



## **A Sinful Priesthood in a Holy Church**

Luke 10:25-37

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*“My friends do not use an oath when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not come under God’s judgment”. (James 5:12-20)*

The Book of James is a New Testament letter of advice to the struggling Christian Church in Jerusalem before its fall to the Romans in 70 AD. It’s also a book of hope because the advice has its origin in the good news of Jesus Christ. In 5:12-20 James advises that when we speak to others, we should say exactly what we intend to say without smokescreens or double meanings. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

In today’s Gospel the teacher of the Law was not speaking truthfully what was on his mind when he asked Jesus the question. “If eternal life depends on loving my neighbor then who then is my neighbor?” As one schooled in Old Testament Law he would know that the expression “love your neighbor” comes from the Book of Leviticus and follows immediately after a reference to “the children of my people”. The lawyer is trying to force Jesus into giving a nationalist answer. In other words, it’s only necessary to love those who are Jews; all others are

not my neighbors and therefore are outside the pale of love. It's a trap. Jesus responds by telling a parable.

A man was robbed and left for dead by the roadside. A priest and a Levite of high social status passed him by. They made no effort to help him. However, as religious Jews they would have known the verse in Leviticus. But faced with a person in need they did nothing. A Samaritan came by and moved by compassion cares for the injured man. Jesus asked the legal scholar, who would most naturally identify with the priest and the Levite, which of the three was neighbor. He replied, the one who showed mercy. In other words, a man is not a neighbor because of what he is but because of what he does. The Samaritan, who was an outsider from a hateful and despised group, was more a neighbor of a Jew than a fellow Jew.

In this parable Jesus was teaching the Jews at that time that all men are neighbors since all men can do well and have compassion. And 2000 years later it's still teaching us that to love one's neighbor is to love all men, even those who are great sinners and live immoral lives. We love because God is Love (1 John: 8) and the Son of God, in his love for us, founded a Church that is one, catholic, apostolic and holy. Christ promised to always be with His Church. But he never promised its members would be holy.

Unholy priests have been with us since Judas betrayed Jesus. In 1500, St Frances de Sales addressed the situation of scandal caused by some of his priests. He stated: "Those who **commit** these types of **scandals** are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, destroying other people's faith in God by their terrible example. While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who **take scandal** to destroy their faith are guilty of spiritual suicide. They are guilty of cutting off their life with Christ, and abandoning the source of life in the Sacraments. This is what I preach to you today. Don't let scandal be the vehicle for your spiritual suicide. Keep the faith at all costs".

St. Francis of Assisi lived at a time of terrible immorality. Priests were setting a terrible example. One of his brothers asked him: "What would you do if you know that the priest celebrating Mass had three mistresses". Francis said: "when it came time for Holy Communion, I would go to receive the sacred body of my Lord from the priest's anointed hands". In his response Francis was getting at a tremendous truth of our faith. No matter how sinful a priest is personally, Christ still acts through him in the sacraments.

Our current scandals undermine the faith of believers and give fodder to those who seek to discredit the Church. Still, we can't let others define what the Church stands for. The Church stands for truth in the face of falsehoods. For justice in the face of injustice! For holiness in the face of sin!

The only fully Catholic response to these crises is to respond as did the Good Samaritan. Reach out with care, concern and compassion to those in need – the victims of sexual predators, the victims of those who abused the power of their office. And the self-inflicted victims of their own sinfulness! Those who by violating their religious vows have lost the way home to their Father's house.

We are all sinful neighbors who live in a Holy Church. Yet we are all called to holiness. Now is the time we need to focus ever more on the radiance of our Church as lived in the holiness of our lives? Pray that through our holiness, our neighbors will find a reason for faith, a reason for hope, and a reason for responding with love to the love of our Lord. Jesus Christ!