

## HOMILY SUN 21C 22 AUG 2010 HT-W/XII-PC

Back during my studies in Rome, I lived at a residence for priests from the United States. One of the fringe benefits was that I got to meet priests from all over the country and learn about how the church is doing across America. And once I was chatting with a monsignor from a large archdiocese going through a radical restructuring. It was necessary: there weren't enough priests to serve all the parishes; there wasn't enough money to maintain all the buildings and pay the salaries and operational costs. And so a lot of parishes were being closed. And many people were upset. And in some places, folks who didn't want their church closed were staging sit-ins in the building to try to thwart the process. Yet one of the ironies, this priest remarked, was that one of the chief orchestrators of these protests was himself a fellow who had not been active in the parish for a long time. For many years, he had not come to church; he had not contributed to it; but now he was vociferous in protesting its closure.

This is an extreme example of a phenomenon I like to call the "entitlement mentality." It's the notion that for some reason or other, I am entitled to something, that is, I can lay just claim to a certain service or position or disbursement or whatever sort of benefit. The "entitlement mentality" has found expression in the religious domain. One could call it "entitlement spirituality." There are folks who think that because they were baptized Catholic, they may therefore lay claim to the full range of services provided by the Church. Now what I'm driving at is that there are some individuals who drift for years from the church, never attending, never contributing. But one fine day, when they want to use the church, that is, they want to have a special event in its facilities (which they have never helped maintain) requiring the services of ministers (whom they have never supported) they expect to get it all and get it for free—free only because they're subsidized by the contributions of the faithful who are donating to the parish, I might add. One also sees this in folks who do nothing to encourage vocations in their children, and then lament the reduction in sacramental opportunities caused by the shortage of clergy.

The fundamental problem w/ entitlement spirituality is that there is no corresponding sense of accountability or duty. It asserts rights w/o accepting responsibilities. Our Lord's teaching today critiques this entitlement spirituality at a most fundamental level. The Lord portrays the unhappy eschatological plight of those poor souls who feel entitled to a place in the kingdom of God. They stand at the locked door, knocking away, expecting entry because they made acquaintance w/ the Lord in their previous life. But entry is denied them. The Lord teaches that salvation is granted to those who strive to enter through the narrow gate. He warns that many will not succeed. And he also notes that some who do enter will come from far flung lands, that is, from the Gentile nations, and take their place with the prophets and patriarchs of Israel, while some of the chosen people find themselves excluded. You see, the Lord was combating a kind of entitlement spirituality among his own people, in particular, among the religious leadership, who regarded themselves as having membership in the kingdom as a birthright.

The lesson for us is rather clear. The Lord would have us strive with all earnestness to enter the kingdom. Salvation is not granted to those who passively sit and wait for it to be delivered to them on a platter. You see, the Lord doesn't want us to be deadbeats who stand idly waiting for a spiritual handout. He wants us to become something better than that. He wants us to stand on

our own two feet and work and sweat and bleed and suffer for his sake. He wants the kind of followers he can joyfully claim as his own.

And so my brothers and sisters we must ask ourselves if getting into the kingdom is really our number one priority? Do we really seek the kingdom before all other objectives, laboring and sacrificing and subordinating all other goals to make it our own? Do we really try to discern God's will through fervent prayer, serious engagement with the Bible and church teaching, and, where necessary, seeking the advice of a wise confessor or spiritual director? Ultimately, are we setting aside all sinful patterns of behavior that obstruct our walk with Christ? Or are we structuring our lives as we do basically because our non-religious culture, our non-believing peers, and our sinful ego say it's the right thing to do? My dear friends, may this Eucharist enlighten our minds and purify our hearts to seek God's kingdom above and before everything else!