

Opening the Word: Jealousy and ambition: The root of sin



“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice” (Jas 3:16).

St. James’ words are occasions for self-reflection for the Church this very day.

We know that jealousy and selfish ambition are found in Christ’s Church.

Among bishops, who may think more about their next assignment or serving on the right committee than preaching the Gospel of Christ.

Among the clergy, who want to be named vicar of this or that aspect of the diocese’s administration.

Among the baptized faithful, who set up artificially contrived hierarchies of importance in our parishes. These Eucharistic ministers, these lectors, these members of the parish council are the ones that matter.

[September 19 –
Twenty-fifth Sunday
in Ordinary Time](#)

Wis 2:12, 17-20
Ps 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8
Jas 3:16–4:3
Mk 9:30-37

In every one of these cases, disorder results from such selfish ambition. We mar Christ’s body, ceasing to serve as

witnesses to the ends of the world of a love beyond all telling.

We are not the first of Christ's disciples to find ourselves suffering from this malaise.

Jesus has just announced to the disciples the hardest of truths. He is the Messiah, yes. The Son of God, yes.

But that Messiah, that Son of God, must be crucified, die and be raised from the dead.

He will reveal his power not through military might, through ambition, but through [self-emptying love](#).

As often happens in Mark, the disciples do not understand. On the way to Capernaum, they're arguing.

About what?

Who is the most important? Who should be [called the greatest](#)? Who is the most powerful?

Jesus responds not with resignation but as the master teacher. He gives them the medicine that they need. If you are to be the greatest, you are to seize no power. Nothing! [You are to become the least](#).

Like a master educator, he performs this teaching. He picks up a child and tells them that whoever receives this child, receives Jesus, and therefore, the Father.

Our temptation is to turn this into a saccharine lesson. Jesus receives the children, so lovely. So precious.

Our Lord is telling us something more complicated. His authority or power is like that of a child.

The child possesses no power. No authority. He is without ambition. She is without guile.

Jesus is this child. He is the Son of the Father. To receive this child is to receive Jesus because the source of [Jesus' power is his sonship](#). He is the Son of the Father, sent not to enact his own will but the will of God.

A harsher medicine than we might immediately recognize.

The task ahead of us is to become like Jesus, to become children of the Father.

And that means enough with the ambition, enough with the seizing of power. Whether you're a bishop, a priest, or a member of the baptized faithful, ecclesial ambition and jealousy are the roads that lead to hell.

The hell of a self-love, which [rips apart the community](#) of the Church.

With Jesus, we are invited to give up the endless search for power and prestige. To [become like ourselves little children of the Father](#), who seek not to enact our own wills but the will of the Father.

If the Church obeys Our Lord, the [fruits](#) will be obvious. Peace. Friendship. A communion grounded in an unimaginable love. A love made manifest upon the cross.

If we do not, there shall be every disorder. Every foul practice. There shall be darkness.

The choice is before us this day. Follow Jesus to peace. Or construct a monstrous, anti-Eucharistic communion of jealous ambition.

Listen to James. Listen to Jesus.

Timothy P. O'Malley, Ph.D., is the director of education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame.