17th Sunday in O.T. 2022

How did we manage in times past without the mobile phone? Those of my generation grew up with only one phone in the home – usually sitting on the hall table – and parental permission was needed before it could be used! Today, we all have phones – it would be interesting to discover how just many in a congregation have phones with them. I am certain that there would be more with phones than those without. I get so many calls and text messages in a day, that at times I feel overwhelmed. Some are just chit-chat, others are more important, and from time-to-time, some are urgent, calling for immediate attention

Three things, other than a sense of duty, urge me to respond – the seriousness of the message; the anxiety in the voice of the caller; and one beautiful word which everyone uses. That word is, “Father”. The message often takes the form, “Father, my dad or mum has taken very ill, we are waiting on the ambulance; can you come? Father, my grandad, my granny, has just passed away; can you come?” “Father, will you come?” Parents will understand what I mean, because parents instinctively respond to a cry for help from a child – and it doesn't matter whether or not the child is an infant or an adult.

I like that word “Father”, but let me hasten to add that it is not because I have any particular attachment to titles – I cherish it because it is a constant challenge to remember that which lies at the very heart of priesthood. The priest, in spite of his human imperfections, is to strive to make visible something of the fatherhood of God, because priesthood is rooted in the loving concern of God for his people. Scripture says, *“I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer. 3:15).*

God’s heart, made visible in the heart of Jesus, is a heart pierced by a lance; a sacrificed heart, from which pours the water of service, and the blood of love. That Sacred Heart reveals the compassion of God the Father who bestows his love on all humanity. To be one in heart with Jesus is the calling of us all, but particularly that of the priest. Therefore, all of us ought to pray constantly for our priests, that their hearts never grow cold, and that God's people are not deprived of God's blessings through frailty or negligence on the part of his priests.

Some might strongly object to the use of the title “Father” considering it an indicator of “clericalism”, and asserting that priests claim for themselves a privileged place in the community. Of course, sadly, the behaviour of some priests has, at times, given credence to such concern and criticism. Should priests claim a privileged place in the community, they can only do so in the sense that it resembles that privileged place of a parent in a family – the privilege of loving, the privilege of serving, the privilege of witnessing to all that is good.

It is not idealistic, even in these strange days of non-gender specific language, to believe that a man can have no greater privilege than to be called “Dad”, and that a mother has no greater privilege than to be called “Mum”. Jesus himself called his Father “Abba”, which is the Aramaic word for “Daddy”! But, whether one is a parent, or a priest, it is a privilege which bears an enormous responsibility. Jesus refers to such responsibility in today's Gospel passage – the responsibility of providing for others that which is for their good. He makes the point that the extraordinary goodness and love of a parent towards a child, is but a reflection of God's goodness and love towards all of us, his children. The fatherhood of the priest can only be authentic if it witnesses to the loving kindness of God.*” The Lord says, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart”,* and again he says*,* *“What father among you would hand his son a stone if he asked for bread.”* The bread that the priest strives to offer to the community can only be the goodness and beauty which shines forth in a life lived in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *(cf EG 168).*

*“God our Father, you who are love,*

*help us never to doubt your tenderness,*

*and to walk humbly with your Son,*

*Jesus Christ, our Lord, and our brother.”* **Amen.**