

[Readings: Mal. 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10; Psalm 131; 1 Thess. 2:7b-9, 13; Matt 23-1-12]

As I reflect especially upon our First Reading and Gospel passage this morning, I see in my mind's eye the great Judgment Day. Millions of people are gathered all in one spot – the ancient City of Megiddo, if we believe the movie, *The Omen*. God comes down from the Heavens on His great Throne, with the Son of God on His right hand, and the Holy Spirit on His left.

His thunderous voice bellows: “All of you, my clergy, gather around at the front of the multitude!” Ever obedient, all the bishops, priests and deacons come to the head of the class. Looking down their noses at the lowly laity, and raising their noses in the air of superiority, they see God the Father gathering up the thunderbolts in His outstretched hands.

Looking back at the crowds and at each other, the clergy say to one another: “They’re gonna get it now!” They snicker as they await Round One of Judgment Day. They look back up at God. Their eyes grow wide as they see God releasing His anger and wrath – at THEM! The thunderbolts burn most of them to a crisp. Not the ending you were expecting, eh?

All of you lay folks – men, women, youth and children who make up what we call the laity – all of you will receive your just desserts at the end of time, for how you lived your lives on earth – good or bad. But we ordained folks are going to have a lot more to answer for. One visionary said a hundred years ago that the road to Hell will be paved with the heads of all the bad clergy of the world who ever lived. YIKES! They did not practice what they preached! Maybe that’s why I have never been a fan of brick pavers with my name on it!

That’s how serious – how deadly serious – we bishops, priests and deacons are to take our call to ordained ministry and our service to God through our ministry and service to you. As you have heard at so many non-Catholic wedding ceremonies, marriage is not something to be entered into lightly. Neither is the call to priesthood or to the permanent diaconate. It comes with a price. But the retirement benefits are “out of this world!” And worth the calling!

Today's readings from both Malachi and Matthew call us ordained men to a renewal of priestly integrity. A renewal of the gift of one's very self, working day and night, as health permits! The truly good bishop, priest or deacon sees their lifestyle as that of a gentle, nursing mother – protecting and nurturing the spiritual children God gives them.

That is the best compliment I have been given as a priest: that something inspired by the Holy Spirit that I said or did brought someone closer to God, closer to their faith, closer to the Church. I read many of those kinds of testimonials you write in your cards and notes to me for Priesthood Sunday and my birthday. It is that positive affirmation that you give me which sustains me in darker days. Thank you.

The worthiness of being a priest, the worthiness of being a son or daughter of God, is something we never earn. It is given to us freely, generously and lovingly by God, through the constant interaction of the Holy Spirit, which St. Paul says in today's Second Reading, "is now at work in you who believe."

Today's Gospel reading contains a verse that, when taken literally, has been used by some Protestants to condemn Catholicism because we call our priests "Father." By that logic, when Jesus said, "Call no one on earth your father," He meant our dads, too, right? Did He never call St. Joseph by the title "father?" Perhaps when Jesus as a lad had a question about carpentry He said, "Hey dude who's married to Mom!" I don't think so. He called him Abba. Daddy.

To understand what Jesus means in this scripture, we need to read the whole passage: This singled-out verse is actually part of a teaching about equality. He is telling us that we must not consider anyone to be superior to ourselves -- no one but God is superior to us. Remember then that in all of this, the emphasis is NOT on our unworthiness. None of us is truly worthy. Beginning with me. Rather, our worthiness relies on our faith in Jesus Christ! God's grace given in the sacrament of the Eucharist is a gift. We only need to respond to and accept this gift, and live it out. Blessed indeed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb! And to live out that holiness in our daily lives in service. AMEN!