

Homily for Sunday 20th February 2022 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

I heard some very funny news during this last week,
though I'm not sure that 'funny' is the right term for it.

**The news was 'the scandal' that a priest in Phoenix Arizona
had for years been celebrating invalid baptisms
because he had used the incorrect words 'We baptise you in the name of the Father...'.
instead of the correct form 'I baptise you....'.**

*The bishop was distraught, the diocese in uproar,
the very salvation of souls was in peril!*

As one learned local churchman pointed out:
**if baptism, the first of the sacraments was invalid,
then so were all the later sacraments
that these hapless victims had received:**

Phoenix was revealed as a hotbed of invalid Confirmations, Marriages,
and even Ordinations.

The number of invalidly absolved sins was too terrifying to think of.

In response the diocese of Phoenix is rallying all its spiritual resources to track down all those invalidly baptised, or invalidly married, to baptise them again and marry them again.

It doesn't bear thinking about the invalid ordinations:

because then the invalid priests had in turn been invalidly celebrating the sacraments.

It would be worse than CoVid:

a pandemic of invalidity spreading across the unsuspecting expanse of Arizona.

It's all utter nonsense of course.

No-one would deny that the priest concerned *should have* used the worldwide Church's form of words in celebrating the sacrament of baptism,

but to even consider that the infinite God of heaven and earth is incapable of transcending the words spoken by a priest,

that the God of Jesus Christ would deny grace to someone sincerely seeking it because someone changed a pronoun,

that God is in fact a prisoner of God's own sacraments,

to suggest any of that is either insanity or blasphemy.

And the news of the actions of the diocese of Phoenix
is a humiliating embarrassment for those who claim the name of Catholic.

And the thing is that Church itself has an age-old and wise principle to cover just such a
happenstance:

it's called 'ecclesia supplet': 'the Church supplies':

*in other words if a minister of a sacrament errs in its celebration,
the faith of the whole Church makes up for it:*

the whole Church celebrates the sacrament even if the individual priest didn't.

Or, as a priest friend of mine, puts it,
with his tongue firmly in his cheek:

Sanctus Spiritus venit sed noluit:

'The Holy Spirit came even though He didn't want to'!

**I tell this story, so funny and yet so sad,
because I think it resonates so much with our Gospel today**

as Luke puts before us so eloquently a Gospel **of compassion and mercy,**
a Gospel **of the heart and not of law.**

*'Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate',
is just the first of the challenges Jesus puts before his listeners.*

'As your heavenly Father is compassionate':

**And this compassionate God would apparently withhold grace
because a priest used the wrong words?!**

Talk about clericalism and centering the whole life of the Church around priests !

We can either laugh, or cry, about the news from the Diocese of Phoenix
but the real point is to allow this to cross-examine ourselves
in the light of today's Gospel:

to ask whether we tend to constrain God's love,

whether our worldview, our own faith-view, places limits and boundaries upon it,

whether we tell God where to lavish grace

rather than being prepared to be surprised by where *God* lavishes grace.

To ask ourselves: are we as legalistic as the Pharisees
or as lavish in loving as Jesus?

The sacraments are the lavish and beautiful gift of God to us.

And they should of course be celebrated as the whole Church celebrates them.

But they're sacraments of the grace and love of God

and the unfolding story from Phoenix can be a reminder to us
not to miss the spiritual wood for the spiritual trees

and ever to think that God's love, grace and mercy
can be as straight-jacketed and narrow as our own sometimes can be.

Fr Colin