

True & False Ambition

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks to his disciples about his impending suffering and death (cf. Mk. 9:30-37). This is the second prediction of the Passion, and once again the disciples don't get it. Instead, motivated by self-ambition, they engaged in a debate about who among them is the greatest. This moment highlights a common human tendency: the desire for recognition and status. Jesus' response to them turns their understanding of greatness upside down. James in the second reading (Jam 3:16-4:3) also condemns such kind of ambition. He warns that where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. Thus, our pursuit of greatness must be rooted in humility and a desire for peace.

There's nothing wrong with being ambitious. Indeed, it is good to be ambitious, to have goals, to want to be good at what one does and to succeed in it. It is not ambition itself that is condemned, but false ambition. Ambition that gets out of hand and causes us to forget everything in the pursuit of success. False ambition involves a desire to rule others. It creates conflict and division, and is very damaging to the unity of the community.

Hence, we must be careful what we are sacrificing in pursuit of our goals. We may be sacrificing family life, justice, kindness, even life itself. Drive and ambition can cause one to treat others in a cruel or unjust way. What good will it do us if we gain the whole world but lose ourselves?

Jesus did not abolish ambition, but redefined it. For the ambition to rule others, he substituted the ambition to serve others. For the ambition to have others do things for us he substituted the ambition to do things for people. This is true ambition. And the best and purest kind of service is that which is rendered to the little ones, that is, to the most insignificant persons in the community.

Jesus highlighted this by placing a child in the midst of his disciples and saying, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me." This powerful image illustrates that true greatness in the Kingdom of God is found in humility and service. In the eyes of the world, children often represent vulnerability and dependence, but Jesus elevates their status, showing that to serve the least among us is to serve him.

As we navigate our lives, we must ask ourselves: Are we ambitious for power, wealth, or recognition? Or are we willing to be servants, following the example of Christ? Are we willing to embrace the call to humility and service? Let us pray for the grace to recognize that in serving others, we find our true identity as followers of Christ.

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