

Bow Your Heads to Receive God's Blessing

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) – Mt 23:1-12

Ave Maria Catholic Church. November 5, 2023. Fr. David M Vidal

The gospel of this Sunday's liturgy offers us a very humbling moment. Who cannot be touched by hearing Jesus's words: "*Practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice*"? However, after those words, Jesus also offers the remedy for the malice. He says, "*He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted,*" (Mt. 23:1-12).

Let us use an image to understand Jesus's words. This image is taken from the liturgy. At the end of the Mass, before a final solemn blessing, the priest or the deacon prepares the whole congregation by saying: "*Bow your heads to receive God's blessing!*" This is a simple statement but full of meaning. Perhaps bowing our heads might be interpreted as a gesture of humiliation. However, bowing our heads before God is a sign of humility and faith.

Humility does not mean resignation. It is not that we are humble because we have no other choice. Humility is the rejection of appearances and superficiality. Humility is having a deep knowledge of what we are and what we do. Then, with a truthful understanding of ourselves, *we bow our heads to receive God's blessing! Incline capita vestra Deo!*

1. We need to bow our heads to see God, who is the Father of the lowly.

This fundamental truth is based on the absolute transcendence of God the Creator. Everything in the world teaches us this lesson. How little are we in comparison with all the wonders of creation? How small are we in comparison with the immensity of the universe that surrounds us, the galaxies, and the planets?

Meditating on the microcosm, we are also humbled. We learn about the complex constitution of atoms and particles and about the organic wonder of the chromosomes with the genes and chemical components. We reflect on the extraordinary actions of the neurons of the human brain, and we marvel. And especially, we marvel at the experience of our spiritual life; we marvel at knowing and loving: all these experiences should be humbling moments!

Some thinkers may be surprised by this way of seeing things. Some people see the same things everyone perceives, but they do not marvel at them. Some people are just one-dimensional; for them, everything is flat, and nothing is beyond this world.

People who are humble give glory to God! The book of Sirach teaches: *"My son, perform your tasks in meekness . . . The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself; so you will find favor in the sight of the Lord . . . He is glorified by the humble"* (Sir 3:17-20).

Unfortunately, the history of humanity teaches us that pride has been and still is the root of all evil. It is the expression of a person who thinks he or she is self-sufficient and, for that reason, does not want to bow the head to accept God's mystery and receive God's blessing.

2. We need to bow our heads to see Jesus, who is meek and humble of heart.

In the gospel, Jesus gives the example of the Scribes and Pharisees, who are, in truth, a counterexample because if we want to be wise, we must do the opposite of whatever they do.

Jesus tells us to choose the last place, to be happy with little, and not to seek the appearances of "pretending" but the reality of "being." Recognizing that before God, we are nothing, and even in the eyes of men, we are little.

Then, Jesus tells us: *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Lk 14:11). This humbling moment could happen on this earth, in this life, but that is not the most dreadful moment. It would be even more dreadful if the humbling moment happened in the life to come. If only we can learn to humble ourselves on this earth, we will be exalted in heaven!

For this reason, Saint Augustine asks: *"Do you want to be great?"* and he answers: *"Begin with the smallest things."* And he asks again: *"Do you want to build a great building?"* And he answers: *"First think about the foundation and the base,"* (Sermo 69, 1-2). If we want to build a life of holiness, we must build on the foundation of humility.

Jesus is our model. As St. Paul tells us, *"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,"* (Phil 2:6-8).

How can we not be small and humble contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, looking at the Son of God who cries in Bethlehem, who surrounds himself in silence in Nazareth, who lives the life of the poor, and who dies naked on the cross? Jesus is the true humble one and the one who truly glorifies God – for God is "glorified by the humble," as Sirach has told us, (3:20).

3. Our Lady helps us to bow our heads and see God's glory because She is the handmaid of the Lord.

In the great act of adoring God, there is one person who surpasses all others, and this person is Mary. When Mary visited the house of Elizabeth, her cousin, she praised God. The *Magnificat* is a song of praise, but it is also a song of deep humility.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked with favor on his lowly servant,” (Lk 1:45-47, 49-50).

Let us think for a moment. Who is saying this? Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and therefore the Mother of God. She is the Queen of heaven who was greeted by the angel Gabriel with great honor and respect. She is also our Mother who teaches us how to be humble. She teaches us to bow our heads because God looks with favor on the lowly; God looks with favor on the humble. Mary prepares us to receive God’s blessings, everything that God has done, does and will do for us. We must learn from her and make ours her own words: *“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,”* (Lk 4:38).

Let us bow our heads before God, who is the Father of the lowly; let us bow our heads together with Jesus, who is meek and humble of heart, and with Mary, the humble Virgin of Nazareth. Let us bow our heads to receive God’s blessing. Amen.