

May 6, 2018 Only A Man Homily: In his fine book, “The Quest for God”, the English historian Paul Johnson shares a telling story about the renowned French painter, Henri Matisse, who passed away in 1954. Matisse received a commission from a religious community of women to design and decorate a chapel somewhere in the South of France. Upon completing his project, he showed and explained his work to two nuns, a prioress and a simple sister whom he had known for many years. The prioress was effusive in her praise of the artist. His work was simply dazzling. She thanked him for devoting so much time and genius to the glory of God. “I did it for myself”, replied Matisse. The sister, shocked, said, “But master, when you were still at work you told me you were doing it for almighty God”. Matisse replied calmly, “I am God”! The historian Johnson was aghast. He thought the French artist mad.

In today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, (Acts 10) we hear the story of the Roman army officer, Cornelius, who is a pagan, and one who is considered “unclean” by strict, observant Jews. According to St. Luke, Cornelius was a pious and God-fearing man. As strange as it may seem, Cornelius had a deep admiration for the Jewish faith and adopted some of the customs of the Jewish people, such as almsgiving. In addition he was very generous in financially supporting many charitable causes favored by Jewish leaders. This may explain why, in Luke’s assessment, he was respected by the whole Jewish nation.

And then Cornelius met Peter.

When Cornelius met Peter for the first time, he fell to his knees in deep reverence. In the original Greek, his stunning gesture suggests one who bows down to kiss another’s feet! Peter, understandably embarrassed, gently scolds him. “Stand up”! I am only a man”. (Acts 10:26)

Later in Acts the missionaries Paul and Barnabas are distressed to learn that some ignorant pagans wished to offer sacrifice to them. The two great evangelists reject the pagan’s treatment of them as Gods with the words, “We are of the same nature as you, human beings”. (Acts 14:15)

We must always keep in mind that those who minister in the name of Jesus are flawed human beings. To be placed on a pedestal by fawning admirers is a recipe for disaster. Learning of the fall of a hero can be, sad to say, very deflating!

The American actress Meryl Streep is certainly one of the most talented and recognizable celebrities in the world. She has deservedly earned considerable praise from her peers. In 2012, she accepted the award for best actress in a motion picture at the annual golden Globe awards ceremony. In her acceptance speech, she thanked god for giving her the opportunity to star as England’s former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher in the film, “The Iron Lady”. But the god she was referring to was not in heaven. She made reference to a now disgraced movie mogul, who has been accused of multiple acts of sexual assault.

In 1966, an admirer of the recording artist Eric Clapton spray painted the words, “Clapton is God”, on a wall on the London Underground. The phrase began to appear in other areas of the city as well. At first, Clapton was amused and dismissed the words as a rather silly practical joke. But as his fame continued to grow, he acted in such a way that clearly suggested that he was more than comfortable with being

idolized by his many fans. A short time later, he found himself an addict to drugs and booze His fall was dramatic and painful. It is only when he acknowledged his weakness as a fallen human being that the necessary reform of his life could begin.

The foibles of Peter are well known to us. He denied our Lord three times on the eve of his death and deserted him on the day of his crucifixion. Nevertheless, this flawed man was chosen by Christ to be his ambassador and witness.

Let us ask ourselves if we are rash in our judgment of the failures of our leaders. Are we too harsh in condemning those who disappoint and even scandalize us? Let us never forget the words of Peter, a Saint of the church: "I am only a human being".

Amen!