

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 11, 2021)

All three readings today connect one way or another to the fact that God calls each of us to specific ways of holiness and discipleship. And, at first glance, those so chosen might seem rather unlikely candidates for that call. In the first reading, Amos is on the receiving end of Amaziah's angry outburst against his work as a prophet—one who speaks on God's behalf. Amos says in response: "hey, don't blame me--I was a simple shepherd, a peasant—God is the one who told me to prophesy!" St. Paul told the Ephesians in our second reading that God chose them in Christ 'to be holy and without blemish before him.' This is the very same Paul who, before his conversion prompted by his vision of the risen Christ, was actively and viciously persecuting the earliest Christians. And Jesus in the gospel summoned those twelve apostles and sent them out with specific jobs to do in order to draw others to Jesus. And those apostles? We might call them the original 'motley crew': a few fisherman, a tax collector (of all things!), a political revolutionary (Simon the Zealot) and others who weren't exactly big-time VIPs of their time and place.

God calls each of us, in our own particular circumstances and with the specific gifts and talents he has given us, to pursue holiness and discipleship as well. No, we are not a prophet like Amos or a St. Paul or one of the Twelve, but we are all called nonetheless—each of us and on a daily basis—to live as Jesus calls, challenges, and empowers us to live. I'd like to offer three more contemporary examples for our brief consideration:

1. This past Tuesday, July 6, the Church celebrated the feast of St. Maria Goretti, an Italian born in 1890 and who grew up in a poor family who lived their Catholic faith in a simple and genuine way. When she was eleven years old, a young man tried to force her to give in to his desires, but Maria refused. She tried to warn him against committing this serious sin, but he only became enraged and stabbed her 14 times. On her deathbed the next day in a local hospital, Maria not only forgave her attacker but also said she wanted him to be with her forever in heaven. In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared Maria Goretti, this young martyr of the virtue of purity, a saint of the Catholic Church.

2. Example #2: less than three years ago, in November of 2018, a remarkably similar crime was committed in the St. Louis area. Jamie Schmidt, a 53-year-old mother of three, was in a Catholic supply store with two other women when a man came in with a gun. He tried to force the three women to submit to his desires. After having to witness this man sexually assault the other two women, Jamie looked him in the eye and said "In the name of God, I will not [give in]." Like Maria Goretti's assailant, Jamie's attacker was enraged by her refusal to submit to him and he shot her point-blank. Before her death later that day, Jamie was heard whispering the words of the Our Father.

I share these two stories not to say that we have to follow Maria's and Jamie's examples in every detail. In his homily at the canonization Mass for Maria Goretti, Pope Pius XII made that very point: "Not all of us are expected to die a martyr's death, but we are all called to the pursuit of Christian virtue...a constant, persistent and relentless effort is asked of us right up to the moment of our death." That young Italian girl and that 53-year-old woman were not well-known or influential or powerful people in any way as the world considers such things. But they lived

their faith in Christ with perseverance and trust and a genuine love for Christ whose grace in turn enabled them to remain true to Christ when death stared them literally in the face.

3. Example #3: Maria Goretti's killer was a young man named Alessandro Serenelli. For several years after his conviction and imprisonment he was thoroughly unrepentant. But then he had a dream in which Maria, his victim, approached him and gave him 14 white lilies, one for each of the 14 wounds he inflicted on her. This led to a profound conversion on his part. Years later, his sentence was shortened and he was released from prison in 1929. Five years later he met with Maria's mother and asked her forgiveness. Can you even begin to imagine such a scene? Your daughter was brutally murdered when she was just a child, and the one who killed her now stands in front of you and dares to ask, has the unmitigated gall to ask for your forgiveness?? Her mother responded immediately: "God has forgiven you, Maria has forgiven you, and I too forgive you." Alessandro later went to live out the rest of his life as a penitent in a monastery. In 1950 he joined with the friars at that monastery in listening on the radio to the Mass for Maria Goretti's canonization. Can you even begin to imagine that scene? You killed a child who resisted your attempt to rape her...and now you are hearing her named as a saint. Serenelli died 20 years later in 1970 at the age of 87—at peace with God, his victim and her family, and in his soul. All of that was accomplished by the most amazing grace and healing power of Christ and Serenelli's cooperation with that grace and his tears of repentance.

St. Paul said in the second reading that God the Father chose us in our Lord Jesus Christ "to be holy and without blemish before him." That was true for Paul himself, for those twelve apostles, for Jamie Schmidt, for Maria Goretti and even for her murderer Alessandro Serenelli. And needless to say (but I'll say it anyway), it is true for every single one of us. The grace of God enabled those very ordinary people to respond to that call in extraordinary ways. And it can and will do the same for us if we want it. Again from Pope Pius XII: "...we are all called to the pursuit of Christian virtue...a constant, persistent and relentless effort is asked of us right up to the moment of our death." Let's pray for that grace that we each need to persevere in that 'relentless effort', and let's do it every day. God will grant that grace; he will give it to us when we need it and to the degree we need it...just like he did for Maria, Jamie, and Alessandro. Let's pray daily for that grace...and then be grateful for God's amazingly generous response.