
The Commitment to Excellence

“Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

In life, we honour those who excel in their undertakings. Sports heroes, outstanding entrepreneurs, award-winning performers are all sought after to give talks, act as spokes-people for organisations and endorse all manner of services and goods. We seek out such outstanding individuals because we want our ideas, products, services, etc. to be associated with excellence. In every aspect of life, we want the best: the best health care professionals, the best educators, coaches mentors, the best counselors, consultants... and the list goes on.

If we were to hire a contractor to do work in our house, and when the work was done he was to say, “Well, I could have done better, but this is good enough,” we would more than likely be livid. If a surgeon were to come to us after operating on us and say, “Well, the procedure could have gone better, but it was good enough for me,” we would be mortified at such irresponsibility and callousness. In every aspect of our life, we want nothing less than the best that we can get. In every part of our life, we want excellence... every part, apparently, but one.

How many times have we heard in parish life that an initiative -- a program, a class, a retreat, concert, social event, or even a liturgical service -- could have been better, but seemed to be “good enough”? How often has someone reflected that a cantor, a preacher, a

Sunday school teacher “could have done more, but I guess it will do.” In any other part of our life, when faced with something that falls below expected levels of quality, we would at the very least complain to someone about the situation. Yet, in matters of Church life, when confronted with such voluntary and conscious mediocrity, we become passive and fall silent.

The key words here are “voluntary” and “conscious”. I am not talking about someone who is sincerely giving an initiative his or her “best shot” and it comes up passable but not the best that one has seen. Such people deserve our respect, encouragement and support, that they will stay committed to giving it their all – for Christ deserves nothing less from us. Rather, I am talking about someone who really could do better and knows how, but – because of laziness, fear, poor self-image, inadequate knowledge or some other reason – chooses not to. With such people we wait with great anticipation for things to get better, either on their own or through someone else’s intervention. But with everyone involved waiting, who’s going to do the intervening?

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us to “be perfect,

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“When we see things falling below the mark, God wants us to be sources of improvement – always in a respectful, loving and charitable way. Where the inadequacy is voluntary and conscious, He wants us to be agents of change.”

as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48) In other words, settling for “good enough” is not how God wants us to look at our spiritual life – whether as individuals or a community. God wants from us a commitment to excellence. “Excellence” means “to excel”. God calls us to excel at worship, to excel in outreach and acts of unconditional love, to excel in our spiritual growth, to excel in being heralds of His Kingdom in this world.

When we see things falling below the mark, God wants us to be sources of improvement – always in a respectful, loving and charitable way. Where the inadequacy is “voluntary and conscious”, He wants us to be agents of change – again respectfully, lovingly and with an open heart. This is what is known as the prophetic ministry of the Church. The prophet is the voice of God among the people. It was the voice of the prophets in the Old Testament that warned people when they were straying away from their covenant with God, and called them to redirecting their lives along the path of His teachings. When we see our parishes, institu-

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tions, organisations (and indeed even our own lives) straying away from the goal of perfection given to us by Christ, we must make the effort to getting things back on track. In its basic essence, this is what is meant by “repentance” – it is a “change of mind” or “change of direction” away from life-taking attitudes and behaviours and towards the life-giving Way of Christ.

One thing to be aware of in the commitment to excellence is the fine line between a sincere struggle to “be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect” and the fall into pride and vain-glory. Our commitment to excellence is not for the sake of basking in glory. We struggle for perfection for the sake of God, because – as said above – God deserves nothing less from us. As we pursue the commitment to excellence we do so in humility, knowing that success in this endeavour comes not from our own efforts alone, but with the grace of God guiding and empowering us. St. Paul says that through the Gospel “it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20) In reality, it is not

our perfection that we achieve in the commitment to excellence, but the perfection of God that we partake of (read “commune with”) through our sincere, prayerful effort.

Taking a searching and fearless look at our lives -- as individuals and as a community of faith -- may we see ourselves as we truly are. Where there is strength, let us turn to God in praise and thanksgiving for granting us these achievements. Where we are weak, let us not be ashamed, ambivalent, or afraid. Let us turn to our Lord again, this time asking for the wisdom and strength to turn things around. Playing small does not serve anyone. It is the devil who asks us, “Who do you think you are reaching so high?” Our commitment is to growth in a humble excellence, which is not self-centred, but God-centered -- rooted in God’s strength and reflecting His glory which abides, in potential, in each one of us.

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The ladder of divine ascent.

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