

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Disgust about the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is partly due to its underlying hypocrisy. The very people charged with leading the community's prayer committed crimes on the side.

How we pray with others needs to fit how we act with others. That is the point of today's readings, and especially of our responsorial. In the bible Psalm 15 opens with a question that the rest of its verses answer. Faithful people have journeyed to Jerusalem and climbed the hill where the temple rests. But before they enter it, they get serious. They are about to cross into holy ground, a place set apart to experience the presence of God. So before taking a single step into the temple, they ask God this question: "Lord, who may abide in your tent, and dwell on your holy mountain?" They don't want to be hypocrites. They only want to enter if they are among those who may be there. Psalm 15 then answers its own question: "They who do justice will live in the presence of God. Those who walk blamelessly..., who keep the truth in their heart, and slander not with their tongue." The complete psalm lists positive and negative commands - basically, "Do good and avoid evil." But it takes a specific slant. The good is not just private prayer or personal integrity, but good toward others. Who does Psalm 15 allow inside? Those "Who harm not another, ...who hate the sight of the wicked, but honor the people of God! Who show no condition in sharing the gifts of their treasure, who live not off the poor." How you act with others directly relates to how you pray with others. This psalm informs the pilgrims to the temple, "Don't even think about worshiping here if you have not treated others properly."

We priests need to pay attention to that message. Helpfully, throughout the mass, the priest offers several silent prayers that make this connection between his moral and liturgical responsibilities. If he proclaims the gospel, he bows down to recite this prayer concerning his sinful thoughts and words: "Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." At the washing of the hands before the eucharistic prayer, he says quietly, "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." Then, just before receiving communion, he says one of two alternative prayers. One includes these words: "free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood, from all my sins and from every evil, keep me always faithful to your commandments." In the other one, he prays that this communion not bring him "to judgment and condemnation," but be "protection in mind and body and a healing remedy." Those prayers are hundreds of years old, and they remind the priest that before approaching the most sacred moments of the mass - the gospel, the eucharistic prayer and communion - he'd better seek forgiveness for his sins. He may not enter the holy mountain of God, he may not pray with others if he does not act properly with others. Sometimes we priests rattle off those prayers without much thought, but they are designed to remind us at mass how we should behave before mass.

Hypocrisy is one of the most repugnant sins in our American culture. Among politicians, hypocrisy can cost them an election. Within families it can cost parents the respect of their children. And within the church it costs trust in leadership. Psalm 15 knows all about it. It expects everyone to do justice for others before ever we approach the mountain of the Lord.