

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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I spent a few minutes this past Tuesday afternoon visiting the Church of St. Malachy in Clontarf, Minnesota—population 164. Clontarf is an old Irish settlement on Highway 9 about five miles northwest of Benson, Minnesota. In case that doesn't help you locate it, it's exactly 141.6 miles due west of this building, on the way to absolutely no place that I could discern. And other than the bar, and the church, and a few dozen homes, there is nothing in Clontarf...except for the railroad track that runs through it. And at least indirectly, that's the reason I went there. Together with my friend and classmate Fr. John Ubel from the Cathedral, we wanted to have an eyewitness experience of Church history.

It was exactly 140 years ago that the local bishop of St. Paul, a young pioneer by the name of John Ireland, hatched what he thought was a brilliant plan to spread the gospel and the Catholic faith out on the prairie of Western Minnesota. And it was all about relocation, railroads, and real estate. Simply put, there were all kinds of poor Catholic immigrants living in squalor in places like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia who needed to escape their miserable conditions of life. And there was all this cheap, undeveloped land out there near South Dakota that needed to be inhabited and farmed. And there were these sleek new railroad companies that needed people to ride their trains and haul their goods along the line. Perfect. All that was needed was for the Church to conspire with James J. Hill's Great Northern Railroad Company and partner in the business of land speculation. It was a classic case of, "If you build it they will come." And for a while, that's exactly what happened. By the hundreds and then, briefly, by the thousands. And so were born multiple little Catholic towns like Clontarf, each with its very own Catholic church and priest to create community. But as it soon turned out, the land out there is not excellent for growing crops, and there really isn't anything else to draw people there, and it's pretty far from any population center, and eventually the railroads were eclipsed by other more convenient ways for people to move around, and the weather can be really harsh compared to New York City. And so it is that today we have Clontarf, population 164. The train no longer slows down when moving through and the station building is long gone.

So perhaps it's at least a fair question to propose: Was Bishop Ireland's Great Idea a fruitful one? Or was it a colossal failure? The answer to that depends a lot on what you're measuring, and what counts for "success." And actually, that's the same question that is posed to us by today's gospel of Luke. What does success *look* like when it comes to spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ? How does one know if one is being obedient and faithful to the task? That calls for some real discernment and prayer, all the time. But at the very least our gospel rules out two false measures of success. The first wrong measure is that everybody loves you and welcomes you. The Lord himself said that that wasn't going to happen. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a two-edged sword. It both consoles and challenges. It both comforts and disturbs. It is both compassion and judgement. And there will be both hearers of the Word who are elated by that experience and those who are infuriated by it, both those who welcome it and those who despise it. So on one hand we may be sure that where there is only peace and quiet and approval at the preaching of the "Christian" gospel, there is something wrong and something incomplete about that. And the other false measure of success is the equal and opposite one, the one that tries to gauge success seeing how much harsh judgement and anger and hatred one can stir up while preaching. Again, Jesus told us it wouldn't be like that either. This is not a gospel simply of ridicule and shame and damnation. So if there are communities where those are the regular offerings and the regular experience of common life, we may be sure that this is also a perversion of the true message of the Lord.

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The Gospel is what it is, and as Jesus sent out his 72 evangelists to prepare his way he told them plainly that would be some who would welcome it, and them, and others that would not. Success in sharing the gospel is not measured by adding up the number of people who are impressed with it or by totaling the number of those who reject it.

But at the same time, we do have some indicators of how successful we are being as bearers of God's Kingdom. Specifically, where there is hospitality to the guest, *whoever* he or she may be, there is success. Where there is healing and encouragement for those who suffer, there is success. Where demons are subdued, there is success—whether those demons have names like selfishness, chemical addiction, domestic violence, or names like alienation, depression, anxiety or grief.

It is clear from today's gospel that Jesus was not commissioning his disciples to collect the largest crowds around them, or to make as many people as possible feel good about themselves as possible, or bad about themselves. It wasn't at all about those superficial measures of success that aren't true measures at all. It was actually a commissioning for something much simpler: Preach my gospel, and live it. That's often not easy, but it's not complex.

And it's important for churchy people like us to get that right because it can be so tempting to want to evaluate our "success" with the same kind of criteria that 3M or Wells Fargo or the Minnesota Timberwolves do...How many people did you attract, how much money did you bring in, how sexy is your brand, whose endorsement did you attract, what does your building look like, who's talking about you on social media and how many "Likes" did you collect online? None of those is a bad thing, necessarily, but it's not the measure of a successful witness to Jesus Christ.

So let us return to Clontarf, Minnesota. Words that I will never apply to that place would include "trendy," "sexy," "popular," or "famous." But as an expression of God's coming Kingdom, could we call it successful? Very possibly, but not in the way that either Bishop Ireland or James J. Hill would have hoped. St. Malachy's church is still there and gathering for Eucharist every Sunday, even though it now shares its priest with two other towns and it's only a small fraction of the size that it was before WWI. As long as the real gospel of Jesus Christ is preached out there, and as long as the effects of that Word spill over into the way that people live together, and serve others, it is an eruption of God's Kingdom.

And our responsibility is, of course, to do the very same thing here on the East Side, no matter who cares or is impressed or pleased by that. We succeed when we are faithful, and nothing else much matters.