

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Power of Your Invitation”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Can you recall a time in your life when someone invited you to join them on Sunday to church? I was pondering this question this past week. Certainly, my parents invited me to go to church with them growing up. Although, I wonder if the word “invite” is the correct word here. Like in many of your families, going to mass together was simply the expectation. However, I was blessed in that I enjoyed going to mass on Sundays for the most part because the priest’s homilies were joyful, interesting, and mercifully short. Going to mass on Sunday was also family time to be together, so that part was great. If we got to the church on time, the head usher usually let me ring the bell if I wanted to, essentially a pint-sized Quasimodo. I also enjoyed being an altar server over the years. It was the only way my parents could think of to get me to sit still during mass. My memories of church growing up are happy ones, thanks be to God.

However, when I finally left home and went to college, like probably many of you, there was a time when I found myself not going to mass anymore. I reflect on the reason why and I think this was mostly because my family wasn’t there with me at college and so the expectation was no longer there. I considered myself spiritual but not very religious in those days, like so many young people today. And so, it might have been one of the most influential moments in my life when one of the guys I lived with in a big house near campus just blurted out over breakfast, “Schuster... You are Catholic like me right?” His name was Phil. I shrugged my shoulders and say, “Yes”. That is when Phil just simply told me, “There is mass at the Newman Center tonight. I am not going alone so...you are going with me.” I was beside myself, a housemate in college was inviting me to go to Church. And so, I simply smiled and said, “That’s cool. What time?”

Honestly, I look back on my college days and I have to say that exchange over cereal, that invitation my friend gave me, may have been one of the most important and influential moments in my life. This is because I did accompany Phil to mass at the Newman center that night and I had a great time. Up to that point the experience of Church was at a typical local parish. Experiencing Church with people my own age was amazing, not just the mass itself, but also everything that went on in that community before mass, after mass, and during the week. I discovered that the experience of leaving home and going to school awakened a hunger only Jesus and the Catholic Church could fill. Soon, I was invited to play guitar in the choir. Later, I was invited to go on a retreat and gained a dozen or so new best friends. The following year, I was invited to become a Peer Minister at the Newman Center. And after I was a Peer Minister, Archbishop Murphy invited me to become a seminarian. Essentially, he took me out to pizza, and I woke up in Chicago...a story for another day. A few years later, Archbishop Brunett invited me to become a priest. About four months ago, Pope Francis invited me to become the auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Seattle. I wonder to myself, would any of this ever happened if Phil didn’t invite me to go to church with him that day years ago?

You see my friends that is how Jesus operates! He welcomes us to a relationship with him through people, ordinary people. That is the power of invitation. We see this clearly in our Gospel reading this weekend. Here we are in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke and what do we see? We see Jesus appointing seventy-two disciples who are sent in every direction. What is their job? Their job is to invite people into a relationship with Jesus and the early Church. This is what evangelization looked like in the early Church and what it looks like today when we get right down to it.

Clearly, this ministry of invitation isn't a job just for just priests, deacons, religious and bishops. If that were the case, maybe I wouldn't be here today because Phil wasn't a priest, deacon, or bishop. Phil was a friend across the breakfast table at the house I lived in near campus. You see, by our baptism, every one of us is called to participate in the priestly, prophetic, and royal ministry of Jesus. The task of inviting others to a relationship with Jesus is for everyone, all the baptized. And so, a powerful question for all of us can be: Have I ever invited someone to come with me to Church? Have I ever invited someone to a relationship with Jesus? If the answer is yes, then we are participating in the mission Jesus gave to the Church in the Gospel reading today. If the answer is no, we have not ever invited someone to join us at mass, perhaps we can take some time this week and consider why not? We can also consider who we could invite this summer at some point if the opportunity presented itself.

What does this kind of outreach look like? It could be as simple as just inviting someone to join you. It worked for me. However, when it comes to inviting people to a relationship with Jesus, it really does help if you are able to tell your story in an articulate way. Why is Jesus important to you? As a priest, I have heard a variety of different themes as people share with me why Jesus is important to them. Sometimes it is a story of profound conversion, of a soul going the wrong way until Jesus helped them radically rediscover their true selves. Sometimes it is a story of profound revelation when Jesus revealed something very important to them at a critical moment in life. Many times, it is a story of gradual conversion over time like a good friendship that grows richer and richer over the passing of the years. And there are other kinds of sacred stories, so what is yours? What is your story, your personal story of why Jesus is important to you? Can you articulate that story in a joyful way? Can you celebrate that story with others, beginning with your family or perhaps with a friend over Cheerios?

My friends, Jesus says to his disciples something we all know is true today, that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. "Pray to the master of the harvest to send more laborers into the field". I think the challenge this week is for all of us is to consider becoming the answer to this prayer. Be the answer to that prayer! Yes, the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few. And so, how do we begin? Our Gospel reading this weekend suggests something loud and clear: Never underestimate the power of your invitation!