

HOMILY for 21st SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel tells us how Jesus wanted to know the public and His disciples think of Him. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story I'd like to share with you.

When the Eisenberg's moved to Rome, little Jamie came home from school in tears. He explained to his mother that the nuns were always asking these Catholic questions & how was he, a nice Jewish boy, supposed to know the answers?

Mrs. Eisenberg's heart swelled with maternal sympathy & she determined to help her son out. "Jamie," she said, "I'm going to embroider the answers on the inside of your shirt & you just look down & read them the next time those nuns pick on you."

"Thanks, Mom," said Jamie, & he didn't bat an eye when Sr. Anne Michael asked him who the world's most famous virgin was. "Mary," he answered.

"Very good," said the nun. "And who was her husband?"

"Joseph," answered the boy.

"I see you've been studying. Now, can you tell me the name of their son?"

"Sure," said Jamie. "Calvin Klein."

Anyway, I don't know about you, but the last time I've heard questions like the ones in this Sunday's Gospel was in the seminary. Our seminary formation staff wanted us to learn about priestly identity & try to grow into it. Otherwise, the newly ordained priests would not understand the honor & expectations that would come with the title "priest," or "father." I remember the first time that the Bishop & my family & friends called me "Fr. Peter." I looked around to see if someone named Fr. Peter that they were addressing to. It took me several seconds before I realized that they were talking to me. After more than 26 years of being a priest, I now know who I am & what I've been expected by the Church & the public as a priest. I reckon that the main reason behind the Church's sexual abuse scandal, in my humble opinion, is because those accused priests failed to understand & live up to their priestly identity. That's why they committed those horrible crimes against their identity & the people they were supposed to serve.

Having said that, let me pose this question to you, "Did Jesus have an identity crisis when He asked His disciples those questions about Himself in this Sunday's Gospel?" We often hear people have identity crisis when they turn 50 years old or more. But, Jesus was in His early 30's when He raised those identity questions to His followers. So, why did He ask those questions?

Let us try to figure out why He asked the first question concerning the public view of Him. Here is His first question & its answer by the public: "...Jesus asked His disciples this question: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.'" Based on those answers, we can tell from our knowledge of Jesus & His death & resurrection that the public had no clue about Him. They thought that Jesus might be John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets coming back from the dead. They came to that conclusion based on all the great teachings & wonderful miracles that Jesus did. For that is how they listed Jesus & assumed Him to be. They only knew about Jesus & His public façade. It's like you might only know some of your family & friends by their appearance; you don't know all the personal details about them or, what makes them tick. That's why only some of those people would be your best friends, whom you would

know all about the strengths & weaknesses. Realizing the importance of a close relationship, Jesus followed up with the second question for His disciples. He asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

Most Christians hear that question & immediately think that they know the answers for it. Then, they begin to recite answers for their catechesis classes or books that they've read about Jesus Christ. For example, they might say that Jesus is the second person of the Holy Trinity who was sent to save the world from its sins & open the Gate of Heaven for the faithful. Jesus' mother was Mary; & His foster father was Joseph. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit; & His cousin was John the Baptist. He did ministry on earth for about three years by teaching His followers to love God & their neighbors. He fed the hungry & healed the sick & the suffering. He suffered & died on the Cross, but rose from the dead on the third day. That is the wonderful information that most Christians could provide about Jesus. But, that is not what He was looking for. Today Jesus comes to us & all of His disciples & asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Basically, He wants us to let Him know what we know about Him personally & how much He means for us. Is He our friend, our Lord, our Savior, or our judge on the Last Day? Have we met & talked to Him over some difficult issues or challenging time of our lives? Do we have a conversation with Him every day?

One of the problems that has torn the Church apart these days is the issue of conservative vs. liberal. Some think that the Church is not conservative enough while others assume that the Church should be more progressive in its ideas & religious practices. So, the two groups fight with each other day after day. In the meantime, their sub-groups try to recruit new members by coming up with new devotional things or support groups for the public to be involved with. They reckon that people need to say certain prayers or belong to particular groups to prove that they are conservative or liberal. That is why you've seen each church group comes up with its own ideas or devotional things to promote its own vision of the perfect Christian/Catholic Church. But, today's Gospel reminds us about the importance of conforming our vision of the perfect Christian/Catholic Church to Jesus'. That is why it brings to our attention the question of discipleship that Jesus wants to ask each one of us, "Who do you say that I am?" As far as He is concerned, He does not care if we are conservative or liberal. All He cares about is how well we know Him. If we don't, then we should not expect Him to open the Gate of Heaven for us when we get there. That's why another Gospel passage tells us that the Gate of Heaven will be closed on the Last Day and the Master of the house would come to the Gate & say, "I don't know you. Depart from me, you unfaithful servants!" So, Jesus wants us to get to know Him personally by spending more time with Him & sharing with Him all of our joys & sorrows, successes & struggles, & other details of our lives. That's how we would get to know Jesus; & in turn He would be our protector & guide in this life & the next.

My dear brothers & sisters, let me repeat that important question Jesus asks us in this Sunday's Gospel, "Who do you say that I am?" My friends, do you have the answer for it? If not, I suggest that you should put your whole heart & soul into your relationship with Jesus & get Him to be your best friend in this life & the next. You'll never regret about that relationship.