

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the parable Jesus tells in our Gospel today, we hear the following exhortation and associated promise: “When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Now, who of us, if we were holding a wedding reception or an awards banquet or something like that, would even consider with a grain of salt this teaching? I know one person I’d bet money on. Mother Teresa.

Perhaps you’ve heard the wonderful news that next Sunday, September 4th, she will be canonized a saint. And while I don’t know of any instances where she invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to a wedding reception or the like, I read a story last night about how she did invite them to a feast of airline lunches.

The article appeared in *Guideposts*, a good monthly magazine of stories of faith that inspire faith. This story was written some time ago by Bob Macauley, the founder of AmeriCares, a relief organization that distributes critical medicines and medical supplies to the world’s poor in times of disaster. To date, they’ve distributed well over five billion dollars in aid to people in over 137 countries. And of all the lessons that Mother Teresa taught Bob in his life, he tells one about begging that he learned on a commercial flight.

He writes, “Mother Teresa and I had visited several orphanages in Guatemala and were heading to Mexico City on TACA Airlines. AmeriCares was still in its infancy and I was wondering how to expand it. I’d had plenty of experience fund-raising but I’d still get self-conscious going to someone hat in hand.

The flight attendant brought us our lunches. “Excuse me,” Mother Teresa said, “how much does this meal cost?” The flight attendant shrugged. “I don’t know. About one dollar in U.S. Currency.” I’m sure this was a question no passenger had ever asked. “If I give it back to you,” Mother said, “would you give me that dollar to give to the poor?” The flight attendant looked startled. “I don’t know if I can,” she stammered. “It’s not something we normally do.”

Well, after a few minutes of consulting with the pilot in the cockpit of the plane, she returned and said, “Yes, Mother. You may have the money for the poor.”

“Here you are.” Mother Teresa handed her the tray. I gave her mine too. No way could I eat in peace with Mother next to me. Then I noticed the couple in front of us did the same. The flight attendant then got on the loud-speaker and announced, “If anyone gives up their meal, the airline will give a dollar to Mother Teresa for the poor.” Can you believe it? Not a soul wanted lunch on that flight, including the crew. I stood up and counted. There were 129 people on board.

“Pretty good,” I said to Mother. “Now you’ve got one hundred and twenty-nine dollars for the poor.” But she was not finished. “Bub,” she said in her thick Albanian accent, “get me the food.” “Mother, what are you going to do with one hundred and twenty-nine airline lunches?” “The airline can’t use them now. We can give them to the poor.” With some reluctance I went to the airline officials who were gathered on the tarmac to greet Mother Teresa. Then, I got to the matter at hand: “Thanks for giving us money for the lunches...but Mother Teresa would like to know if she could have the lunches too.”

After conferring among themselves, they returned with their answer – “Of course. Anything Mother wishes.” I walked back to Mother Teresa to tell her the good news. She hardly paused for breath. “Bub,” she said, “get me the truck. I want the truck.” “What?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard her correctly. “I want the truck.” A few minutes later I was sitting in the passenger seat of a TACA Airlines truck with a not even five-foot nun behind the wheel. She was so short she had to peer between the steering wheel and the dashboard to see. “Where are we going?” I asked. “To the poor.”

She was a terrible driver – it was only by the grace of God that she didn’t hit another vehicle. In a half hour we found ourselves in one of those desperately poor Mexican neighborhoods of cardboard shanties. She pulled over to the side of the road. Mother Teresa leaped to the ground and opened the back of the truck, handing out meals. The recipients had no idea who she was. They just knew she had food.

The truck, the lunches, the money – how had she gotten it all? By asking. We got back into the truck and returned to the airport. “Bub,” she said, “it’s easy to ask when you’re doing it for the poor.” And that was the lesson I learned.”

Now, you might think to yourselves, “Well, of course – she’s Mother Teresa! That’s why she’s being canonized.” Exactly! But, do you think she started out this way? Do you just think she was born with incredible faith and just got lucky? No way. St. Teresa of Calcutta will be declared a saint because she sought to do whatever God wanted of her in life. Whatever. Feed the poor, move to India, beg for airline lunches. She had a passionate love for Jesus and for Jesus’ weakest brothers and sisters.

But, as much as we might admire Mother Teresa, none of us is called to be her or do precisely those things she did in her life. Rather, as Matthew Kelly says in the purple book we handed out for Christmas, *Rediscover Jesus*, we are called to become saints by “becoming the best version of ourselves.” Imagine what our world, our parish, our families would look like, if, like Mother Teresa, we all took seriously the call to become the best version of ourselves! Imagine. Now, let’s do it! God bless you.