

In the context of a good conversation, a wise priest of our diocese once asked me a question. He said, “Steve, what letter comes in the middle of the word “pride”? I answered “I” and he responded, “That’s all you need to know about that.” In today’s Liturgy of the Word, our Lord Jesus takes direct aim at the two deadly sins of pride and envy and shows us the alternative virtues to these two vices—in other words, Christ shows us *His way*, rather than the way of our fallen, self-centered culture. But what are pride and envy?

The Church would define “pride,” as one of the 7 capital/deadly sins that consists of an excessive and undue self-esteem or self-love, which constantly seeks attention and honor and sets oneself in selfish competition against God and others. Again, what letter is in the middle of the word “pride”? *I*—it’s all about *me*: *my* wants, *my* needs, *my* success, *my* agenda, *my* power, *my* pleasure, *me, me, me*...and I don’t care what God thinks or if He’s offended and I don’t care if others get hurt.” Brothers and sisters, we all have to combat these disordered inclinations within ourselves.

What is envy? The Church would define “envy” as another one of the 7 capital/deadly sins that consists of an intense resentment or sadness at another’s good, and the desire to possess that good for oneself. Envy may be called a grave and extreme form of jealousy, where a person is truly angered and embittered over the goodness that another person or group of people enjoys.

Both of these deadly sins are truly self-destructive and frankly unattractive. The “companions,” if you will, of pride and envy are arrogance, hatred, and bitterness. And who on God’s green earth wants to be around arrogant, hateful, and bitter people? The answer is pretty much nobody.

Now *when* can we as weak, imperfect, and fallen human beings experience pride and envy? Well we can experience these evils pretty much in any facet of life, but most especially in the context of our relationships, whether it’s with family and friends, co-workers, acquaintances, classmates in school, “Facebook friends,” etc.

And I just want to be clear: there’s absolutely nothing wrong with healthy, reasonable, and legitimate competition, especially within the

context of business, work, and sports, so long as the competitors don't hate each other and their competition doesn't lead them into sin in any way. Such legitimate competition should help the competitors to become the best version of themselves and to grow in virtue, mutual understanding, love, and respect. Virtuous competition should always foster a mutual respect for the inherent dignity, value, and worth of the other. Competition should never foster hate, jealousy, or bitterness, but rather it should be grounded in love of God and love of neighbor, as well as gratitude for one's gifts and talents.

Our Lord tells us in the second reading today from the Letter of St. James: "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice." Doesn't get any clearer than that. And then immediately in the next line of that letter, the Lord shows us *His* way as opposed to the *world's* way: "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace." Brothers and sisters, the

way of Jesus is *always* better and *more fulfilling* than our way and the way of the fallen world around us.

In today's Gospel, we're told that the disciples were arguing among themselves who was the greatest. Wow, that's pretty awkward. I mean can you imagine these disciples arguing among themselves who's greater? Jesus must've been like, "Dude, are you kidding me?" In response to the sheer childishness of His Apostles, our Lord Jesus proclaims, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be *the last of all* and the *servant* of all."

Then Jesus does something that would've been considered controversial in first century Roman Palestine. In Mark's Gospel we're essentially told that Jesus takes a child, places the child in their midst and says, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me." Now just to understand the significance of what Jesus is saying and doing here, children in first century Jewish culture were basically put on the lowest level of the social and religious strata at the time and they were certainly not held up as *models of anything*. Children were in

no way considered to be sources of wisdom, knowledge, or teaching.

But what does our Lord Jesus do? Not only does Christ elevate *children* to be spiritual role-models *for adults*, but He elevates children to be models of purity, humility, innocence, goodness, and dependence upon God. And even more than that, Christ goes on to explicitly identify and equate Himself to a child! The Son of the living God identifies Himself with a lowly, weak, defenseless, and dependent child, who in the eyes of the world has absolutely no power, influence, or major status.

Brothers and sisters, our Lord Jesus is trying to teach us that true greatness is not measured by the standards of the fallen world—true greatness is not measured by how much money we have, how much material stuff we possess, how far we advance in our professional career, how much time we spend in the gym, how many initials come after our name, how many Twitter followers or “Facebook friends” we have, etc. No, for followers of Christ, true greatness is measured by humility, purity of intention, love of God and neighbor, and *service—service!*

Our Lord Jesus is the Servant-Leader, par excellence. In fact, Christ perfectly embodies what it means to be a servant-leader. In

Christ, we see the full meaning and manifestation of the expression, “To lead is to serve.” For it was Christ who said, “I came not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.” True greatness is measured, not by money, power, and image, but rather by how we love and serve God and others in humility and virtue.

Brothers and sisters, in the context of today’s Liturgy of the Word, the Lord wants us to do a spiritual check-up in the humility department. If we’re too busy constantly comparing ourselves to others and we’re so fixated on constantly competing against others and trying to beat them at everything, then we’re probably not loving and serving others as we should. If we’re too busy comparing ourselves to others and obsessed with constantly competing against others, then we’re probably not being grateful for everything that God has already blessed us with.

So we have to examine our conscience and ask ourselves: Do we seek to take the credit for everything? Or do we humbly and lovingly give credit to others where the credit is rightfully due? Do we lovingly praise others for their legitimate and good achievements and accomplishments, especially within the context of work and sports, or

are we simply jealous and envious of those who succeed and do well?

Are we truly grateful for everything our Heavenly Father has given to us, especially the most important gifts like our salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, our life, our faith, our family, our friends, etc.?

As we prepare to worship and receive our Lord Jesus Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's ask our Lord to infuse our hearts and minds with His humility so that we might never be slaves to pride and envy, but rather always strive to be faithful disciples of Jesus, whose greatness is measured by how we love and serve God and others.