

Fourth Sunday Per Annum (B)
February 1, 2015

They were astounded at his teaching for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Mk.1:21).

As we commemorate the mysteries of our Lord's public life and ministry, the Gospel text of today's Mass invites us to see in Jesus the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own kin; you shall heed such a prophet* (18:18). Jesus, however, is more than a prophet; He is the Son of God and the authority with which He speaks and acts is God's own authority. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me* (Mt. 28:18).

Our Gospel text records an exorcism in which divine power is displayed through our Lord's word, a word that is imbued with supernatural or divine authority and power. Jesus simply commands the spirits and they leave. Authority and obedience are at the very heart of life. It can be said that the whole of the created order obeys fixed laws of nature. From the greatest to the least, whether cosmic in scope or microscopic, the created order is governed by law. Humans are also governed by laws and our obedience to these laws, be they divine law or natural law or the laws of nature, determines our well-being and happiness. Properly understood, laws actually enhance our freedom. Authority is likewise a fact of life. All of us, even the least among us, exercise varying degrees of authority. Whether it is in the intimacy of family life, at work or in regard to our own selves, authority is either exercised or encountered and each one of us exercises a form of authority over ourselves. For this reason, many of our earliest years are dedicated to the proper formation of disciplined habits of thought and action. We call it formation in virtue and it should be at the heart of all education but most certainly primary and secondary education. An undisciplined life is ultimately detrimental to both our physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Our spiritual life lived with conviction and purpose also requires a discipline which we express chiefly through prayer, penance and almsgiving or charity. The reduction of Christianity to philanthropy betrays both the words and example of our Lord who Himself fasted and prayed. It is in prayer that our own words are also imbued with the authority and power of Christ our Lord, for we pray in and through His Holy Name. In the celebration of the Sacraments this is clearly evident; especially in the Sacraments of Confession and in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The priest speaks and acts with the authority of our Lord. This is especially true in the Rite of Exorcism. Though rare, exorcisms are performed, and in these, the priest always speaks and acts in the name of Christ our Lord; by the power and authority of His divine word.

In a talk (General Audience: *Confronting the Devil's Power*, November 17, 1972) given in 1972, at the height of the sexual revolution that has ravaged our culture, Blessed Paul VI spoke of our mysterious struggle with the forces of evil from which only our Lord's Redemption can free us, and he said, *the Christian must be militant; he must be vigilant and strong; and he must at times make use of special ascetical practices to escape from certain diabolical attacks. Jesus teaches us this by pointing to 'prayer and fasting' as the remedy.* The importance of these ascetical practices cannot be overstated in our struggle against what St. Paul

describes as *the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Eph. 6:12). This is why we pray the Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel after Holy Mass. It is a prayer that we should also recite every night.

As we give thoughtful consideration to our Lenten discipline so that we might become better disciples of Christ our Lord, we do well to reflect on the place of personal prayer in our lives. Prayer strengthens our Christian life and conforms us to our Saviour for it is in prayer that we learn to put on the mind and heart of Jesus Christ (Cf. *Phil.* 2:1-2). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that *by prayer every baptized person works for the coming of the Kingdom* (2632). We might begin by procuring a good prayer book. This is a good start in our efforts to deepen our knowledge of and intimacy with our Lord. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the absolute necessity of a disciplined habit of personal prayer and the importance of having a good prayer book. The use of a prayer book is indispensable in developing a regular life of prayer. Though there are obviously many prayer books available, I highly recommend *St. Benedict's Prayer Book*, published by the Monks of Ampleforth Abbey. (http://www.amazon.ca/Benedicts-Prayer-Ampleforth-Abbey-Press/dp/0852442580/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1422657798&sr=8-1&keywords=st.+Benedict%27s+Prayer+book)

Our Lord Himself said: *And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover* (Mk. 16:17-18). Such then is the authority of Christ which He shares with us who believe and pray in His name. The authority of Christ our Lord manifests itself in service that is liberating, compassionate and above all concerned with the eternal salvation of others. May our prayerful participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass help us to *listen to the voice of the Lord* (Ps. 95) both here in this Sacred Assembly and in the quiet of our own personal prayer; and may our prayer enliven our works of mercy.