



THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER - USA

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

National Minister, Tom Bello, OFS

“Jesus Never Invites Us To Failure!”

Servant Leadership in the Secular Franciscan Order

This past August offered me the joyful opportunity to make a Visitation to the Divine Mercy Region with our National Spiritual Assistant Friar Stephen Gross, OFM Conventual. It was the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, and the Sunday Gospel included, in part, the famous story of Peter's walking on the water, found only in St. Matthew:



*When the disciples saw him walking on the sea
they were terrified.
“It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear.
At once Jesus spoke to them,
“Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”
Peter said to him in reply,
“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”
He said, “Come.”
Peter got out of the boat
and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.
But when he saw how strong the wind was
he became frightened;
and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”
Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand
and caught Peter, and said to him,
“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

Matthew 14:26-31

It is a Gospel we all know well, and I have been blessed to preach on this Gospel on occasion. However, I have never explained or heard the Gospel explained as Friar Stephen did. With apologies that I do not have enough of his exact words, here is what I remember:

“Jesus never invites us to failure!” When Jesus called Matthew from being a tax-collector, He did not invite him to failure. When Jesus called Andrew and Peter, James and John to “Follow me!” He did not invite them to follow Him to failure. So when Jesus said to Peter, “Come,” He did not invite him to come and sink.

It always surprises me when I attend a fraternity election, and someone whom everybody else says will be the right person for the job, the right fit for the position, that person tells me, “I’m not ready.” Or “I’m not worthy.” Or, my favorite, “But I’m a sinner.”

Where’s our faith? Don’t we all know by now that Jesus really does have the love and the mercy to help and to save one more sinner like me or you? Doesn’t He? What have we not understood about “Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand” or the very last words of the same Gospel: “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

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Brothers and Sisters who say No! to Servant Leadership at fraternity elections do not give the rest of the fraternity, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a chance to choose for themselves whether they would like a FELLOW SINNER to serve them. We do not give God Himself the chance, as the saying goes, not so much to call the qualified as to qualify those whom He is calling. Sisters and Brothers, please give the Holy Spirit, and your own fraternity family a chance to say No! Who knows? They may say Yes!

Now, I readily admit there are legitimate reasons why one may decline Servant Leadership, and we all have to answer to our own consciences; but as Friar Stephen went on to explain, all service to the Lord and to His people will be successful if only we can trust and love the Lord more. One of the great deceits of the devil, the flesh and world is to trick us into convincing ourselves, for whatever reason, of our obvious sinfulness and unworthiness.

Of course we are all sinners and unworthy! But our hearts lack sufficient faith, hope and love of God and neighbor to keep out the self-doubts, fears and distrust. It's not really about us. We don't trust God enough. We think God doesn't love us enough, and thus we cannot trust Him or ourselves to step out into an admittedly new service to Him and neighbor. We will fail, we are sure, so we never try. We never accept Christ's invitation. We never say Yes!

Shame on us!

"Jesus never invites us to failure!" Let us hold Friar Stephen's words in our minds and examine our lives. It can be our Secular Franciscan life, our married and family life, our work life, whatever. What should we do when we feel called out of our comfort zone by the Lord?

I pray that we can say Yes! That's the answer Mary and all the saints gave sooner or later. We should surrender our wills to Christ and stay focused on Christ, never minding the storms and rough seas around us or the weaknesses and fears within us.

That's why I usually say at all elections, "If you have been nominated for Servant Leadership in the Secular Franciscan Order, the default position is Yes!" We have to trust that Jesus is not inviting us to failure.

Well, then, why do we fail? Why did Peter start by walking on water, and then begin sinking like a rock?

Again, I think Friar Stephen is correct. From my own personal experience and observation, our hearts are, my heart is, not full enough of the love of God and neighbor, and we, I, get easily distracted. Why shouldn't we be distracted? Like Peter on the sea, the storms do rage, water is always fluid, and the correct way often seems often uncertain and even dangerous. Internally – who wouldn't feel self-distrust? In fact, we are all sinners, we are all weak and we have all failed.

Will we fail again? Only when we don't trust the Lord enough, don't pray enough, and start focusing on ourselves or on the difficulties enough to take our eyes off of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Well, what about if the Lord really isn't calling us to service, what about if it's our own ego alone? Okay, if it's only about our egos, that's usually a sure indication of failure, but honestly, after over 30 years in the Secular Franciscan Order, I haven't seen many

Servant Leaders invited to service by their own egos! I mean, have you been misinformed? Being an officer in a Secular Franciscan Fraternity at any level is not about fame, power or fortune. If you are currently an officer at any level, how many people in the greater world know or care what you do? How many people in your own family know or care? How many people in your own fraternity kowtow to your every word and gesture? How much are you paid? Please!

Of the hundreds of elected and appointed officers that I have met in Local, Regional and National Fraternities and in the International Fraternity, the vast, vast majority of the people are holding office not out of ego, but out of service, out of love of the Order and out of accountability to their brothers and sisters, to God and to themselves.

That service is from the Lord, and that invitation is not one to failure. Now, will there be suffering? Indeed. Will that suffering give us pain on occasion? Hello! What have we not understood about the Cross? We are all called to follow Christ to the Cross. Do we have a Feast Day entitled "The Failure of the Cross"? No, every September 14, even if it falls, as happened this year, on a Sunday, we have the Feast Day entitled "The Triumph or Exaltation of the Holy Cross."

We do not fail when we suffer in doing the Lord's work. We do not fail when we carry our crosses yoked to the Lord. Deep down in our Christian faith, we must know that without the Cross there can be no Resurrection. Don't be afraid of suffering in service to God and neighbor. Don't be afraid of the Cross.

Be afraid of not doing what the Lord wants us to do. Be afraid of walking away from what we can do if we surrender to the Lord and fill our hearts with trust of Him, hope in Him, love with Him. How many times have we all missed opportunities to step out and serve our brothers and sisters and in doing so, missed serving the Lord Himself (see Matthew 25:45)?

Let us pray. God, why are we so afraid at times of Servant Leadership in the Secular Franciscan Order? Why do we say No! and turn our backs? Help us to trust more, to hope more and to love more. May we keep our eyes and minds and hearts always on You. May we not focus on the stormy waves outside or the raging fears inside. And even if we begin to sink, may we always remember and believe that You never invite us to failure, and we need only pray three simple words, "Lord, save me!" And immediately You will stretch out Your hand and catch us. We pray in Jesus' name.

