

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

November 4-5, 2017

Readings: Mal 1:14-2:2, 8-10; 1 Thes 2:7-9, 13; Mt 23:1-12

I have to think that of all the jobs one could choose, a career as a professional umpire or referee would be one of the most difficult. Generally speaking, someone is always yelling at you and angry over a call and they rarely receive compliments. There is a great story about Earl Strom, one time NBA referee for over 30 years. In a close game years ago between Boston and Detroit, the Celtics Larry Bird and Pistons Bill Laimbeer were charging after a loose ball.

They both fumbled after the ball before Bird suddenly dove after it. Laimbeer pulled up assuming that his opponent would be whistled for traveling. Instead, Bird grabbed the ball, flipped it down court flat on his back, leading to a perfect fast break lay-up. Laimbeer complained, "Hey, ref, that's traveling." "No," said Strom, "that's sliding, and we don't have a rule on that." He was rewarding Bird who out-hustled his rival.

You may have noticed how the past few weeks, the Gospels have focused on the idea of the Law, the attitude of some of the Jews and Jesus' response to numerous questions about the Law. Thus, it should be no surprise to see that Jess is more and more uneasy with all the questions and veiled attempts to trip him up. In today's passage, he loses his temper, tearing into the Scribes and Pharisees.

The entire history of the Pharisees was designed to make them a people of the Law. They dreamt of greatness, but politically that never materialized, for they were conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians. And yet, even if they could not have political power, they had the Mosaic Law, directly from the Lord, and no one could ever take that from them.

The Scribes are the older group. They too studied the Law and interpreted all the details about how one must keep the Law in its minute detail. But then in 175 BC, the Syrians made a deliberate

attempt to stamp out Jewish religion all together, and to replace it with Greek ideas and forms of worship. This was quite a threat.

The name Pharisee literally means *the separated ones*, and they dedicated their lives to the strict keeping of the Law. Though never large in number, perhaps 6000 at their height, they are mentioned in the NT because they were so influential. They were people of good will. Sometimes they are portrayed as lacking in any virtue—this is totally false. But they did get caught in their legalism. A legalist is not the person who observes all the laws, but rather the one who, having done that, is incapable of making key distinctions that in special circumstances, might warrant an adjustment.

When Pope John Paul II promulgated the 1983 Code of Canon Law, he wrote a very helpful document explaining the rationale behind such laws in the first place. Law “is in **no way** intended as a **substitute** for **faith, grace**, charisms, and especially charity in the life of the **Church** and of the faithful.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, it intends to “create such an order in the ecclesial society that, while assigning the primacy love, **grace**, and charisms, it at the same time renders their organic development easier in the life of both the ecclesial society and the individual persons who belong to it.”

This is a beautiful and concise explanation of the role of law in the Church and a wonderful response to those who feel that the Church and her members should not be “constrained by law.” No, the Holy Spirit inspires what our love has to perform. Just as faith means nothing if it is not active in love (Gal. 5:6), so love is not authentic without producing fruits.

St. Augustine’s famous aphorism, “Love and do what you will” should not be taken in a sense he never intended.<sup>2</sup> It continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Sacrae disciplinae leges*, para.16

<sup>2</sup> Augustine *Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12. Tractatus VII, 8)*

“If you keep silence, keep silence in love; if you speak, speak in love; if you correct, correct in love; if you forbear, forbear in love. Let love’s root be within you, for from that root nothing but good can spring.”

This is a paradox. Only the one who is the servant of love can be truly free, because this person has been radically freed from all egoism and selfishness. The laws of the Church are like wings that have as their purpose to open up in freedom an authentic experience of God.

Ours is an ordered faith. The Church, as a visible social structure, also must have norms. Good Law will always have some room for flexibility in it, just as Jesus pointed out today, and Church Law is no exception.

Whether in basketball, in life, in the Church, it is one thing to know the rules. It is another to appreciate how they can be both a source of genuine order and true freedom.