

Homily St Pius – St Anthony 4th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B

Jesus faithfully turns out to the synagogue again, today. Often people ask me about the Catholic obligation of Sunday mass (of course, we are still not under that NOW due to the Coronavirus- but back in normal times, and we will get to them again maybe soon enough, we do live under an obligation to celebrate the Holy Eucharist at least weekly on Sunday). My first reaction is always to think of Jesus Himself: the faithful regularity and frequency with which we hear of Jesus ‘going to synagogue’, ‘teaching in the Temple’ or ‘showing up in the synagogue on Sabbath’. He sets the example of weekly faithful Sabbath observance at synagogue, so there is no question about it to me: we go to Church weekly, & celebrate the Eucharist, just like Him! We follow Him!

Jesus is a great teacher, But He is also a great exorcist! Who would have thought? *Teachers today may want that combined skill set with some class groups?* Just kidding... Yet, something about today’s reading makes me flash back to my childhood. Here’s a couple of memories: one time in 5th grade, after a certain teacher student interaction, I thought, “I can’t believe you just tried that shenanigan”. I don’t mean the teacher but what a student tried. I had great no nonsense 5th grade teacher, she was good with offering illustrations and tutorials—She was demanding but she had such good classroom sense about her. Probably because she had been taught by her own kids growing up what games they tried playing in her. But a classmate of mine John---his behavior (talking and pushing on desks) had been disruptive and distracting to the rest of class, and she said, “John, get your book and go the to the principal’s office, now.” He kicked around a little, begged off, but she insisted and so he went out the door. He was gone a little bit and then he came back in quietly and sat with his head down writing. She stopped teaching and said, “Welcome back John, that was fast what did Mr Hayden say to you?” John responded, “He told me not to do that anymore”. And she got up immediately and escorted him back down the hall. And we were all in shock, not about her walking him out, but that he would try pull such a con! Mr Hayden never did that-he kept the student out in the library as timeout! Or again, in high school once, a friend Scott was thrown out of history class for distracting the class talking under his breath during a movie like running commentary, and Mr Bishop sent him down the hall to the teacher’s lounge in solitary. But Scott but became more of a distraction because kids kept getting up to fake throwing paper away, to get a look out the door and down the hall to see Scott down at the lounge. He had poured himself a cup of coffee and was Xeroxing sport magazine pictures. But, it didn’t end well for him that day. But as I think about these guys and distractions, I think they needed some good “Jesus-focus” brought to them. A little more attention and calm. But Jesus does that in our gospel today; He not only calms/pacifies the troubled spirits,

but He also teaches with a commanding authority that is universally recognized, appreciated. His authority truly brings the unity, the integration and peace that only living truth can accomplish.

Good teachers, like we hear about in our gospel exemplified in Jesus Himself, can keep clear and focused under all circumstances, and always bring light and peace to the matters before them. I think that is part of what the people mean, when today they are '**astonished**' in the reading at Jesus and say that (vs 22. 27) "**He teaches with authority unlike our scribes**".

It may seem like two different things are going on in the reading. The first that Jesus is the greatest teacher ever (of course, because He is the Wisdom of God incarnate), but also secondly that Jesus works wonders, by casting out demons from the man pulled in too many directions. Yet, I suggest that these things are pretty closely related after all.

Since the demon exorcism is more dramatic, let's start by looking at it: what is really going on when Jesus casts out demons? We can learn something even from listening to 'crazy people' (& no offense, *because some of our most brilliant minds have teetered on the edge of sanity* before, during, and/or after their great discoveries to art/science). So what do these demons say today? Well, **they confess their own** torment to Jesus. Did you notice, the demon(s) says "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-." That Multiple and Plural jumped out at me! How many selves are inside the man? Is this a true multiple personality situation, or is the man torn in so many directions by manic passions/forces/urges/racing and obsessive (**possessive**) thoughts, that he has not an ounce of focus. No peace, No clarity. I think so. He lives in a storm of conflicting pulls and pushes to '*do this-do that-go here-go there-call them-don't call them*'. Whatever is attacking his mind/heart leaves him pulled apart- He has no aim; no center. I like how the 'I' peeks out of the man's word-cloud, only, when it comes to 'knowing who Jesus is' (I know who you are-the Holy One). That's what brings the order (I-know) to the man's tortured heart-mind. The pushing-pulling of a divided or split mind/heart is what I think is behind the 'convulsing' we hear so often about with the bible stories of 'demon-possessed' that Jesus encounters. We find such references of 'possessions' or mind-splitting demons, in other places in the bible too. The letter to the Ephesians advises Christians to beware of (4:14) being "tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery" or when the Letter of James (1:6) cautions about 'doubt that treats one like "a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind."' (*The root of 'doubt' is 'doubling'-being torn between at least two options*). Or the prophet Jeremiah 17:9 that says that 'More tortuous than anything is

the human heart.” James 4:8, even calls it ‘doublemindedness’. Yet James there, offers the solution of ‘*drawing near to Christ*’. That is what happens in today’s gospel. As *the demons draw near to Christ, the internal chaos is silenced, ordered, pacified*. The storm is calmed (sound familiar) and tension is relieved by Jesus’ presence and His words. I think this ‘clarifying’ act of ‘bringing together ‘otherwise flying-apart minds’ is what is accomplished by Jesus in the Martha/Mary Home story of Luke 10:42 where **Jesus ‘centers’ Martha** by calling her name ‘Martha Martha’. He says her name twice, as if he is bringing her into a still point of focus on Him from being pulled into different directions. Jesus does this for the possessed man in the gospel. He brings the man together, to rediscover what is most important- God and keeping in tune, synchronized with Him. And that is what Jesus, the good ‘**authoritative**’ teacher does too. He has 1) command over the distracting demons, and He has 2) command over the material He is teaching (and what does Jesus teach, but the good life-the abundant life of John 10:10). Jesus knows it, and He knows us. He is focused, disciplined and always draws out the integrating, coherent truth of every matter. He desires to give us that focus, calm and peace that comes from anchoring ourselves in Him. He can separate (cast) out the unimportant, the trivial distractions of this world, to keep us from being swept away and our peace pulled away from us. Jesus centers us, to bring proper focus to what is needed. He orders chaos and it is put into place. Hearing Him (God’s word), drawing near to Him and staying with Him brings us peace, calm and clear direction.