **coaching high school basketball** before I became a priest,

we were fortunate enough to be **GRC champs** three times,

and I was voted **coach-of-the-year** on several occasions.

My mother would tell me, “Michael, remember, **the kids won the games.**”

Since I have been a **priest and a pastor**,

we’ve had **three capital campaigns** at St. Stephen’s,

and all three have been quite successful;

\$1.6 million for ***Growing in Faith***;

\$2.1 million for ***Going to the Well*** to retire the debt;

and \$800,000 for ***Comfort for the Masses***.

Some parishioners have complimented, “**Fr. Mike** is a **good fund raiser.**”

My mother tells me, “Remember, Michael, **the parishioners contributed the money.**”

My mom is very humble,

and she is still advising me on my need for humility.

My mom will tell me, “**So you think you’re so great.**

Just walk through a hospital.

Just drive through a poor neighborhood.

Look at how good you have it.

It’s all a gift from God above!”

My high school basketball coach was a religious brother, **Br. Mike**,

and he was another excellent teacher on the **virtue of humility**.

He told us as players,

“If you have success, **don’t get a fat head!** Always **keep the same hat size!**”

No matter **how talented** you may think you are,

no matter how much you think you may **know**,

no matter how much you think you may have **achieved**,

you should **never get a “fat head.”**

My coach, **Br. Mike**, was a **holy man**, and he was **very insistent** about this with us,

“If you score the winning basket, or if you score the most points for the season,

or if you have had great achievement, **your hat size should never change!**”

It is important to **be humble**.

If you are the star, it is not all your doing.

If you hit the winning basket, remember,

someone rebounded the ball for you,

someone passed the ball to you.

And if you have the ability to be a **good shooter**,
you have good **timing**, good **spring** in your legs, good **accuracy**,
where did that **ability** come from?

Your talent it is a gift from God.

So **be humble**.

If people try to exalt you,
or raise yourself to a higher place,
or give yourself a better seat at a banquet,
share the glory.

Give credit to others.

Praise your **teammates**.

Give glory to God.

And **keep** your **hat size** the same!

This brings us back to the great **wedding banquet**, and the **virtue of humility**.

The **Pharisees** were **obsessed** with the **seating chart**.

They were **over-concerned** about who got the **places of honor**.

They **lusted** for **high places** which was a **grievous sin against humility**.

The **concern** over **wedding protocol** has **not changed** much over the centuries.

Weddings are still major **social events**,
and there is a definite **social pecking order**,
and we are **quick to check how people rate**.

When we go to a wedding, don't we check things out?

Who is seated at the **head table**?

Who is seated at the **tables closest** to the head table?

Who is **relegated** to the **back tables**?

Where am I on the seating chart in comparison to others?

Have I been accorded the **proper respect that I deserve**?

Many of the **concerns** are about **ourselves**.

These **status concerns** often rise to the level of **sins** against the **virtue of humility**.

While we are worried about where we are seated,

Jesus has an **unsettling question** for us:

“Who is greater, the one seated at table or the one who serves?” (Lk 22:27a).

Two of Jesus' disciples, **James** and **John**,

jockeyed for position over the other ten (Mk 10:37).

Jesus, on the other hand, at the Last Supper,

had a position of prestige at the center of the table,

but he **left** his **privilege position**, bent down,

and **served** his disciples when he washed their feet (Jn 13:4,5), and he concluded,

“I have given you an example, as I have done, so you must also do” (Jn 13:15).

As a **priest**, I attend **many weddings**.
Sometimes I am seated at the **head table**,
sometimes I am seated with the **parents** of the **bride** or **groom**,
and **occasionally** I am **forgotten**, not seated with anyone, and left to fend for myself.

Once upon a time, I was **offended** for being overlooked.

Now, in light of what Jesus said about the **importance** of **those who serve** (Lk 22:27a),
I have a new approach.

I go out of my way to **visit with the servers**, the **wait staff**,
and it is amazing how much they appreciate the **time** and **attention** and **a little respect**.

For those **occasions** that I am **blessed** to have a **higher seat**,

I try to be as **kind** and **polite** as possible to the **wait staff**
when they bring and remove things.

I say "Please" and "Thank you;" "Ma'am" and "Sir."

The **servers** are **people too**, and to them, as well as the bridal party,
goes **a share of the glory**.

Blessed are the humble!

To God goes the glory!

Every ounce of our **ability**,
all or our **accomplishments**,
are by the **grace of God!**

Therefore, **instead** of **exalting ourselves** or **stepping on someone to get ahead**,
with the **help** that **Jesus provides** in the **Eucharist**,
let us **conduct** our **affairs** with **humility**,
and for whatever we have **accomplished**, or any **status** we may enjoy,
let us give **thanks** and **praise to almighty God**.