

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Some of you may be aware that the Pastors of the local churches meet for lunch or breakfast up at the Brass Eagle with some degree of regularity. That's where PCCO was born. At a recent lunch only four of us could meet. We got to talking about death and dying. The Mennonite pastor asked, "What would you want people to say about you at your funeral? One answered, "I'd want people to say, 'He was truly compassionate and really cared about those in need.'" Another said, "I'd like people to say, 'He was a good father and husband; a man whose life was a fine example for others to follow.'" The Mennonite said, "Oh, I'd like people to remember me for my preaching of the Word." Well, I'm the oldest in the group. So, they turned to me and, again, the Mennonite asked, "How about you, Father Vic, what would you want the people to say?" I thought about it for a long minute and finally said, "I think I'd like someone to say something like, 'Look, he's moving'"**

**This evening/morning let's take a look at these first followers of the Lord; two sets of brothers; Simon Peter and, his brother, Andrew; and James and John, the sons of a man named Zebedee. The most important thing about them that strikes us is how unimportant they were. They were simple fishermen; hard-working men to be sure; but there was nothing special about them.**

**When you think about it, Jesus could have chosen anybody to be his first followers. He could have gone into the local synagogue and found the most prayerful people. He could have gone to the governor's palace and picked out the most powerful people or even the best and strongest soldiers. Instead, Jesus walked down by the shore and chose simple, uneducated, unsophisticated, relatively powerless people to be his disciples.**

**In beginning his ministry in this way, Jesus is really telling us who hear this Scripture, He is also choosing us, no matter how simple or uneducated or unsophisticated or powerless we feel ourselves to be. In the words of Mother Theresa, now St. Theresa of Kolkutta, "He doesn't choose the qualified; rather he qualifies the chosen." The fact is that the Lord chooses ordinary people to be his disciples so that they will depend on His power and not their own. For this reason, St. Paul says, no one will be able "to boast in the presence of God."**

**Now Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John didn't merely become fans of Jesus. A fan is merely an enthusiastic admirer. This weekend there are millions of fans who will scream their heads off for the Atlanta Falcons or the Green Bay Packers or the Pittsburgh Steelers or the New England Patriots. Come Monday morning some of those fans will still be cheering, and others will be like fans of the Philadelphia Eagles, saying, "Wait until next year!"**

No, Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, with others soon to follow became disciples of Jesus. They turned away from their lives as they knew them, and followed Jesus, listening and learning from him for three years of their lives. That, of course, is the first step in discipleship—spend time in the presence of Jesus, come to know him through his teaching and way of life.

Unfortunately, in our time and place, Jesus seems to have more fans than followers. Almost 75% of Americans identify themselves as Christians, that's somewhere in the neighborhood of 233 million people. That's a lot of Christians.

If that's true, why is that 35 million people in America go to bed hungry every night, including 13 million children? Why is it that there are more than 120,000 children waiting to be adopted? How is it that more than 3,000 lives are snuffed out by abortion every day in the United States? These numbers just don't add up to give evidence that there are 233 million Christians in America.

Jesus might have 233 million fans in America, but certainly not followers or disciples. These "fans" may even get dressed up for church each Sunday. They like hearing some good worship music that makes them feel good. They like being associated with Jesus. These fans want to be close enough to Jesus to get the benefits, but not so close that I requires anything from them. They want a no-strings-attached relationship with Jesus. So a fan says, "I like Jesus but don't ask me to serve the poor; I like Jesus, but I'm not going to give any money to support the work of His Church; I like Jesus but don't ask me to forgive the person who hurt me; I like Jesus, but don't talk to me about money or morality or politics—they're all off limits.

As we see in Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, these four very ordinary people, they became not mere fans of Jesus. They became followers. They spent three years of their lives in the presence of Jesus. They became disciples, that is, students of a great teacher. They listened to his every word and hung on to his every work. They grew in discipleship. They wanted to become more and more like Jesus.

I grew up, as some of you did, in the church of the 1950s and 60s. Catholic churches were always full at four or five Masses every Sunday. Many mourn for those days and wish that they were still here. Some even yearn for the Latin Mass to be reinstated. But the Church wasn't really growing; it was merely getting fat. We came to church but we weren't really growing. We remained spiritual infants. We weren't growing in understanding and faith. The church was simply multiplying spiritual babies. What became of too many of us. Many have fallen by the wayside. Others left, looking for the next, new thing. Still others have proven to be people of shallow convictions. Lots became fans, but never followers.

**To be alive is to grow. What's the difference between a flower that is alive and one that is dead? The one that is growing is alive. The only evidence of life is growth. So it is with the life of the Spirit.**

**Growth is why we come to Church. This is where we encounter Christ and learn about him and grow in our spiritual walk. Those who say they follow Jesus, but don't need the Church are merely fooling themselves. Studies over the past few decades back that up. Those who claim to be Christian but don't belong to a local church become less and less committed to their Christian values. The ember removed from the fire soon grows cold.**

**Like every Pastor, I am astounded at times by the casual attitude many have with regard to their responsibilities to the church. The church is the place where disciples grow. This is where we are equipped for the work Christ has given us. The church deserves our greatest loyalty and service.**

**Recently, I heard about a man who was given the nickname, "Honest John". It embarrassed him and he protested that he did not deserve it. "Couldn't you call me, 'Fairly Honest John?'"**

**That sounds like many of us, doesn't it? We want to be "fairly committed" in our service to Christ, "fairly committed" to worship when it's convenient and comfortable or when we feel like it, "fairly committed" to making our church what God has called us to be.**

**Jesus called those first followers to spend three years in his presence as disciples, learners, and students. It wasn't enough for them to be "fairly committed". Christ called them to be completely committed. They needed to grow. So do we!**

**Those disciples grew into Apostles. As disciples they were called to come to Jesus. As Apostles they were sent forth. As disciples they held on to Jesus, caring for themselves and each other. As Apostles they were sent forth to care for others. There comes a time when mature Christian disciples realize it is time to move beyond "being ministered to" to the work of ministry itself.**

**For me one of the most poignant scenes in all of the Gospels is when Peter comes ashore after fishing in the Sea of Galilee, to which he returned after his three-fold denial of Christ before his crucifixion and all the confusion surrounding the talk of his Resurrection. Peter meets Jesus and doesn't know what to say. He is filled with shame, confused, and frightened. Jesus doesn't accuse him. He doesn't point out his weakness or cowardice. He simply asks him again and again and again, "Peter, do you love me?" Each time when Simon Peter professes his love for Jesus, the Lord simply instructs him, "Feed my sheep."**

**That is the final step in following Christ. It is to feed His sheep. We need to appreciate that in the Church today. We need to move beyond caring for ourselves to caring for others.**

**At the beginning of his ministry Jesus called four ordinary fishermen to leave their nets and follow him. He called them not to be fans, but to be followers. God then did extraordinary things through them. The first part of their discipleship was spent living in the presence of Jesus and others who were called that they might grow to spiritual maturity. With that spiritual maturity attained, they became Apostles, sent as teachers, missionaries, leaders of local churches, and servants both of the Word and Sacrament to the world. That is our calling as well. Are you ready to move beyond being a fan to becoming a follower, growing in discipleship to be sent forth as an Apostle.**

**Begin today. Spend time in the presence of Christ, not just here at Mass, but in private prayer and reading the Gospel. Did you know the Church is open all day, every day? When is the last time you spent time, praying in church on your own, before the Blessed Sacrament? Join in one of the many offerings we have for adult faith formation here at the Church. Come to know and love Jesus for yourself. Connect with “formed” on your computer at home and learn more and more about Jesus; be inspired by the lives of the saints; learn more about being a faith-filled Catholic. Then, offer yourself in service here in the church. Enter more deeply into the life and work of the church and bond yourself more closely to those with whom you pray and worship. In these ways prepare yourself to become the Apostle that Jesus and His Church need you to be. Your life and the lives of our suffering sisters and brothers in the world depend on it.**