

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Catholic Men's Fellowship Conference

Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

Catholic Men's Fellowship Conference

St. Philip Neri, Linthicum

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I don't know about you, but I'm a big fan of "Five Guys," but in the Gospel you just heard, we're only dealing with two guys. In fact, we might title the Gospel, "Two Guys in a Synagogue." Actually, they are well known to us.

First, is the Pharisee, praying up in front of the synagogue. He is well-known and well-thought of in the community. He was highly educated, well-connected, a shaker and a mover, and, more than anything else, he enjoyed a sterling reputation. He was thought to be a man of God.

And he approached God as a man of substance and prominence. God was treated to a recitation of how good the Pharisee was. He prayed; he fasted; he gave alms - and not only did the Pharisee proclaim himself righteous before God, the Pharisee also took the occasion to condemn the poor fellow in the back pew, who happened to be the most hated person in town, the tax man.

Ah, the tax man, but not just any tax man. This person was a Jew who collected taxes for the Roman Empire which, at the time, had conquered and occupied the land of Israel. He was not only deemed to be a sinner, he was also something of a traitor, the object of contempt, a person who likely didn't have many other friends, unless it was fellow tax collectors and others of ill-repute.

And he approached God as man who was a sinner. He had no social standing. No great achievements. No admirers. So this man, the publican, kept his distance, stayed in the back.

And he poured out his heart to the LORD, "Be merciful to me a sinner."

How should we understand the difference between these two men? We might say that one was prominent and that the other a shadowy figure. We might say that one was proud and that the other was humble. Or we might say that one was full of himself and the other was a realist.

These descriptions are pretty good but they might not hit us between the eyes because no one of us likes to think of himself either as a Pharisee or a tax collector and as I say this I sincerely hope there are no IRS agents in this Church – I do not, I repeat, I do not want to be audited!

So, how can we describe these two guys in a synagogue in a way that might resonate with our experience?

And who can we point to that will show us how to be more like the man who was justified in the sight of God, that is, the tax collector, and less like the man whom God deemed unrighteous, that is, the Pharisee?

So, here's a way we might understand the two guys in the synagogue.

The Pharisee was the man who took all the credit and none of the responsibility. Remember what Jesus said about the Pharisees: "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses... They preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders but they do not lift a finger to move them" Matthew 23:4).

By contrast, the Publican was the man who took no credit whatsoever but he certainly took his share of responsibility.

What did Jesus say about those who are humble? About those who take responsibility for their own lives?

He said 'there would be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent' (Cf. Luke 15:7). He told us that 'those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (Matthew 23:12).

I think that's what we did today at this conference. We gave credit to God and took

responsibility for our lives, including our faults and failings.

Is there someone we all admire and respect whose life and example demonstrates for us how to give God the credit while taking responsibility for our own lives?

Sure. There are thousands of them. We call them saints.

But sometimes it's good for us to turn to someone who is an undeclared saint, someone like Roberto Clemente, the perfect example for all the Pittsburgh Pirates fans among us here today.

Besides dating myself, I'm also now on thin ice with the Orioles. So, we all know who Roberto Clemente was.

He was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico and grew up in poverty but there learned to love baseball and was good at it.

His major league career began on the bench of Brooklyn Dodgers 1954 but in those days he already had two strikes against him – first, he was black and second he was Puerto Rican and spoke with a heavy accent.

In Brooklyn he didn't play in a single game but he was noticed by the GM of the Pirates who gave him a chance. Clemente was with Pittsburgh for 18 seasons where he worked hard and in spite of obstacles showed himself to be a team player.

When things went right, he credited the team. When things did not go as well, he took responsibility.

A star with a strong throwing arm and his own unique batting style, he was the winner of 12 consecutive Gold Glove awards, MVP in 1966, and he achieved his 3,000th hit in this last regular season game in 1972.

Clemente excelled but he never forgot his humble origins. He gave God all the credit for his success on and off the baseball field. In spite of his success, he never forgot where he came from and was always willing to help those less fortunate than himself.

He was great humanitarian but a quiet one who never called attention to himself. In fact, that is how he died.

When a devastating earthquake hit Nicaragua in December 1972, Clemente decided to be a part of the team that delivered relief supplies to the people of that stricken country. The DC-7 in which he was a passenger took off from San Juan and crashed into the Caribbean, leaving no survivors.

A humble man who took no credit, Roberto Clemente gave God all the credit, and took upon himself all the responsibility.

This is a pretty good thing for us to think about as Lent winds down: to give God the credit, the thanks, the praise, the adoration, by spending time in prayer, by attending Mass devoutly, and whenever possible eucharistic adoration.

And to take responsibility for our lives, our vocations, our work, our faults and failings, by continuing to make good use of the sacrament of reconciliation, by asking for the grace of a humble and contrite heart, not only a heart that repents but also a heart that cares about other people and reaches out in generosity and love to serve them, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Then we and those we love will experience the authentic joy of Easter!

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!