HOMILY FOR THE 22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – C
August 28, 2016

When I was seven years old, my Uncle Lawrence moved into an apartment in Cleveland, across
town from where we lived. Previously my uncle lived out of state and I don’t know if I’d even seen him
before this. But when he moved to Cleveland, we would go visit him from time to time. I remember the
first time we went to visit him. There was a good bit of mystery to it. Not only were we going to see an
uncle that I really didn’t know -- but he had his own apartment. And I had never even been in an
apartment before. For someone who grew up in a home with multiple residents – my parents, sister,
grandmother and aunt – going to visit someone who lived by himself in his own apartment was like going
into a strange new world.

Though I wasn’t sure what my uncle or his apartment would be like, I was pretty sure what would
be expected of my sister and me when we got there – find a way to amuse ourselves quietly in the
background somewhere while the adults sat together, drank coffee, and talked. But to our surprise and
sheer delight, Uncle Lawrence did something totally unexpected. He asked us if we would like a cup of
coffee. And of course, we said yes, and received our cups of coffee with sheer delight. Now regardless of
what one thinks about the merits of giving coffee to children, I have to say that my sister and I thought
that this was absolutely awesome. We felt like the person in the gospel who took the
lowest place and
then was told by the host to move up to a higher position. Being given that cup of coffee made us feel
special, like honored guests. And, of course, that’s why my uncle did it. To him we were special. Giving
us that cup of coffee was his way of letting us know.

It seems to me that today’s gospel is telling us that, as the followers of Jesus, this is the way we
are to treat people, especially those who are often ignored by others, or treated as though they are of little
worth – the physically or mentally challenged, the homeless, the jobless, the prisoner, the addict – any of
those who for some reason don’t seem to fit into society’s picture of acceptability. Though not
necessarily by giving them a cup of coffee, we are to treat them in such a way that they know we consider
them to be persons of great worth.

We are to do this for them, and for us. For you see, this is where the humility that Jesus speaks of
in the gospel is to be found – the kind of humility that leads to life in the kingdom of God. True humility
is not a debasing of ourselves so that we give the impression to others that we think our lives are of little
value. Nor is it a matter of simply choosing to give someone a special place and treat them well because
we feel sorry for them. This kind of humility is really more about us than it is about the persons we have
treated so well. After doing this, we may just as well pat ourselves on the back and say, “Look at all that
I’ve done for those poor people. And I’m also very humble.” This is not the kind of humility Jesus is
calling us to in the gospel.

Rather, true humility flows from our recognition of the infinite value of each person, including us.
The more we see the preciousness of each person, the more we will be moved to relate to them in ways
that let them know just how precious they are. And in doing this, we also come to the most profound
sense of how precious we are. True humility has to do with coming to see what is wonderful about being
human, with coming to recognize the great value of what we all share as human beings. In other words,
there is nothing that any of us can add to it that is more precious that the humanity we share with all
others as people made in the image of God. And to live out of this truth is true humility.

Someone who has written quite beautifully about this is the late Fr. Henri Nouwen, particularly in
his book entitled Adam. The book is based on his experience of becoming pastor of the L’Arche
Daybreak community in Toronto. L’Arche is an international federation of communities in which persons with physical and intellectual disabilities and their caregivers live together in community. Fr. Nouwen shocked many people when he accepted this assignment. He had been a prolific writer on spiritual and moral matters, had held teaching positions at Yale and Harvard, and was in demand as a speaker at various gatherings throughout the world. But he knew that something was missing in his life, so he accepted the invitation to become the pastor of L’Arche Daybreak.

One of Nouwen’s duties there was to be a caregiver for a young man named Adam Arnett. Adam was a person who had frequent seizures and couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move without assistance. Each day Fr. Nouwen assisted Adam with bathing, dressing, eating and preparing for the day. This was not an easy task, especially for one who had no experience doing such things. Yet Fr. Nouwen says that he learned more about the spiritual life and about being human from his time with Adam than from any other experience in his life.

Adam had given Henri Nouwen the profound gift of allowing himself to be cared for by another human being. He had allowed his life to be placed in Henri’s hands. And the longer he was with Adam the more Fr. Nouwen began to see through the disabilities to a person who could still give and receive love. Though often in silence, Fr. Nouwen experienced a deep communion of spirit with Adam. He came more and more to a sense of what a great privilege it was to share life with him. More than anyone else ever had, Adam had taught Henri Nouwen about the precious things all humans share simply by being human, things that are of far greater value than any particular gifts or abilities. And he was profoundly humbled, as he came to recognize as he never had before what a precious gift human life really is.

True humility is valuing ourselves and others for the right reason – not because one is better than another but because each and every human being is of inestimable value. And the greatest thing we can do for others is to treat them in ways that help them to recognize this. We do this by imitating God, who more than any other knows the value of each person. The writer of Hebrews tells us that God has invited all people to come to his house – to this place where we enter the heavenly Jerusalem, with countless angels in festal gathering, with the assembly of the first born in heaven (that is, the saints), with the spirits of all the just made perfect (that is, with all those family members and friends and with all others who have come to share in the heavenly life), with Christ our savior, and with the God who is Lord of all. This is the glorious company we enter into when we gather here each week at God’s gracious invitation.

God invites all who will come, to share in this glorious gathering, so we will know how precious each and every person is to him. And as those who have come to see how precious each human life really is, we are called to help others see it too by the way we treat them. How wonderful the world would be if all of us would do for those we encounter in life what my Uncle Lawrence did for me, what Henri Nouwen and Adam did for each other, and what God does for us each time we gather here. And how happy we all would be.

Fr. Rod Damico
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