

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
September 24, 2006

From the Omaha World-Herald Public Pulse, September 17, 2006: “According to a September 3 news story in the Omaha World-Herald, the Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha has a problem in trying to ordain enough new priests. Not surprising. There is no future in being a celibate priest with a low wage and low status. Why have such a dead-end job when one can be a big-time executive in a giant corporation or be an astronaut and travel to Mars? I recommend that anyone choosing to be a priest give the vocation about 10 years and then clear out before it’s too late.” Thus spoke the letter writer to the Public Pulse, written near as I can tell without even a hint of irony; I think he really believes what he’s saying. And you know what? He’s about half right; the problem is that he’s also half wrong, and it’s the half wrong part which he’s missing which is what vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life are all about. Low wages? Indeed. Status in society: not so great due in no small part to a media that loves to play up any and all wrongdoing done by Catholic clergy, in ways that they do not do with ministers of other denominations, and if you don’t believe that, come talk to me about the evidence I have. But wait; there’s even more that the letter writer failed to mention. Long hours, often frustrating work, sometimes emotionally draining, sometimes physically demanding. Low wages, low status, long hours, hard work; it’s a job like none other. Wait, I take that back: it’s a job like only one other, the job that most of you have, and that is, being a parent. And that’s the key that this gentleman missed; he thinks the priesthood is a job, rather than a way of living out God’s call to each of us to give ourselves away in some way, by doing something that doesn’t give us earthly rewards, but which gives us spiritual satisfaction.

If you’re measuring things with a worldly yardstick, the priesthood and parenthood aren’t going to measure up very well at all—if what you’re looking for is pay and status. In the second reading today from the letter of James, though, we heard an excellent and eloquent warning on the dangers of measuring everything with that worldly yardstick. Writes James: Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. He goes on to write: You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. His exhortation is about praying for things which are sheer wants, rather than needs. What matters, really, in the big picture? Salvation, mostly, ours and others, and so that should be the first thing we pray for. For the success of various spiritual endeavors, that our church and parish will be strong so that they may proclaim the Gospel; I think it’s legitimate to pray for health and success, not extraordinary riches, but certainly for our daily bread. But when it starts veering into sheer wants, we probably won’t receive; if everybody prays for their team to win, well, fifty percent of them aren’t going to get their prayers answers. But James’ letter goes much deeper than merely how we pray or what we pray for; it’s about our mindset and our priorities. What matters to us the most: the fleeting

things of this world, or the things which will transcend this world, and be part of the life to come? Which is more important to me: your needs, or my pleasures?

In the Gospel passage this weekend from Mark, Jesus puts down the ambitions which are growing within the ranks of disciples by telling them that the first among them must be the last of all, and the servant of all. Then he says, “whoever receives one such child as this in my name, receives me.” To welcome a child in the culture at the time meant more than welcoming one who was weak or defenseless. A child had little to no legal rights; doing a favor for a child meant doing it from the goodness of your heart, not for any sort of recompense or reward. Jesus, by taking that child, placing him in their midst, and telling the disciples to receive one such as this, was telling them—and in turn telling us—to get away from the “what’s in it for me” mentality which is so pervasive in every culture and society of man. And if we, as Christians, find ourselves always wondering “what’s in it for me”—we will have a vocations crisis. And an attendance crisis. And a financial crisis. All the way down to, and eventually including, a faith crisis. Now, there’s something to be gained in everything, but the Christian is challenged to consider what it is that he or she wants to gain. Most jobs offer some combination of money, prestige, and/or power. And if that’s what you want, and that’s all that you want, that’s fine: be prepared to work hard and earn it, but it’s okay with me if that’s what you want. But most followers of Christ want more than those things: we want spiritual growth, we know that we don’t feel fully mature and productive unless we are sacrificing something of ourselves for the good of others; we crave the feeling inside that generosity gives us; we want fulfillment, not satisfaction of our desires, but fulfillment of our Christian calling to witness Christ to those around us.

We can be all about money and status if we want, but now that we belong to the Mystical Body of Christ, we are not called to gain what the world says we should want, instead we should be about gaining what God wants for us. And he is the one who told us that his reward will come to all sorts of people: what God wants us to be about is available to priest and parent, CEO and teacher, soldier and politician. Our lives are about holiness: growing closer to God through prayer and study. They’re about service: seeing the needs of those around us and giving of ourselves and our many blessings so that others may be blessed through us. Our lives are about evangelization: letting others see what does really matter to us, and letting them see the peace and joy that faith brings. Some won’t like seeing this sort of witness: the book of Wisdom says “the wicked say ‘let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us, he sets himself against our doings.’” There are people, and plenty of them, who think Christians are obnoxious just because we won’t get on board with their agenda. Another letter to the editor of the Lincoln paper, a wonderful letter, challenging a previous writer who purported that abstinence is unrealistic and unworkable: the challenger says in her letter that she’s living chastely, others she knows in their twenties are living chastely; it’s possible, it’s doable. But so many people are invested in the lie, the big fat lie, that it’s just too hard to live according to God’s commands. And that’s why, when a Christian

fails, the media plays “aha, gotcha!” But the fact is that we can live with the demands of our faith, and not only that, the demands are relatively light, and the reason they are relatively light is because the rewards are so huge, not only in the life to come, but in this life here. We are different, and if others can’t see that, then we probably aren’t being quite different enough yet. Jesus stood out in his day, long before he began to preach and teach. Mary stood out. John the Baptist stood out. They were each in their own way obnoxious to the world, because their embrace was of a world yet to come.

The more I read about and think about the vocations crisis, the more I think that there is a crisis. But I don’t think that the crisis is that God isn’t calling enough men, and I don’t think that the crisis is necessarily that those he is calling are not responding. I think the crisis may be that we are getting the vocations we’re praying for, and that not enough of us are praying rightly. A little intercession during Mass is easy; when was the last time we offered up a day of fasting for more vocations? Or decided to change our lives because we knew that we were displeasing God? Or went to confession for the first time in many, many moons? Maybe our prayers are being offered but with no power behind them, like letters sent off without a stamp, or no address on them. As for our first letter-writer, who thinks that I’m in a dead-end career, well, let me tell you: I’ve held bread in my fingers, and had it turn into the Body of my Savior, offering salvation through my hands for me, and for all; I’ve watched people go from being in a state of sin to being in a state of grace in confession; I’ve seen more, and done more, as a priest than most men ever will ever get to do in any other calling. And as for his advice that I give the vocation 10 years and then get out before it’s too late: it’s too late already. Because I’ve had a taste of something that all this world’s money and status couldn’t even make a down payment on, much less buy. We do need to pray for more vocations, but we need to pray rightly. And underscoring all of our prayers—be they for more priests, for holier families, or for more faith among the faithful—must be a lifestyle that doesn’t ask “what’s in it for me?” but which asks “what’s in me that God wants to use to serve others?”

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