

Prophet's Reward
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(2K 4; Mt 10:37-42)

Today's Gospel, the end of Mt 10, concludes a section where Jesus has been instructing and training his twelve apostles for their mission work. Jesus told them they would have authority and power to act in his own name, casting out demons, healing the sick, and proclaiming the Gospel (10:1,7). He began by giving them instructions: travel light, don't worry about money, find a family to host you in each village (10:5-15). He also prepared them for persecutions, telling them they would be sent like "lambs among wolves" (10:16). As we heard last Sunday, they were to have no fear, even when they were being martyred, but to give testimony without fail (10:26-33).

And today he concludes with the requirement to put the work of the Gospel above their families: "*He who loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me*" (Mt 10:37). Being an apostle of the Church is fully demanding. It requires a complete dedication, a readiness to serve and suffer, and to leave all other concerns behind, including family and career. In return, the apostolic worker can expect to be supported materially by those he serves.

It is for this reason that the Church requires those ordained to the ministry to remain celibate, that is unmarried. Though this has a spiritual or theological significance as an imitation of Christ's celibacy, it is also a practical consideration, because of the nature of the work, and the demands it places on the individual, and the demands it would place on his family if he had one. St. Peter and some of the first apostles were married and had jobs as fishermen, but as they undertook the work of the Church they were constantly moving and travelling. St. Peter went first to Antioch, and eventually Rome. Either their family had to go with them, or they left their families and made other provisions for them (cf. Mt 19:27-29). St. Paul noted how some of the apostles had their families with them, but strongly urged those who would dedicate their lives to the Church to remain as he was, celibate (1 Cor 7:7). "*The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided*" (1 Cor 7:32-33).

In return for the sacrifices that have to be made on behalf of Christ and the Church, in order to be apostolic missionaries, Jesus assures them they will be provided. The people they serve will provide room and board, and practical necessities. They will do so joyfully and generously, because in receiving the apostles, they are receiving Christ (Mt 10:40).

In conclusion, Jesus promises blessings to those who receive and provide for the apostles: “*Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And [even if he] gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward*” (Mt 10:41-42).

This is a very solemn promise of Jesus, which is shown by the way he repeats it three times. This is the blessing of the laity, the “prophet’s reward.” Those who are fortunate to be able to host or provide for the Gospel workers, will be richly blessed and rewarded by God. Jesus doesn’t specify exactly what that reward will be, it will be different for each household.

The first reading tells of a household in Shunem which welcomed the prophet Elisha into their home, even setting up a room for him when he travelled to that area. They were very generous. They were a childless couple, and God rewarded them by giving them a son (2K 4). Another example is when the prophet Elijah was hosted by the widow of Zarephath during the drought. As long as he stayed with her, the jar of meal did not go empty, nor the pitcher of oil fail (1K 17:14). And when her son died, God raised him through Elijah (1K 17:22).

The laity know it is not a burden but a privilege to provide for the Church’s work, and for those who labor in the Gospel. We no longer host the Church’s work in our homes like they did in the first century; instead we build the parish church, and provide a rectory for the priest to live. But it is still a custom to invite the priest to our homes, in order to bless them and share a meal.

When Jesus made the three-fold solemn promise to reward the laity who receive and provide for the apostles of Christ, he also made clear the obligations and expectations of the clergy toward the laity. He did this by referring to them in three ways, as prophets, righteous men, and little ones.

The **prophet** speaks God’s word with authority. The man of God must be trained in Scripture and theology, that he may preach with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, giving counsel and guidance to the flock in the contemporary situation. Ministers of the Church undertake a rigorous 8-10 year academic and spiritual preparation in the seminary.

The **righteous man** practices what he preaches, giving good example through a life of holiness. We know the damage that is caused when one of Christ’s ministers gives scandal. Christ expects his apostles to live upright lives as they serve the faithful.

Finally, the minister is to be humble, a **little one**. When the apostles argued about who was the greatest, Jesus put a child in their midst and said whoever wishes to be great must be the least, and the servant of all (Mt 20:26). The clergy are not to take advantage of the laity's hospitality and generosity, they are not there to be served. Instead, they must put the spiritual needs of the flock above their own interests, in the name of Christ who came not to be served, but to serve (Mt 20:28).

In this way, the Church is built and grows, and the relationship between clergy and laity is mutually beneficial and harmonious. Christ articulates the pattern of the Church's work, and interdependent roles of the ministers and faithful.

One final reflection on this Gospel, is the need to promote vocations. To "receive a prophet" into one's home, it is not simply enough to think of the priests and clergy who are sent to the parish by the bishop. We must also think of the vocations that are sent directly from God. Families must be ready to welcome and provide for the apostle from those whom the Lord may call among their children. It is an honor, and a rich blessing from God, to welcome a religious vocation in the family, and in the community.

I have heard stories where God was calling a young man to the priesthood, but his parents and family discouraged and opposed the vocation. Perhaps because they wanted grandchildren, or because they wanted their son to have a successful career. Jesus said he who loves these things more than him is not worthy of him. And by discouraging a vocation in the family, these parents failed to receive God's prophet. They shut themselves off from great blessings and the prophet's reward which God had in mind for them. The faith in those communities that fail to promote new vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, will wither and die out. "*If they do not welcome you, shake their dust from your feet*" (Mt 10:14).

And so one of the most important ways the laity can provide for the Church – beyond making sure the rectory is comfortable and the priest has what he needs for celebrating Mass – is to provide for future priests from among their children. Even though priests serve the laity by providing their spiritual nourishment, the fact is the laity serve the priesthood by providing their numbers. The Lord arranges the Church in such a way that all the members have a role to play, all have a stake and a responsibility for the success of her holy apostolic work.

May God bless our parish, our priests, and call forth new laborers for the harvest of the Kingdom.