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## *Pride of the Pharisees*

*Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio*



A hundred and fifty years before Christ, they were the good guys. The Greeks were in charge and decided that, if they were to unify their kingdom politically, they needed to unify it religiously. So they imposed Greek ways on the Jews, including worshiping idols and eating pork. You can read about the **Jew's military resistance** to this tyranny in the two books of Maccabees.

In these same books, you can read about the **spiritual resistance** of pious laymen who stood up for the Law and the traditions of the Rabbis, who sought to preserve the faith of Israel and live it with passion. The members of this renewal movement became known as the **Pharisees**.

*Yet obviously something went terribly wrong with God's champions.* Because just a few generations later, when the Son of God appeared in their midst, they rejected Him. How did it happen? They succumbed to an **insidious disease** that they didn't even know they had.

Today, there are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like this. One of them, HTV, is a virus that has no symptoms at all. A woman often does not know that she has it . . . until, that is, she is diagnosed with deadly cervical cancer.

The Pharisees would have wagged their fingers at such women, as they did at the woman caught in adultery (John 8). "Serves them right— the wages of sin is death!"



Fornication and adultery are serious sins indeed. In fact, they are expressions of one of the seven capital sins—lust. Many assume that lust is considered by Christianity to be the epitome of sin, the worst possible vice. Actually, in the hierarchy (or should I say "lowerarchy") of capital sins, the king-pin and most deadly of the seven sins is not lust but pride. Lust wrongly seeks sexual pleasure apart from love and life. Pride seeks greatness apart from God. The tricky thing is that pride can often start in the course of **promoting** God's greatness.

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Here's how it works--as people begin applauding as you do God's work, you think they are applauding for you. It's a rather pitiful mistake really. Imagine the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem thinking that the crowd had turned out for him!

Such applause, however, can be addicting. The proud person ultimately will do anything to make the ovation happen and keep it going. But there can only be one star. Pride is **essentially competitive**. So anyone who threatens to steal the show becomes a mortal enemy. Even if he happens to be God.



The proud man does not teach to enlighten, but rather to **pontificate**, to impress, to appear as the authority. So the Pharisees laid heavy moral burdens upon the shoulders of the people without lifting a finger to help them (Mat 23:4). They coveted the title of "teacher" (that's what "rabbi" means) and "father" (teachers in the ancient world were regarded as spiritual fathers), but really did not want the responsibility.

When Jesus says to avoid being called teacher and father, **he wasn't talking about** what titles educators and parents should and shouldn't use. He was talking about an attitude. Humble persons realize that all wisdom and teaching comes from God, even if God happens to be instructing others through their mouths. They know that the applause ultimately is for Him, and they are glad to redirect it back to Him as Mary does when she is praised by her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1: 42-55).

**Pride is deadly because it is so insidious.** The further the disease progresses, the blinder the victim becomes until it is nearly impossible for him to recognize his plight. The strutting and posturing of the proud are nothing more than compensation for their own insecurity. The pathetic emperor cannot see what is perfectly plain to everyone else--namely, that he has no clothes.

The humble person, on the other hand, is secure in the love of God and therefore has no need of pomp and circumstance. He is not afraid to look at his own littleness, for He clearly sees the greatness of a God who is **not a competitor, but a loving Father**.



*This was originally published in Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection upon the readings for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, liturgical cycle A (Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10), Psalm 131:1-3, I Thessalonians 2:7-9;13; Matthew 23:1-12). It is reproduced here with the permission of the author.*

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