

## TRUE GREATNESS IS SEEN IN HUMBLE SERVICE

One of the many important books every Bishop of the Catholic Church must possess is **The ROMAN PONTIFICAL**. The Roman Pontifical is the Liturgical Book which contains the rites and ceremonies performed by Bishops. That book among other things, provides an optional homily to be given by the bishop at the ordination of priests. The last sentence of the last paragraph summarizes everything the Church stands for and moves me each time I hear it. It says: **“Keep always before your eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”** In his homily at my priestly ordination on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2019, although Bishop Philip did not read out the above prescribed homily, his homily was a summary of the key points contained in the Roman Pontifical. He said to me and Fr Nishan, **“The priesthood will cost you everything including your own life. This is so because no one is ordained a priest for himself but to serve others wholeheartedly and selflessly.”** To me, one person who has exemplified this humble service presently is Pope Francis. Since his election 10 years ago, on Holy Thursday of every year, Pope Francis celebrates the Mass of the Lord’s Supper in one of the prisons in Italy. Within that Mass, he washes and kisses the feet of men and women from various backgrounds, faiths, and none. I remember the first time I witnessed such a humble gesture and how I was moved in my guts. I was equally deeply moved when a priest friend of mine who works at the Vatican informed me that Pope Francis relates humbly with all Vatican workers be they Cardinals or Gardeners. Yes, true greatness is not seen in occupying lofty positions and/or wielding power; true greatness lies in humble service of our brothers and sisters without exception. It is this humble service which is the hallmark of true greatness that we are presented with in today’s readings.

In today’s First Reading from Prophet Malachi Chapter 1 and 2, we are reminded that the only person who possesses true and ultimate greatness is God. He is the great King and His name is feared throughout the nations. Hence, all of us who are God’s subjects and His ministers in one way or another, must place Him at the centre of everything we do and glorify Him always. In today’s Gospel pericope from Matthew Chapter 23, Christ Himself reminds us that true greatness is found in authentic religion which is manifested in humble service of others. According to Christ – *Meizon hymon estai hymon diakonos* – **The Greatest among you will be your servant**. It is refreshing to note the slight difference between the Greek and English rendition of the above sentence. While the English version puts the emphasis on service upon the assumption of the lofty position; the Greek version puts the emphasis on the service which leads to getting the lofty position. The Greek word **Diakonos** has two important meanings: Firstly, it means one who executes the commands of another such as a servant, attendant, or minister. Secondly, *Diakonos* refers to a deacon, who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the Church, cares for the poor.

As a huge fan of the British Drama Series – **Downton Abbey**, although the show portrayed the Aristocratic Crawley Family and their lineage as being powerful, we all noticed how dependant they were on their domestic servants. In fact, without their domestic servants, their lives would be in shambles. This important and greatest place

of the servants was highlighted to us when Covid struck. The powerful men/women around the world were not the presidents, prime ministers, and the leaders; no, the powerful men/women were the doctors, nurses, drivers, supermarket workers, cleaners, and so on, who risked their lives to keep us safe. They were the REAL HEROES/HEROINES of our Covid Pandemic world. Yes, servants do not act on their authority but the authority of their masters, which is why good servants discharge their duties in complete honesty, without any airs. St Paul's highlighted this devoted and protective roles of the servants in today's Second Reading from his First Letter to the Thessalonians Chapter 2 when he stated: "Like a mother feeding and looking after her own children, we felt so devoted and protective towards you, and had come to love you so much with our whole lives." All good servants do go beyond their contract because they had come to love their masters to the point of risking their own lives. Yes, all servants are deacons, and all deacons are servants. And we are deacons and servants.

My friends, **the greatest among us will be our servants**. Imagine a world wherein every one of us thinks of the welfare of others and not just ourselves. Imagine a world wherein we served everyone without counting the cost. Imagine a world wherein we all Paid-It-Forward by caring for each other and for our planet.

**The greatest among us will be our servant**. As your parish priest, one thing that drives everything I do is service. As I told you all in my letter to you – **I want to love and serve you all**. I am here not to wield power or authority but to serve. If at any point in my being your parish priest, you notice that I am autocratic or power hungry, you have my permission to write to Bishop Philip, report me to him and demand he removes me from your parish. As I always say – **There is no power/authority in the Church; all we have in the Church is service and service alone**.

**The greatest among us will be our servant**. In all the appointments I have made so far in our parish, I have chosen parishioners who will serve all of us. In my meeting with each of them, I have made it clear that they are not here to wield any power/authority or to lord it over anyone. If I notice that anyone in our parish leadership team is flexing his/her muscles against anyone, I will be the one to ask such a person to step down. **There is no power/authority in the Church; all we have in the Church is service and service alone**. Yes, the greatest among us will be our servants.

My friends, as the homily in The Roman Pontifical reminded those to be ordained priests and indeed all of us, let us "**Keep always before your eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many**." And when we have done our duties, we must echo those words of Christ in Luke 17:10 – **We are mere servants; we have simply done our duty**. May God help us to realise that true greatness is seen not in wielding power/authority, but in humble service like Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta showed us.

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (05/11/2023)