

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – July 3, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat. Vigil, 8:30am & 11am Sunday – 790 words

We frequently speak of a clergy shortage nowadays as if it were a relatively new reality, but the Lord himself spoke of it in the Gospel: “The harvest is abundant”, he says, “but the laborers are few”. It’s obvious that the number that constitutes “few” has fluctuated throughout history and that, at present, we are at a relative low. Even in good times, however, when many of our parishes had multiple priests living in the rectory, that was still a fairly relatively small number compared to how many Catholics they were called to serve. And so I take this Gospel verse as a consolation: when I, as a priest today, am faced with the enormity of the task of serving so many, I am reminded that the Lord himself said that our number would be few. Therefore, I have to look to him to see how he will work through me to accomplish the task at hand. The task is his, not mine.

The Lord also commands us to “ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest”. This is, in fact, the only command he gave us with regard to vocations: he tells us to pray for them. But what do our prayers accomplish? It’s not as if we’re convincing the Lord, by our prayers, to call more men to the priesthood. That’s simply not good theology. Each one of us was willed by God from the creation of the world; from the beginning of time the Lord had a definite plan for each of us. And it’s not like we’re going to change his mind about what he had planned. No, rather, when we pray for vocations, we’re asking the Lord to soften the hearts of those whom he is already calling so that they can hear, receive, and respond. We’re asking Christ to soften the hearts of those family members or friends who might stand in the way of the call. And we’re asking that there will be people who support the person in following Christ.

But prayer for vocations does another thing – that is, if we do it right: it moves us to act. It moves us to be more aware of those around us whom the Lord might be calling. It moves us to summon the courage to approach those people at the right time and ask them if they have considered God’s call. It moves us then to accompany them on their vocational path. I would say that our parish is very good at most all of this. But look at a vocation poster and see the relatively small number of men who have responded in our diocese; we need to do more! We need to pray more. We need to reach out more. We need to accompany more. This is one of the reasons that I’ve already scheduled a special Mass for priestly vocations on the Feast of St. John Vianney, August 4. It will be a time for us to kneel together before our Eucharistic Lord and beseech him to send more laborers to the harvest here in the Diocese of Birmingham.

There is one final thing that we need to consider, and the end of today’s gospel reminds us of it. After their mission the 72 returned to the Lord excited because of the miracles that they had done: “Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name”, they said. Christ affirms them in that, but then gives them a salutary reminder: “Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you” – because you do miracles – “but rejoice because your names are written in heaven”. In other words, the work is God’s, and our focus should not be on the results, but on simply being faithful in doing his work. Although we’re encouraged when we see the quality of men on our vocation poster, sometimes the number can get us down. The results, however, should not be our concern.

And so we can ask ourselves some questions this week and make appropriate resolutions: Do I pray daily for vocations to the priesthood? Do I pray for specific men whom I believe may be called? Do I actively encourage them to consider God’s call? Do I support our seminarians and those who are applying to the diocese? Jesus told us that the number of laborers would always be “few”, and we can see how that number fluctuates through history. If it is lower in our time, it means we need to pray more. This is the only command that the Master has given us with

regard to vocations. Let us be faithful in following his command – and have confidence that our prayers will be heard.