

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

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When I was first beginning my life in priesthood there was no internet. No email, no chat rooms, nothing like that. Which meant that when I would meet with couples who were preparing to get married and I would ask them how they met, the typical answers were things like having gone to school together, or having been introduced by friends, or having met in a bar and striking up a conversation. Today, by contrast, I'd say about half the couples I speak with tell me that they first met online—most often through an electronic matching and dating service. Sometimes they seem a bit hesitant—almost embarrassed—to admit that, as if there is something sad and pitiable about saying that you're looking to fill an empty place in your soul and you don't know where to start to do that. But there's nothing wrong with admitting that. In fact, it's a universal longing that only dishonest people try to deny. We don't fulfill *ourselves* at the deepest level of our being. Only people can do that. If saying that out loud makes us feel vulnerable or incomplete, well that's just exactly what we are when we are all by ourselves: Vulnerable and incomplete. If someone chooses to look online for that person, good for them.

But there is one way in which computer matching services may put people at a disadvantage. From all I can tell, these online places begin by asking a prospective partner just exactly what they are looking for in a mate: their ethnicity, interests, education, values and so on. Again, that seems reasonable enough and there's nothing wrong with it, *but*... But what if a person just doesn't know what he/she is looking for that way, or what if it is just *presumed*—as it seems to be—that the ideal partner is one who aligns perfectly with all the specified preferences and desires that are entered on the database. Think of all the important people in your life—past or present—that would *never* have passed the preference test on an online match service. Many of my great friends are people who aren't like me at all, and I don't think that's rare. One of the advantages of the old-fashioned way of beginning a dating relationship is that you had actually to sit in the same room with the other person for a while, or else trust a friend who had done that on your behalf. Physical presence can clarify a lot of questions and wonderings. A lot of the “who *are* you” questions can't easily be answered through a computer screen online.

And although it's not a perfect analogy, we can say many of the same things about Jesus' call of the first disciples in today's gospel of John. There are at least two notable moments in this story. The first is that these two disciples already had a relationship of trust with John the Baptist, their teacher and mentor, enough so that when John said, “Follow that one, Jesus,” they did, without hesitancy or question. They didn't yet know him at all, but they knew of John the Baptist's spiritual vision. They actually spent physical time together with John—even if that time was, as the gospel seems to suggest, literally just standing around watching people pass by. John, if you will, “set them up on a date.”

The second moment is the posing of the question to them by Jesus, “What are you looking for?” The two of them don't answer directly, but instead pose a question of their own: “Rabbi, where do you stay?” They could just as well have said, “We have no idea what we are looking for, but we know of our inner longing, and we think you may be the one to fulfill it.” And so they stayed with them that day...physically together, testing out this Jesus person, getting to know him.

And as the rest of the gospel will play out, it will become abundantly clear that this Messiah is not much at all what the disciples thought they were looking for at the start. He didn't conform to any of the standard

categories of matching desires or wishes. He would have been an immediate reject in an online questionnaire for a savior.

- They were looking for a military power and Jesus showed up in meekness and peace.
- They were looking for a Jewish Nationalist and Jesus showed up as a welcome of *all* peoples and nations.
- They were looking for harsh judge of sinners and Jesus showed up as a forgiver—70 times 7 times.
- They were looking for a person who would make their own lives easier and Jesus showed up as one expecting to suffer and expecting them to suffer with him.

In short, Jesus failed the dot-com compatibility inventory, but he still proved to be the right Messiah of God. And that could only be discovered by staying with him—in person and for quite a while.

That's the same requirement for us still, we who wish to be his disciples too. We don't come to know and trust this Jesus in just an instant or from a distance. We only come to recognize him as the fulfiller of our deepest spiritual longings by actually staying with him awhile—in Christian community, in liturgy and sacraments, in Sacred Scripture, and in prayer and service. In today's First Reading (1 Samuel) it took both Eli and Samuel quite a while to understand where and how God was truly calling and commissioning young Samuel for a mission. They just had to be patient—together...physically together in conversation and discernment. There's no shortcut to that kind of deep kinship with Christ, especially when we find that he can upend so many of our presumptions and expectations in the process of filling the void in our hearts—the void that was created specifically to be filled by him.

“Where are you staying, Lord?” “Come and see.”