

"I have become all things to all, to save at least some." This simple line thrown in the midst of a longer address by St. Paul has both challenged and intrigued me for many years. At the heart of effective ministry in the Church is the ability to reach people, and yet at the core of one's integrity is the need to preach a consistent message in season and out. Understood correctly, this approach to ministry is most effective, but misunderstood, it has the potential to lead to a compromised ministry that seeks only to preach to the Choir, even when Choir members sing very different tunes.

St. Paul is comparing himself here to the Christ insofar as St. Paul is becoming like a slave, humbling himself so that he might be the servant of all. Jesus underwent the prescribed rituals of the law, as in the Presentation in the Temple just celebrated, and he observed the law during his life, to the extent that it did not conflict with his Father's will. He submitted to Baptism, though he was without sin.

In more theological language, we speak of the divine *kenosis* of Jesus, the setting aside of his divine glory for the sake of humbly identifying with those whom He came to save. This self-emptying showed forth Jesus' deepest desire to become small, so that the Gospel might stand out more clearly. St. Paul also submitted to rituals in order to show his respect for the Jewish people.

Frankly, it does little good to deliver a blistering sermon if you are not willing to stick around to help pick up the pieces. The Gospel is equally challenging for priests, religious and laity alike. But if we Church leaders are not truly willing to engage with an open heart, we will never move anyone closer to the Gospel truths we have promised to uphold. Yes, there are times when difficult truths must be preached and the messenger must not shy away from doing so out of fear of upsetting people. We do not brag about people getting up and walking out during a pro-life homily or when upholding the

dignity of the sacrament of matrimony. Still, the Gospel must always be preached in love and never out of spite or anger. Years ago, I recall hearing a description of preaching as “comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable.” I do not see this as the purpose of ministry, even as we **all need** to be challenged to grow.

Absent of love, preaching the hard Gospel truths easily could appear as little more than pent up anger being worked out at the expense of God’s people. But when preached from love, the message is entirely different. No priest should seek to upset people, to harangue them, and yet the salvation of souls is the highest good.

St. Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians of the need for milk before the people were ready for solid food. “I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it. Indeed, you are still not able, even now for you are still of the flesh.” He knew his people, sensing when some were ready for the next steps.

St. Paul became all things to all precisely in order to meet people where they were, and to call them forward from diverse places on the spiritual journey. He spoke of the need to “win over” as many as possible, realizing that not every approach would work equally well in every situation.

It is my deepest desire is to lead people closer to Christ and His Church in a spirit of charity and truth, without compromise, but with humility and compassion. That is a tall order, one requiring a careful examination of conscience each and every day on my part, and the assistance of your prayers. Together, I believe that God can help us to become a leaven in this world, all for the sake of the Gospel.