

September 20, 2015 Receiving a Child Homily

My brothers and sisters, in the early days of the film industry there were few actors as acclaimed and entertaining as W.C. Fields, a comic genius. In the 1930's Mr. Fields appeared in many film comedies. He had the face of a clown without make-up: a bulbous nose, red face and a humorous gait. Aside from his comedic genius, he is best remembered for two things: first, his fondness for liquor and second, his disdain for children, especially child actors. He always feared that a child actor may upstage him, steal his thunder, and rob him of the notoriety on film that he thought he deserved. In response to the question, "How do you like your children"? He said, "Well done"!

If we wish to appreciate and understand today's gospel (Mk.9:30-37), we must first realize that in the ancient world, children were considered non-persons. As a class, they had no social standing, no legal rights. They were considered one of the weakest and vulnerable members of society. A child in Our Lord's day was less important than a common slave! Not surprisingly, a child had no desire for honors. It simply wasn't possible.

Once again, Jesus does the unexpected thing. He invites an unnamed child to share center stage with him. He even takes the child in his arms, a remarkable sign of affection. By placing the child in the midst of his disciples, Jesus is clearly using this highly unusual gesture as a way of instructing his followers. Jesus identifies with those who are insignificant, forgotten and live on the margins of society. And at the end of his life, Jesus himself will be regarded as a person of no account and will be crucified as a common criminal.

The very logic of the Christian faith can be summed up in the words of Christ: "If anyone would be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all" (Mk.9:35). The first, the greatest in the reign of God will be the person at the bottom. It is interesting to note that the first of the names given by Jesus to his followers is "These little ones" (Mt. 18:6). Our Lord identifies himself as one who is "gentle and humble of heart". (Mt.11:29). The Blessed Mother's humility is conveyed in her words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk.1:38). The key words in this gospel are spoken by Jesus: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the one who has sent me" (Mk.9:37)

Are we willing to admit the unwanted members of our society into our midst? Do we go out of our way to avoid them? Are we possessed by an unruly desire for power, prestige and honors? Do we see the person of Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters? (Mt.25:45). Do we imitate Our Blessed Lord's love for those who live on society's margins?

Amen!