

*'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'* So, *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* These words from today's second reading always puzzled me. Spoken by the great and mighty Apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul- always depicted wielding his sword- boasting of his weakness seemed something like the opposite of what I expected from him. The passage I just quoted actually begins with him recounting the words of our Lord which he heard directed to himself in prayer: *my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.* Upon further reflection, it seems that at first glance, Paul, himself, was turned off by the prospect of weakness.

Commentators including the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church have surmised for centuries what this "thorn in his flesh" was referring to; this battle he faced which he beseeched the Lord to remove from him. While we can never know for sure what it was, we can be sure that Paul regarded it as a hindrance to his mission and growth in personal holiness. Naturally, it was good for him- indeed, it is good for all of us- to desire that every hindrance to growth in these areas would be removed. Yet, the Lord's response made clear that He permitted it for a greater purpose. And what was this purpose? That St. Paul would not be in a position to regard his accomplishments as feats which he performed by his own strength. On the contrary, being aware of his weakness and incapacity to do anything great was precisely the proof that the greatness of his deeds found its source in Christ alone.

I rarely take the occasion to preach on the second reading of Sunday Mass because, while valuable for the sheer purpose of our broader exposure to the New Testament, the second reading rarely fits in with the first reading and gospel which *are* specifically chosen to thematically align with each other. On this occasion, though, of my visit to your parish, I could not pass up the opportunity to address this important message from St. Paul.

As the Vocation Director of our diocese, my primary goal is to support in their formation those who are training and preparing to become priests. We call these men 'seminarians' as they receive their formation in a school called a seminary. A natural extension of this work, then, is to promote consideration of the priesthood among the young men of our diocese. Truly, though, the work of the Vocation Director should encompass the general theme of encouraging us all to pursue the universal vocation to which God calls each of His children: holiness. We were created to become saints. A saint is anyone who is in heaven, and if we want to go to heaven, then we want to become saints. It's that simple!

Saints, however, do not just fall from the sky. Nor are they an endangered species among Catholics on their way towards extinction. We become saints, first by wanting it, and then by striving after it. The path we pursue to become saints is the unique vocation to which God calls each of us. For the vast majority, it is to marriage, for the raising up of families to further populate the world and the Church. For the remaining minority, God calls them to celibacy: a life of total dedication to Him lived out through service to others.

Although it is not the exclusive way in which the celibate vocation is lived out, the way with which we are most familiar is through a consecrated life in the Church as religious sisters and brothers or priests. It is not natural to desire to become a priest or religious. It is natural to desire marriage because this vocation is what keeps the world turning; but it is supernatural to become a priest or religious. God takes that gift of desire for union with another and elevates it to being satisfied by total union with Him in order to become free to give ourselves to many others. It would seem, though, that supernatural calls are not so easy to hear.

Some of you in these pews at this very Mass are being called by our Lord to the priesthood or religious life. A sign it might be you is that you hope I won't make eye contact with you as your heart races and stomach twists and turns at this precise moment. Many more people sense that God *might* be calling them to this than those who actually respond, however; and the most frequent reason they do not respond is because of how I began my homily.

We convince ourselves that we are too weak; that there is something wrong with me that, if not overcome, I could not live out such a vocation. That unless God "fixes me", there's no way I could be a priest, nun or brother. The fact of the matter is, this is true! Left to our own devices, we could not live out these supernatural callings! Not because there is anything uniquely wrong with us but because God does not want us to live out these vocations on our own steam. He wants us to rely upon Him.

Certainly, for a whole host of reasons, there may be struggles or difficulties which, if not properly addressed, we could not suitably undertake the preparation for priesthood or religious life. But the answer to those issues is not waiting for God to snap His fingers and magically take them away. The answer is for us to *boast in our weakness so that the power of Christ may dwell in us!*

My dear young friends, if you have ever thought that God may be calling you to the priesthood or religious life; if you have daydreamed or imagined what life might be like in such a vocation; if while listening to me preach your palms are sweating and your heart is pounding- do not be afraid! I assure you, you *ARE* too weak to undertake this vocation. But Christ is not too weak to work in and through you to make it possible. Begin- today- to give yourselves more entirely to Him in prayer and good works. Little by little, you will sense His power taking root in you, and before long, the prospect of the priesthood or religious life will become something that seems less like an unrealistic possibility but more like your future; a future filled with peace, hope and joy.