

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Path to Healthier and Holier Vocations”.

Fr. Frank Schuster

As a young man, I remember listening to Archbishop Murphy on many occasions speak on vocations in the life of the Church. He had many wonderful things to say on the topic having been a rector of a seminary, bishop in Great Falls-Billings and our Archbishop here in Seattle. In reference to the priest shortage, I remember Archbishop Murphy saying on a number of occasions that priests do not grow on trees. Fair enough! Priests and sisters come from healthy and holy families. He even went so far as to say that the real vocation shortage in the Church isn't vocations to the priesthood or religious life. He said that the real vocation shortage in the Church is healthy and holy families. The argument being that if we had healthier, holier marriages and families, we would see an increase in healthier and holier priests and sisters. And back then, I always found myself smiling when I heard Archbishop Murphy say that because I grew up in a really great family and I was not the only vocation to the priesthood or religious life to come forth from my family over the years. And, news flash, being a priest, sister or deacon is a wonderful life. I love being a priest. You kids out there, take notice!

What Archbishop Murphy said is correct. However, over the years I have come to the conclusion that what the Church really needs is healthier and holier vocations period, no matter what family you come from, no matter where the Lord has called us to serve, whether this be in the sacrament of marriage, single life or religious life and priesthood, whatever. What the Church really needs is healthier and holier vocations across the board, from the ground up and from the top down, and every branch and twig in between.

You see, as I survey the Gospels, what irritates Jesus the most are people who pretend to be living their vocations but are in truth frauds. He calls these people hypocrites...a hypocrite was a street performer in Jesus' time who would use different masks for different characters. This was his favorite description for the religious leaders of his day. On the other hand, Jesus had immense compassion for people who were honest with themselves that their lives were not perfect, who truly sought to turn from their past so to embrace a better future only Jesus can give. People who acknowledge their imperfections and turn to Jesus for help are not hypocrites. They are called disciples. There has only been two people throughout history that were born without sin. You and I are not them. I mention this because Jesus offers those willing to follow him very Good News in our Gospel reading today on how to help ourselves and our families to become healthier, holier, and dare I say, happier people.

It is helpful to get some background to appreciate the Gospel reading this weekend. The Pharisees and scribes catch some of Jesus' disciples eating a meal with unwashed hands. There were other rituals to be observed as well, like the purification of cups, jugs and kettles, etc. We think they believed in only Ten Commandments, however, they managed to stretch the law into six hundred and thirteen commandments. One of these religious precepts is to wash their hands before eating. Not doing so was considered to be offensive to God. Now, all of us can understand the health benefit of

washing our hands before we eat. Making this a spiritual requirement for salvation, however, was ridiculous. Gathering the people together, Jesus said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand, nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.”

You see, I think the Lord would agree that it is important to practice good hygiene whenever possible. (So all you kids out there, you still gotta wash your hands before you eat!) The worst thing that is going to happen, however, if we eat dinner without washing our hands is we might get sick. We might even get very sick. The point Jesus is trying to make, however, is this: the matter of personal hygiene is a matter of common sense, not religious obligation. Failure can lead to physical illness, but this is nothing compared to what can happen to us with spiritual illness.

Jesus wants us to consider what can happen when we let our hearts run wild with evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, thoughts of murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, and folly. When we become enslaved to these passions, our lives can become separated from the vocation God calls us to in our lives and we can become really unhappy as a result. No one is immune from this, regardless of what kind of clothes you wear when you go to work be it a suit or a cassock. Jesus’ advice here is good for all of us to remember because the vices he lists can lead to all kinds of trouble in life, harming our relationships. If we are not careful, these vices can even lead us to losing our soul, a considerable worse outcome than food poisoning, wouldn’t you say? Jesus wants to liberate us from the vices that try to ensnare us so we can grow closer to the image and likeness the Father originally planned for us.

I think we would all do well if we spent some time this coming week and simply reflect on how well we are living our vocations. However, if you do this, don’t fall into the trap of allowing this exercise to become a guilt trip. Let’s give ourselves some credit for all the ways we are living our vocations well as we consider the ways we could be living our vocations more fully. You see, I believe the remedy to the vices Jesus lists in our Gospel reading this weekend are the fruits of the Holy Spirit. If you ever reach an unhappy place in your personal life, see how much more satisfying and liberating life can be by practicing the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They instruct us to be more loving and joyful, more patient and kind, to be good and generous, gentle, faithful, and modest, exercising better self-control, and to live more chaste and pure lives. Far from being a message of enslavement, these virtues are about spiritual liberation. These virtues help us to experience spiritual joy and fulfillment no matter what life throws at us. These virtues are necessary to help us form and sustain healthier and holier vocations to marriage and religious life in our Church. My friends, these virtues reflect the spiritual freedom of disciples of Jesus who are “doers of the word and not hearers only.”