

A trait for saint and sinner

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

In a riveting scene from the play "Amadeus," Antonio Salieri attempts to strike a bargain with God. The composer vows to scrupulously observe the commandments if God will grant him the ability to compose a single, magnificent masterpiece.

Later, after hearing Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart effortlessly produce a brilliant piece of music, Salieri has the insight to recognize his own lesser talents. Though he is a competent composer, he realizes the younger Mozart is a musical genius.

The older composer, overcome with jealousy and despair, turns his back on God. Salieri then uses his court position in Vienna to ruin Mozart financially and professionally. When Mozart dies, there is the suggestion that Salieri contrived somehow to poison his rival.

Salieri is a man consumed with ambition in Peter Shaffer's fascinating "Amadeus." Based loosely on historical events, the play displays Salieri's moral deterioration as ambition and hatred crowd out his more generous virtues.

The character of Salieri in Shaffer's play emphasizes the negative aspects of ambition. In Salieri, ambition is out of bounds. He recognizes no limits as he pursues the goal he has set for himself.

Ambition is a highly ambiguous term. It "has a good and a bad side," explained Norbertine Father Alfred McBride. He discussed ambition and the Christian life during a recent interview. The well-known religious educator is president of the University of Albuquerque, N.M.

Father McBride noted that a person with ambition sets goals and makes plans to move ahead. Ambition can motivate people to achieve high goals, he added.

But because of the negative connotations associated with the word, Christians usually don't think of saints in terms of ambition, Father McBride commented. Yet "the quest for saintliness is an

ambitious, admirable goal."

As an example, he pointed to St. Catherine of Siena. She had a "consuming passion": to persuade Pope Gregory XI to move the papacy back home to Italy.

For 70 years in the 14th century, during what is called the Avignon Papacy, popes lived in Avignon, France, rather than in their traditional home in Rome, Father McBride explained.

St. Catherine considered this a scandalous state of affairs and used "her personal presence, persistence and skill in negotiating" to end the exile in Avignon, Father McBride said.

When she "put her mind to it, nothing deterred her," the college president said. For four months,

he explained, St. Catherine lived at Avignon, negotiating with the pope, in person or through letters.

During the negotiations, St. Catherine used all her ingenuity to think up persuasive arguments. For instance, she insisted that the presence of the papacy in France "subordinated the church to the French government" politically and economically, Father McBride said. In her view, this would give the French government too much

"control over the papacy."

Her most persuasive argument was spiritual, Father McBride said. It was an appeal to Pope Gregory XI's sense of honor. She reminded the pope of a promise he made to God while he was still a cardinal, after the death of the pope preceding him. As the cardinals gathered to choose a new pope, he had promised to return the papacy to Rome if he were elected.

That argument, Father McBride said, convinced Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon and go home to Rome. And St. Catherine's great ambition was achieved.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Ambitious Leap

Thoughts on burying one's talent

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

One day, completely ignoring the Lord's references to the horrible fate awaiting him, James and John approached Jesus with an incredibly insensitive request. They asked for positions of honor when he came into his glory (Mark 10:37).

These two brothers, nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" by Jesus, could hardly be faulted for lack of ambition. It was not, however, a praiseworthy ambition. Behind it was a self-centered desire for prestige and status — and at someone else's expense, in the bargain.

Another time, after the second prediction of the Passion, the whole group of apostles started arguing about who was most important. Ambition again, of the shoddiest sort.

The desire to be Number One is

no modern affliction.

Jesus didn't chide his apostles for being ambitious. But he made it clear that if they wanted to share in his glory, they had to forget themselves and love as generously and creatively as he.

Jesus also had harsh things to say about lazy people who fail to make the most of their God-given talents. A parable in Matthew 25 develops this theme:

A man about to go out of town on a business trip calls in his servants and entrusts his funds to them "according to each man's abilities."

Two servants work diligently at investing the money profitably. The third, apparently afraid of failure, simply digs a hole in the ground and buries his share.

The boss handsomely rewards the servants who made a profit. His reaction to the third servant is terrifying: "You worthless, lazy

lout! You know I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter. All the more reason to deposit my money with the bankers, so that on my return I would have had it back with interest... Throw this worthless servant into the darkness outside, where he can wail and grind his teeth."

Obviously the Lord wants his followers to be ambitious, to work hard for success. When we put all his teachings on the subject together, the result seems to be something like this:

God has given everyone talents of various sorts to be used profitably.

However, the aim is not narrow, prideful building up of self — an extended ego trip. Satisfaction in accomplishments should be tempered by the constant realization that we are doing our duty (Luke 17:10). Moreover, we are working with borrowed capital,

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