

Inside and Outside
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 12:38-44)

Jesus uses two examples to teach how the “inside” must conform to the “outside.” People are very skilled at presenting and utilizing an external face that is very different from the inner reality. They want to look good on the outside when in fact they are not so good on the inside; they present themselves as holy when the truth is quite different. Unlike other men, Jesus sees not just the outside, but the inside (cf. Jn 2:24); and his harshest invectives are directed to those who practice hypocrisy.

The first example Jesus uses is that of the “scribes.” Today we call them “clergy.” These are the religious leaders who expound on the holy things of God, and as such are honored and respected for their sacred office. Like the scribes of Jesus’ time, clergy today also wear distinctive garb and are recognized in public; they too receive privileged places at receptions and banquets. Clergy often benefit from special favors and treatment, including generous gifts.

It is right to honor such men of God, and express gratitude for the sacred ministry which they exercise – St. Paul says those who labor in preaching and teaching should receive double honor (1Tm 5:17). The problem arises, however, when the interior or private lives of the clergy does not conform to the exterior ministry represented by their sacred garb. It is good for the faithful to give honor and respect to the clergy due to their sacred office, but the first who need to give honor and respect to the sacred office are the clergy themselves, and they do this by not living a double life.

For clergy who are true, it is a daily struggle and burden to be challenged morally and spiritually by the fact of their office. Far from causing comfort and ease, the office imposes constant reminders of the cleric’s weakness and imperfection, which endanger the effectiveness of his ministry. Above all, the words of the Lord echo in his heart: “*to whom much is given, much will be required*” (Lk 12:48).

Clergy who use their status for personal gain, or hide behind their clerical status in order to live a double life, are reprehensible. It is this sad fact that has brought such damage and disrepute on the work of the Church today, and no single issue has been more damaging than the widespread subculture of active homosexuality among the clergy. The interior does not conform to the exterior; the life and witness being given is a lie; severe will be the condemnation (Mk 12:40, Lk 20:47).

The second example is that of the poor widow. Today the offering is dropped into the baskets passed around by the ushers; in the time of Jesus people dropped their offering into the collection boxes as they entered the temple. Then as now, it can be observed on the “outside” that some people give more, some less. Yet the amount by itself says nothing about the true offering, which is an interior act. Here too, there is great opportunity to be deceptive, and mask the inner reality. Only God and the individual know what is in someone’s heart.¹

When determining what one’s offering in the temple is, more important than the external *amount*, is the inner *meaning* of that amount. That is to say, the faith, sacrifice, and obedience of the heart. It is this that Jesus sees when he singles out the poor widow and claims, “She gave more than all the rest.” Through her example, Jesus highlights again the importance of the interior with regard to the exterior. This woman’s exterior act is a transparent reflection of a life that is fully given to God, inside and out. In fact, her exterior poverty is the paradoxical symbol of her inner wealth.

This attitude of the widow is not only important with regard to the church offering, it applies in all areas where we are called upon to give, help, or do good. When it comes to our chores and obligations, do we give the minimum in order to fulfill requirements? Do we give grudgingly and reluctantly? Do we give so much in order to look good? Do we give selectively based on what we get back in return? Or do we give sincerely and generously because that is who we are, and because it reflects the generosity of God with us? The widow put her “heart and soul” into the external act.

Jesus is not minimizing exterior acts and appearances, or implying that they are not necessary. What the Gospel stresses is there not be a disconnect between the two, but rather a harmony and continuity: “*Let your (inner) light so shine before men, that they may see your (external) good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 5:16).

Let us take to heart the lesson of today’s Gospel and put it into practice, bringing the inside and the outside into perfect integrity.

¹ It is for this reason that when installing new money counters to help in the parish office, they are always placed under strict obligation of confidentiality. In fact, they are not to discuss or even wonder at the amount of anyone’s offering.