

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Fr. Samuel Springuel

29 January, 2023

1st Reading Zephaniah 2:3;3:12-13

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 146:6-7,8-9,9-10

2nd Reading 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Gospel Matthew 5:1-12a

I want you to imagine that you're putting together a working group to accomplish some goal. In fact, let's make this imaginary situation a bit more concrete and say that we're putting together a Committee for the Promotion of Monastic Vocations. So, who are we going to put on this committee?

Well, the first and most obvious members would be some experts on monasticism: monks and nuns. They live a monastic vocation out on a daily basis and so should be equipped to define what a monastic vocation is. We might want to specify that these monks and nuns be self-reflective and articulate so that they can answer questions from others, including questions that they may not have considered before, and can communicate their answers in a way that others find understandable, even relatable. We might consider academics who have studied historical monasticism in order to provide context and background, but if we're really interested in promoting monastic vocations today, it's far more important to have people familiar with the actual, current living out of monasticism than, say, how the Abbey of Cluny operated near the end of the first millennium.

So that covers knowledge of monastic vocations, but this is a Committee for the *Promotion* of Monastic Vocations, so some expertise in the art of promotion is in order too. To that end we might start with a branding expert: someone who knows how to create a recognizable identity for something, in this case monastic vocations. What is it that makes monastic vocations distinct from other religious vocations? How can we communicate those distinctions to others and even create positive associations with them? A branding expert can help elaborate on these questions, and refine the answers provided by our monastic experts, creating a story about monastic vocations that will resonate with a wider audience.

Of course, not everyone would be the target audience for this branding, so perhaps some expertise in market research is in order. How do we identify the people who actually might be considering a monastic vocation? We need someone who knows how to do focus groups, polling, that sort of thing to determine where the target audience is, how to reach them with the stuff the branding person creates, and can provide feedback as to how the target audience is responding to various aspects of the branding so that it can be optimized.

There also needs to be some sort of communication expert, a marketing director, who can create the campaigns which communicate the brand to the

target audience. Perhaps a social media influencer or someone else who already has an in with our target audience. Someone who can be the trusted source introducing the monastic vocations brand. Our committee will also need some sort of back-office support to track contacts, ensure that inquiries are responded to in a timely fashion, and that more information gets to the people who need it.

We might even want some sort of closer: the kind of person who knows how to take interest and turn it into action. Who can take people from “this sounds interesting” to “when can I visit”.

We could probably go on with this process for a while, identifying the useful skills, knowledge, and qualifications that we would want represented on our committee. We might also devise processes for finding actual individuals with these skills, knowledge, and qualifications, as well as an interest in seeing the committee succeed in its work. Some compromises might need to be made along the way, covering everything might lead to a committee which is too large to function effectively after all, but this is how we would humanly assemble this working group.

But who would God pick? To answer that question it might help to look at today’s readings.

In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah, in God’s name, exhorts his audience to seek justice and humility. He’s not looking for go-getters: people who are sure of themselves and quick to act on what they see to be the best course of action. He wants people who are humble, who obey God’s law; they do no wrong and speak no lies. They take direction from those who know better, and will willingly admit when others know better. Indeed, they recognize the truth of the message of today’s psalm: that ultimately everything comes from and depends on the Lord. We may cooperate with Him and act in accordance with His will to further particular goals, but as a different psalm says, “if the Lord does not build the city, in vain do the builders build.”

This is also the message that St. Paul is trying to tell us. Our skills, our knowledge, our wisdom, our abilities, our strengths, they are all nothing in the face of God. God chose the poor, the foolish, the weak, the fishermen from a small village in a backwater province to be the leaders of the movement that he started, the new Covenant, the Church, so that we might discern the true source of success, the true *meaning* of success, in a world so intent on self-promotion and self-reliance.

And then there is the Gospel. In addition to last week’s Gospel which told us about those poor fishermen, today’s tells us that it is the poor in spirit, not the knowledgeable, who attain the kingdom of heaven. It is the meek, not the proud, who inherit. It is those who seek righteousness, even when they are persecuted for it, who will achieve their aims, not those going after lesser, “more attainable” goals. Jesus doesn’t want people who will settle, who will compromise for what is less than perfect. But he also wants them focused on the right goal, what is *truly* perfect. While I cannot say for sure, I suspect that Jesus would tell us that our imaginary committee is asking the wrong question. Perhaps it should not be focused on how we might promote monastic vocations, but on how the communities of those already pursuing the monastic life might be found worthy to receive the men and women whom God is already calling to a monastic vocation.

For ultimately, it is not our success that God seeks. It is our holiness. When we are holy, when we truly seek God with everything that we have, with everything that we are, then all these other things will find their proper place.