

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
September 23, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 9:30-37

Last week the Capuchin sisters of Nazareth visited with us, and after Mass they gave a vocations talk in the Parish Hall. I thought they did an excellent job, because their focus for the children was on asking them to discern their vocation: What does God want me to do with my life—have a family or enter the priesthood or a monastery or convent? They didn't talk about occupation, but vocation. Their focus was on service, not ambition.

We heard in St. James this morning, "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." Selfish ambition is that which seeks to advance oneself even at the expense of others, whereas godly ambition desires to serve the Lord and give glory to Him. The Capuchin sisters who came to see us were so impressive because they have a beautiful life, due to their properly-ordered ambition.

Contrast what we saw in the sisters with what our young people are taught in most other contexts. We teach them that they are educated so they can get a job, as if one's occupation is the sum total of one's life. We set as a goal financial success, so that when they get older they can retire early and spend the last years of their life in self-indulgence. This is the epitome of selfish ambition, telling our young people to get an education so that they can make money and to make money so that they can goof off. Is it any wonder so many Americans self-report that they are unhappy, that particularly among women we see each generation unhappier than the last?

The Capuchin sisters did not talk about money or retirement, but about being mothers and fathers. They said that every woman was born to be a mother and every man was born to be a father irrespective of biological progeny. They pointed out that they won't have any children, but that they will have innumerable spiritual children. They repeated a point you've probably heard me say once or twice, that we call priests father precisely because they serve as our spiritual fathers even though most of them don't have children of their own.

The sisters understood and conveyed the message that we are called to motherhood and fatherhood; and the most important question we must answer is if we're going to exercise that vocation as actual parents or enter into the religious life. How beautiful, then, that we heard this message reiterated in this morning's Gospel. Jesus said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." In order for us to know Jesus intimately, in order for us to know God the Father, we must be open to new life. We cannot know God, who is Love, if we do not want to exercise our vocations as mothers and fathers.

This vocation to motherhood and fatherhood, we see, Jesus ties directly to service. He says immediately before he takes the child into His arms to embrace him, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." A genuine openness to life manifests itself in a life dedicated to serving others, and naturally serving others encompasses, even emphasizes, serving the most vulnerable among

us. In other words, the children aren't for us, they are for God, just as we are; and if we are going to teach them to serve, then we must serve them first.

Jesus, then, gives us the proper perspective on the age-old question we pose incessantly to our children, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" There are really only two right answers— "a mother" or "a father." The follow-up question is the really exciting one: "How are you going to exercise your motherhood or your fatherhood?"

If we make the job the goal, then we make the individual and his ambitions the end. What he wants to do becomes the measure of all things. But if we make service to others the goal, then our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us how to serve others upon the altar of the cross, becomes our end. When we get our priorities straight, we are free to discern God's purpose for our lives; and therefore we are free from the anxieties, listlessness, and general unhappiness that afflict so many of our contemporaries.

An orientation of service to the world as a mother or father also frees us from viewing a child as an impediment to a fulfilling life. According to today's Gospel, children are precisely how our lives are fulfilled, an openness to more life is the recipe for success in coming to know God. Such an orientation automatically excludes the possibility of treating an unborn child as anything other than a blessing. Children aren't in the way, obstructions that prohibit us from reaching our goals. No, children are the way, the way to heaven; and if we want to have a bright future, as opposed to a dark one, we must nurture the proper receptivity, a receptivity Jesus has said explicitly we must possess if we are to know the Son of God and His Father, both in this life and the life to come.

The Capuchin sisters of Nazareth stayed here a long time, conversing with so many of you. This is, of course, a credit to them, their patience as well as their devotion to their vocation. But the length of their stay is also a credit to you. They told me before they came that they would probably only take ten or fifteen minutes, based on their experience at other parishes. Well, they talked for a lot longer than that and stayed for hours because they were talking to people who want to be mothers and fathers. Our responsibility, since we already get it, is to spread as far and wide as we can this message of love the Sisters articulated for us so well. One way we can do that is by answering the question we've all heard a thousand times the same way every time: "I want to be a father" or "I want to be a mother." Then take the time to explain.