

Called to be faithful, not successful

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Father Bob Miller, God rest him, comes to mind today. Bob, a very fine preacher, once gave a homily on patience and perseverance. In the course of the homily, Bob told several stories about people who had worked for a particular goal, only to fall short of what they hoped to achieve.

At the conclusion of each short story, Bob used the phrase, "You can't win them all." He went on to name the great good the subject of each story had done — often without even being aware of it — even though he or she had not achieved the immediate goal.

"You can't win them all" is a phrase still to be heard at Sacred Heart rectory where I live. We use it when one or another of us tells the story of an event or activity that doesn't go just the way we hoped it would.

We hope that those words encourage the hearer to remember Bob's homily, which was a wonderful reminder that a.) human affairs don't always unfold just as we hope they might and b.) every act, thought or word offered in faithful, good spirit by any one of us is a seed that will bear good fruit in the Lord's plan for us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta expresses the same truth in a different way when she reminds us that we are called not to be successful, but to be faithful.



A LONG THE WAY

Neither the words of Bob nor of Mother Teresa encourage us to carelessness or irresponsibility of any kind. To know them in any way, is to know that Bob was and Mother Teresa is quite familiar with discipline, hard work and a sense of responsibility.

Both of their lives have communicated an awareness that, while we should be willing to do the best we can in all things that really matter, everything depends on God who loves us and who is always faithful to us.

I find both comfort and freedom in that reality. Because more often than I like to admit, I find myself caught in a trap that can lead me to feel that the success of everything I do depends on me. Or that there is nothing of benefit

for me or anyone else in anything I do that is less than perfect. Or that others are judging my efforts as severely as I am. Or that I should not attempt the good until I am quite sure it will be realized exactly as planned.

I know absolutely that none of the above are true. Both our gracious God and a great majority of our neighbors understand that we are not perfect and, therefore, they do not expect perfection from us.

What they generally offer in response to our sincere, honest — although imperfect efforts — is gratitude for the good we offer and a consoling understanding about the inevitable gap between that good and the perfect.

My life experiences and what I hear and observe on my pastoral rounds persuade me that I am not alone in battling the tyranny of the perfect or of that cultural pressure which, if unchecked, would lead us to judge ourselves and others by measurable successes.

If you do find yourself beset by those twin bugbears, I hope that you will remember Bob and Mother Teresa and the lessons they offer to us. Surely, we're called to use our good gifts as best we can in service of one another. But it's important to remember that we don't have to win them all. We don't have to succeed. We need only to love as faithfully as we can.

Peace to all.

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