

A HAPPY AND FULFILLED LIFE

Let me begin with an excerpt from an article in the current issue of *America* (Jan. 5-12, 2009, p. 18):

Another young man, Matthew: a superlative Jesuit Volunteer...He has put in a long year in an inner-city Catholic grade school... He once stopped a food fight among the fourth graders by singing a song that made the kids laugh so hard they forgot why they were launching ketchup-dripping Tater Tots at one another. I ask him if he...had ever thought of being a Jesuit. "No," Matt replies matter-of-factly, as if the answer is self-evident. I follow up, "Why wouldn't a young man consider being a Jesuit today?" Matt: "I guess that as a priest you really can't make your mark."

This Sunday is the end of Vocations Awareness Week, and while there are oceans of vocations in the Church that need being attended to, there is a critical need for young men to consider the priesthood. Is it really true that as a priest (or as a deacon, or a vowed religious man or woman) one cannot "make your mark"? The question is worth exploring.

I'm not 100% sure what is meant by "making one's mark," but if by that one means that history will hold you in high fame, for better or worse (like either Mother Teresa or Madonna or Michelangelo), most of us aren't going to have that happen. Does "making one's mark" mean becoming the Pope or the President? Even these categories mean nothing, in and of themselves: who remembers anything about, for example, Pope John XI or President John Tyler?

"Making one's mark" needs perhaps to be seen in a more focused way: have I, by my choices and witness and example and behavior, helped others to make an affirmation of Christ that is leading them to God? Here the reality is enormous even if the public awareness is minimal (even, nil). If Mother Teresa had never become famous (never "successful [in a public sense] but only faithful," if she returned to the convent of Loreto after only a few days of her new venture as a servant of the poor, she would have made her mark: as she helped a dying man in a Calcutta gutter (the first she'd ever encountered), he asked her: "Why do you do this for me?" "Because I love you," she replied. What other "mark" need one make in one's life?

In asking young people to consider whether or not they are called to a vocation to ordained ministry or vowed religious life, I am not asking anyone to think that by this there will be a pathway to fame (and Lord knows that any other path one might choose is loaded with likelihoods that this desire will also be thwarted). It's not a matter of praise; it's a matter of doing and being who and what you are called and made to be in God's sight. Doing or being anything else will ultimately lead you to unhappiness. One can "make one's mark" so importantly in a family, or in a parish, or a school, or a religious community, even if one does not become America's President or the Church's Pope or the Head of the National Catholic Education Association.

Service in love is the path to joy. I can assure you of that from first-hand experience! Won't you join me/us? Trust me—in this vocation you can indeed "make your mark."