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# The Pharisee and the Publican

## Gospel Commentary for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

ROME, OCT. 26, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- This Sunday's Gospel is the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. Those who attend Mass this Sunday will hear a commentary more or less of this type.

The Pharisee represents the conservative who feels himself in line with God and man, and looks with contempt on his neighbor. The publican is the person who has committed an error, but he recognizes it and humbly asks God for forgiveness. The latter doesn't think of saving himself on his own merits, but rather through the mercy of God. The preference of Jesus between these two is clear, as the last line of the parable indicates: The latter returns to his house justified, that is, forgiven and reconciled with God; the Pharisee returns home just as he left it -- preserving his sense of righteousness, but losing God's.

Hearing this commentary, and repeating it here, leaves me dissatisfied. It's not because it is mistaken, but it doesn't respond to our modern times. Jesus told these parables to those who were listening to him in the moment. In a culture charged with faith and religious practice like that of Galilee and Judea of his time, hypocrisy consisted in flaunting the observance of the law and of holiness, because these were the things that brought applause.

In our secularized and permissive culture, values have changed. What is admired and opens the path to success is the contrary of that other time: It is the rejection of traditional moral norms, independence, the liberty of the individual. For the Pharisees the key word was "observance" of the norms; for many, today, the key word is "transgression." To say that an author, a book or a show is a "transgressor" is to give it one of the most desired compliments of today.

In other words, today we should turn the terms around to get at the original intention. The publicans of yesterday are the new Pharisees of today! Today the publican, the transgressor, says to God: "I thank you Lord, because I am not one of those believing Pharisees, hypocritical and intolerant, that worry about fasting, but in real life are worse than we are." Paradoxically, it seems as if there are those who pray like this: "I thank you, Lord, because I'm an atheist!"

Roche foucauld said that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. Today it is frequently the tribute that virtue pays to vice. This is shown, in fact, especially among youth, who show themselves worse and more shameless than they are, so as not to appear less than others.

A practical conclusion, valid as much in the traditional interpretation alluded to at the beginning, as in the development given here, is this one: Very few -- perhaps no one -- are always in the role of the Pharisee or always in the role of the publican, that is, righteous in everything or sinners in everything. Most of us have a little of both in us. The worst thing would be to act like the publican in our daily lives and like the Pharisee in

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church. The publicans were sinners, men without scruple, who put money and business above everything else. The Pharisees, on the contrary, were, very austere and attentive to the law in their daily lives. We thus seem like the publican in daily life and the Pharisee in the temple, if, like the publican we are sinners, and like the Pharisee, we believe ourselves just.

If we must resign ourselves to being a little of both, then let us be the opposite of what we have just described: Pharisees in daily life and publicans in church! Like the Pharisee, we must try in daily life to not be thieves and unjust, but to follow God's commandments and pay our dues; like the publican, when we are before God, we must recognize that the little that we have done is entirely God's own gift, and let us implore, for ourselves and for all, God's mercy.

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Father Raniero Cantalamessa is the Pontifical Household preacher. The readings for this Sunday are Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

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