

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today readings challenge us as Church, especially as leaders within the Church, whether clergy, religious, or lay. In today's first reading, through the Prophet Malachi, God rebuked the priests of Israel for their lack of integrity as teachers and leaders of the community. In a verse omitted in the Lectionary, God spelled out three characteristics of priests who were faithful to the Covenant: their decisions were just, their lives were holy, and their instruction preserved others from evil. However, the priests and Levites of Malachi's time were more interested in currying favor with the wealthy and the powerful than with being faithful to the Covenant.

In today's Gospel, Jesus warned the people about the Scribes and Pharisees as teachers. He told them to do as they say not as they do because the Scribes and Pharisees did not practice what they preached. They imposed burdens on others without making any effort to help them. Whatever good they did, they did in order to be seen and honored. Jesus reminds us who want to follow him, "*The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*"

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul demonstrates the meaning of servant leadership. He states that he was gentle among them like a nursing mother. He had such affection for them that he was determined to share not only the Gospel with them but himself. He worked night and day for them. Consequently, he could give thanks for them because they had received the word of God not as a human word but as the word of God. In other words, the witness of his life demonstrated the truth of the Gospel and proclaimed it effectively.

Today Pope Francis continues to challenge the Church. He teaches us that we are called to be an inclusive Church rather than an exclusive Church. He teaches us that we are called to be a missionary Church. He teaches us that we are to serve the needs of others. Above all, he teaches us that we are called to be merciful as God is merciful. He reminds us that it is never our place to judge others. Jesus himself taught: "*Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged...*" [Mt. 7:12]. Finally, Pope Francis teaches us that those who want to be an exclusive church have forgotten or do not understand the mercy of God.

My brothers and sisters, recently a priest was telling me about a book he had read. According to this priest, the book makes the point that the Church continues to lose members and not attract new members. He argues that we need to reverse our approach to evangelization to model ourselves after Jesus. Currently, we expect people first to live a moral life and then come to faith in Jesus at which point we welcome them into our communities. The author suggests that Jesus took the opposite approach. First, he welcomed people. Then he invited them to believe in Him. Finally, he challenged them to become holy. It seems to me that this is approach Pope Francis calls us to employ.