

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Titles are strange things—especially in churches. The technical term for the bishop in any diocese, according to canon law, is “The Ordinary.” That’s not because he’s unremarkable—it’s because he’s the one who is responsible for keeping order in the local church. But beyond that, the titles soon mount up. Because we happen to be an *arch*diocese, Archbishop Hebda is not only an “Ordinary” but also a “Metropolitan.” When one meets him, it is considered respectful to address him as “Your Grace.” When I lived in Boston, the archbishop there was also a Cardinal, yet another honorary title, and it was considered respectful to address him as “Your Excellency.” The pastor with whom I lived at the time didn’t care very much for Cardinal Bernard Law, and so he’d always refer to him as “The Beloved Ordinary” or merely as “The Beloved One.” The sarcasm was deliberate. And of course, when meeting a pope one should greet him with “Your Holiness,” whether or not that has anything to do with his personal character or not.

The same is true for priests. I am regularly addressed as “Father” or sometimes “Reverend,” though in a literal sense I am neither, and despite the fact that Jesus in today’s gospel tells people not to do that. If I were a bishop my “proper” title would be “*Most Reverend*.” And if I were a monsignor, I could be called “Very Reverend,” which would stretch the limits of anybody’s integrity who actually knows me.

There’s a running joke among some of my priest friends regarding Fr. John Bauer, who is Rector—another title—Rector of the Basilica in Minneapolis. His duties as pastor there are no different from any other place, but because he’s a “Rector” he’s already a “Very Reverend,” and because he’s also very funny he likes to remind people of that frequently. But he’s still not satisfied. For years he’s been whining to his friends that he wants to be a Monsignor and no bishop has ever bestowed that title on him. He says all that with tongue firmly in cheek. Because, in fact, the title of “Monsignor” (which translates from the French as “My Lord”), doesn’t mean much in the performance of anybody’s duties in pastoral ministry, but you can wear special robes and sashes and head-gear and capes.

Unlike many dioceses, we haven’t had a priest appointed as a Monsignor in about 50 years, and as far as I know, there is only one left alive today. That was a deliberate decision made by Archbishop Roach back in the 1970s and supported by most of the clergy back then. The belief was that titles like that not only aren’t helpful, they are harmful. Because they divide people into needless ranks of alleged honor, and they bestow sometimes false titles upon people without reference to who they actually are or how they actually behave. Holiness is not demonstrated by a title.

I would honestly be embarrassed if my formal title in ministry ever were to be “Very Reverend” because that is so far removed from who I am. And I know that’s exactly the way Fr. Bauer thinks too, which is why his campaign is funny, at least to friends.

Any title in the Church that is given to a person because of the idea that they have *earned* it by being good enough or proficient enough is a phony title, and a potentially dangerous one. That was Jesus’ point in today’s gospel. He was very suspicious of titles in religion. Even when he, Son of God, was dragged before Pontius Pilate and asked, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (another title), Jesus’ response was simply to say, “It is *you*, Pilate, who say so.” He wouldn’t take on a title, even for himself.

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But there is one title that all of us rightly share as followers of Christ, though we may be hesitant to accept it. It is the title, "Saint," which translates to "Holy." Every person here present today is rightly to be known as a saint. And in this week in which we have commemorated All Saints, and All Souls, and now our own beloved dead here at St. Pascal's, it is a time to remember our own truest identity. We are saints. Our true title is "Blessed."

And that has nothing to do with how good or pure or generous **we** are. We claim that title not because *we* are good enough, but because God is loving enough to claim and love us as we are. We are not "Very Reverend" or "Excellent" or "My Lords" as the result of any effort of ours. We are just adored by Christ because we are His. And that means that we share a radical equality in dignity because we are equally His. Whether we are weak or strong, criminal or not, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, Atheist, Ordained or Lay, respected or scorned by the world, pleasant or obnoxious. None of that matters. We are saints, rightly to be regarded as Holy. Not after we die, but now.

That is not a message that we are getting from a whole lot of other people and institutions these days, which is why it is so essential that **we** understand that. The gospel of Jesus today is clear. Sure, he says, feel free to respect the authority of those who presume to exercise it, whether in religion or politics, or government or business, or school or home. But when it comes to your behavior, follow me. Your behavior won't make you a saint. You already are saints. So bask in that one title that actually matters, and then act accordingly.

At the beginning of our Eucharist today we chanted the names of 37 of our brothers and sisters who died this year. Some of them were renowned for their virtue. Some of them are remembered for their foibles and faults. Some of them almost none of us really knew. It doesn't matter. We share the same title because of Christ, not us. We are the saints. Thanks be to God.

