

# Homily by Monsignor Michael Hazard

St. Joseph Church, 936 Lake Street, Kalamazoo Michigan 49001

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**31<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

October 30, 2011

Over the nearly forty years since I was ordained a priest, I have done my best to sidestep the obvious conflict between the present gospel passage and the title the Church traditionally confers on an ordained priest: “Father”. The best thing I could say—and have said—is that someone who would accept the title Father must dedicate himself, first, to knowing the One Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and then, to shaping his life on the image of the Father that we have in Jesus.

I still think that’s true.

But it remains true, also, that to accept the title is to put oneself in formal violation of the word of Jesus, “Call no one on earth your Father.”

Of course we have good company in doing so. St. Paul, who describes himself variously as brother and mother to the various churches to whom he writes, also says this to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15): “Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

St. Paul’s practice in this matter should not embolden us. We, after all, are not St. Paul, a spectacular figure chosen by Christ himself to preach the Good News beyond the tight circle of his Jewish co-religionists to people of every nation, race and color, of every religion and no religion at all. What we are is what St. Paul knows himself to be down deep: children of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus, brothers and sisters with one another.

Paul has the nerve to say what I do *not* have the nerve to say: “Imitate me.” This is very risky, I think. Of course, unless you are a literalist, one who gives absolute value to each word, even possibly to each letter of the Scripture, unless you are a literalist, you probably appreciate that *not* every word has the same force. There is hyperbole (overstatement to make a point) like when Jesus says: “It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” There is irony (the use of words to express the opposite of the literal meaning) like the use of the nickname, “Curly,” to catch the attention of a bald man. So when Paul says, “Imitate me,” his hearers quite likely understood that there might have been some limitations on how they should imitate him.

But what’s really at play, here, is not a select few names we should not apply to one another, but an attitude. If you did not identify the role that has been given to me by some title like “Father,” there would inevitably be another, like “Reverend,” (one to be revered) or “Pastor” (meaning *shepherd*). But you then might hear Jesus say, *Call no one on earth Pastor, you have only one shepherd, the Christ*. The proper attitude is one of humility that recognizes that the appointed leader of the community (the catechist in the classroom, the parish priest, the diocesan bishop, even the Pope!) is not God but is appointed to bring the brothers and sisters to God, called by God to preach the great Good News of Jesus.

This attitude is easier for the people to keep than it is for their leader, their teacher, their parish priest. It is easier for those who have no *special* standing in the community to recognize that we are all sisters and brothers, than it is for the one who is designated as the leader. It is perilously easy for the leader (the dad or the mom, the police officer, the

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head of the company)—it is easy for the leader to begin to lose sight of the natural limitations on one's authority, and to discount the new meaning the Jesus gave to the notions of authority and power.

I will say that the voids in my list of personal strengths often help me truly believe that I am not your "boss" in any sense. And the loving-kindness I have experienced over the last twenty years reminds me that what sustains us all here is not my enormous gifts but God's enormous gifts, the grace that enables us to treat one another with respect and care and love.

For the eternal Son of God made himself our brother by taking on our human likeness. The Son of God made himself the servant of all. And in so doing, he taught us what it means really to be a sister or a brother: one who serves all the others, in a community where all serve according to their role and gifts, for the good of all.

In this Eucharist, we celebrate and strengthen our communion in Him.