NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

'Jesus wants followers, not admirers'

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 30, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

At the close of the Mass at which he was ordained a bishop Wednesday, Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, spoke to the congregation. After the thank yous, he said something very profound: "Jesus wants followers, not admirers." (Full disclosure: Bishop Olson was a Basselin Scholar at Theological College when I was an inmate there as well.)

There is precious little in our American culture that encourages that disposition of heart and mind to become a follower. We have perfected the art, first introduced by Adam and Eve, of going our own way. And if you doubt that we are a culture of "admirers," just wait until tons of ink and air-time are spilt on who is wearing what at the Oscars.

None of us is free from these cultural referents, just as none of us is free from the stain of original sin. I recall, happily a long time ago, having a conversation with a Jewish friend who was, and is, a political philosopher. He asked me what I meant by saying I was a liberal Catholic. I replied, "Well, I suppose it means that I accept the fact that we all have our crosses to bear, but I do not want anyone else telling me what my cross is." My reply satisfied my interlocutor, but, over the years, I realized it did not satisfy me.

The other day, the Holy Father met with refugees. He spoke very movingly about how we must encounter each other and share our joys and sufferings. He told an apocryphal tale of St. Peter going to Jesus and complaining that his cross is too heavy to bear. Jesus takes him to a field where 40 crosses are on display and invites St. Peter to try a different one. Peter tries them all and finally finds one he thinks is suitable. The Master tells him, "That was the cross you had in the first place." How many of us, like Peter in the story, have complained about our cross and compared ours to the crosses of others? How reluctant we are to accept suffering as a part of life, even as a part of God's plan for us, not in a sadistic or self-hating way, but mindful that if there is a cure for the sin of pride other than suffering, that cure has yet to be discovered.

Another story. Back when I was working in a restaurant, I was interviewing applicants who wanted to become a bartender. A young woman, dressed all in black, most of it leather, with tattoos and piercings everywhere, sat down and handed me her application. I asked her to tell me about herself and she said something about how she liked to express her individuality in her clothes, her piercings and her tattoos. I refrained from pointing out that everything she had cited as evidence of her individuality had been manufactured, sold, or dry-cleaned by others. I asked her where she grew up. Turns out, she grew up on a farm in rural Virginia. I hired her on the spot and told her why. "If you grew up on a farm, you know all about hard work." That was one of my only rules about hiring waiters and bartenders: Anyone who grew up on a family farm, whether they had restaurant experience or not, was hired on the spot. Of course, this young woman did not choose where to be born. She might have been born into a family of accountants. But the thing I was looking for, a work ethic, is something we acquire from others through example. It can't be bought. A work ethic cannot be dry cleaned.

If you have teenage children or nieces and nephews, you know the shocking degree to which the marketing agencies have captured their young imaginations. I wrote last month that the real War on Christmas is the effort by commercial interests to turn a holiday about divine grace and humble beginnings into an opportunity to teach

children how to be greedy. If you look at the magazines they read, they are mostly advertisements and most of the stories are about what people wear, the houses where they live, the cars that they drive. We are all followers of fashion now, we just don't realize it because the marketing agencies have convinced us all, as they convinced the young woman who wanted to be a bartender, that it is here, in the choice of accessories, that we get to define ourselves, usually by choosing accessories we have seen on those we admire.

Bishop Olson did not elaborate on what he meant Wednesday. I hope he will in the weeks and years ahead. To point out that Jesus wants followers and not admirers is as countercultural as you can get in this culture. His words challenge those who bring their economic theories or their feminist theories or what have you, none of which are rooted in the Gospel but derived from elsewhere, and with which the Gospel is confronted and the Church perceived as something to be overcome. "Jesus wants followers, not admirers." In the history of the Church, the true revolutionaries are always those who have followed, those who have suffered, those who are docile. It is the Virgin Mary who sets forth the manifesto we know as the Magnificat, and that revolutionary prayer is credible to Christian ears precisely because it comes from the one who said, "Let it be done to me according to thy word."

We tend to see the important discussions in the Church as those that engage the left versus the right, even though everyone admits that the words "liberal" and "conservative" are as likely to obscure debate rather than enlighten it. But I would submit that partisans of both left and right tend to rush past this prior, more fundamental divide that Bishop Olson touched on. Modernity is all about admiring but admiring is as old as the forbidden fruit. The real challenge for our age is to recapture that sense of following which once had fuller cultural expression, and understand that discipleship is always, always about following. Those of us who invoke the Good Shepherd need to remember, that in that parable, we are cast in the role of sheep.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/28/2016 - 07:22*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/jesus-wants-followers-not-admirers