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**From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.**

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# The Mission and Challenge of Teaching

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## **The Mission and Challenge of Teaching**

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## **Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Sunday Readings for November 2, 2014 for Cycle A:

Mal 1:24-2:2, 8-10; Ps 131; 1 Thes 2:7-9, 13; Mt 23:1-12

### **THE MISSION AND CHALLENGE OF TEACHING**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

Few tasks are more awe-inspiring than those entailed in the vocation of parents and teachers. How can we exercise the authority that comes with this mission of collaborating in the guidance of a younger generation toward worthwhile goals? We hark back to the models and admonitions chosen by the Church for the Sunday liturgy as a basis for a personal reflection.

The Covenant at Mount Sinai created Israel as a tightly-knit and structured community, with leaders to guide the ordinary people into God's way. Moses was the great teacher who led Israel from servitude in Egypt and instructed the community in its service of the true God. Although Moses could have made a special place for his own children as priests of Israel, he chose rather to give that prerogative to his brother Aaron. The descendants of Aaron became the priestly line that interpreted the commandments and mediated on behalf of the people in sacrificial worship. They pronounced the beautiful blessing of Aaron (Nm 6:24-26) that grounded Israel's peace on the benign presence of God in its midst. "May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!"

The Latin poet asked: "Who will watch over the watchmen?" Who will evaluate the quality of teaching and mediation given by succeeding generations of priests and kings? From time to time, prophets would rise from various segments of society, challenging the king, his nobles, the priests and Levites to recognize their sins against proper leadership. The first and foremost task of the prophets was to recall Israel to covenant fidelity, shown in observance of the commandments. Then they would point to the future, to the goal of God's plan for the world and for the chosen people.

Malachi ("My Messenger") was the last of the line of prophets whose writings were preserved in the Jewish Scriptures. He castigated the priests who failed to live their vocation as messengers of the Lord of hosts. "You have turned aside from the way and have caused many to falter by your instruction" (2:8). Therefore, the blessing of Aaron might be reversed for their generation!

Although St. Paul could be as "gentle as any nursing mother caring for her children" (1 Thes 2:7), forthright teachers often admonished their peers with harsh criticism. After all, the leaders who disregarded their responsibility were like shepherds neglecting their flock. As a prophet like Moses (Dt 18:15, 18), Jesus was meek and gentle with the simple folk, but his anger blazed forth against those who misused authority.

Jesus had high regard for authority and its symbols, the most important being "the chair of Moses". Those who were heir to Moses the prophet deserved the people's attention. Jesus noted that unfortunately, sometimes their deeds contradicted their teaching. The indictment was biting: "They do not practice what they preach!" (Mt 23:3). The Gospel at times may give the

impression that "the Pharisees" were a unified group whose teachings were legalist and whose attitudes were hypocritical. On the contrary, there was a wide range of opinions among Pharisees and they debated sharply with each other. A great many made an honest effort to find the best way to serve God and to keep the commandments. Those who criticized Jesus are seen to have been extremists or hypocrites, so the Master challenges them.

The Jewish community had several symbols and gestures that constituted signs of observance in fidelity to the commandments. The *tefillin* (phylacteries) took literally the exhortation to "bind the commandments at your wrist as a sign and let them be a pendant on your forehead" (Dt 6:8). Jesus certainly prayed with the words of the great commandment (Dt 6:4-5) attached to his hand and forehead, just as he wore the tassels (Nm 15:37-40, see Mt 9:20). These practices are beautiful, but must point beyond themselves to an obedience that embraces God's will in all aspects of life.

Reading the admonitory passages of the Gospel should be an occasion for us to examine our conscience. How do we use the titles and symbols of authority and the Church's instruments of prayer? Whether we are parents, teachers or other leaders in the community, people expect to see consistency between our words and deeds. Any use of religious symbols or positions for self-gain is particularly pernicious. The only way to exercise leadership is by seeing it as service of God and neighbor. "The greatest among you must be your servant" (Mt 23:11), as the Master was.