

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year C: Is 6:1-2a, 3-8; Ps 138; 1Cor 15:1-11; Lk 5:1-11
February 6, 2022
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One theme in the Sacred Scriptures for this Sunday's Mass is the fact that God invites us to cooperate with Him in spite of our unworthiness.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah was given the glorious and heavenly vision of "*the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne*" with seraphim stationed above, singing "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!*" At this sight of this glory, Isaiah professed his unworthiness and said, "*Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*" But then one of the seraphim touched Isaiah's lips with an ember from the altar and said, "*See, now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.*" And then Isaiah offered to work for the Lord, when he said, "*Here I am, ... send me!*" At the sight of God's glory, Isaiah was aware of his sinfulness and his unworthiness, but this won him God's pardon and purification, that made him ready to work for the Lord.

In the Gospel passage we just heard, something similar happened to St. Peter. He witnessed a miraculous catch of fish, as a result Christ's instruction and intervention, and his reaction to this sign of Christ's divinity was to fall to his knees in the boat and say to Jesus, "*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*" But Jesus said to him, "*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.*" In each case, a manifestation of the divine led to an admission of unworthiness and was met by a divine invitation to serve and cooperate with the Lord.

In the second reading, St. Paul tells us that he also knew the privilege of working for God in spite of his unworthiness. He tells the Corinthians, "*Last of all, as to one born abnormally, [Christ] appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective.*" St. Paul was forever grateful that Christ had called him to be an apostle even though he had been persecuting the Church before his conversion. But when Christ called him, it required him to change his life drastically.

So, the Scriptures for this Sunday's Mass emphasize that God invites the sinful to be His co-workers and to help Him in the great work of spreading the

Gospel and building the Kingdom of God. But there is a danger here of which we all should be aware, because it has caused many problems and scandals in the Church. It's true that God asks and invites us to serve Him and cooperate with Him in spite of our sinfulness. No one is without sin, and if God called only the perfect to work with Him, He would have no co-workers. But the critical detail in this message from the Scriptures is that Isaiah, Peter and Paul all acknowledged and admitted their sinfulness, which included a desire and sincere intention to change and reform their lives.

In other words, it's not enough to admit our sins, without a sincere intention to do something about them. Some people might think that if God invites even the sinful to cooperate with Him (which is true), then God is ok with their sins and finds them acceptable. Such thinking is what has caused many priests, for example, to live double lives – lives that are directly contrary to the teachings of Christ and their ordination promises. And the result has been great scandal and spiritual casualty. Over my 20 years as a priest, I have met several people who did not hesitate to tell me that they have nothing to do with the Church anymore because of the unrepentant, sinful behavior of a priest. And the same dangerous consequence is present if a lay member of the Church attempts to live a double life that is contrary to the faith.

So, the critical matter is what we do *after* we acknowledge our sins. What matters to God (and to others who are watching all of us in the Church) is whether we are honest and sincere about wanting to *avoid* sin. What matters to God is whether we are contrite and repentant about our sinfulness and our unworthiness. It's true that God invites the sinful to cooperate with Him, but that does not mean that He invites those who refuse to reform their lives. God calls and invites all of us to constant conversion. And if we acknowledge and admit our sinfulness, God is willing to look beyond our unworthiness and invites us to work with Him in His great project and mission of redemption. Isaiah knew this. St. Paul knew it. And St. Peter was able to become the first pope because he was convinced of it.

The same is true for us. When we become aware of God's glory and His holiness, we often become more aware of our sinfulness and our unworthiness. But if we admit it with sorrow and a sincere desire and intention to change, God invites us to join Him as His co-workers and to help Him bring others to Christ, so that they will discover the more abundant life that He came to bring us.