

COUNTIN' FOR SOMETHIN'

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Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

(Reprinted with permission, *Los Alamos Daily Post*, April 6, 2025)

I've been watching the old black and white episodes of "Gunsmoke" during relax time lately, and saw a rather poignant one recently (Ssn 9, Ep.26). A struggling farmer was feeling that he was getting "old" (a whole 43 ... puh-*leeaasssse!*) and was depressed because he felt he had been of no consequence in his life—barely making a living, no kids, and a shrewish wife declaring him a "failure." A rather timid yet good fellow, he goes into Dodge City hoping to find some way to make his mark and ends up publicly backing down to a bully in shame (in front of a woman who had been kind to him, no less) and sleeping in the stable or the street. Only his good ol' dog is his sporadic but loyal companion. But, in the end, he redeems himself by selfless sacrifice in taking a bullet meant for Marshal Dillon. In his dying breath, lying in the street, he asks his aforementioned female acquaintance: "*It counted for somethin', didn't it Julie?*"

Speaking from a male point of view, the theme of that story would, I think, strike home with men most because we are largely evaluated by what we do in work, life, etc. What's one of the first things in a conversation with strangers, especially among men? "What do you do? Where do you work?" If we're honest, that's not just an attempt to find commonality, but we tend to gauge a person by occupation, standing, and impact he may have in society at large. The wealthy usually get instant respect (merited or not), as do those in occupations known to be intellectually challenging or essential in societal structure. And unless there's some sort of handicap such as physical or mental limitation, those we perceive as whiny, lazy, or lacking in drive we tend to view with ... "less" respect, if not visceral disdain.

An oft-mentioned theme in this column is a motto from "Kingdom of Heaven: "What man IS a man who does not make the world better?" And while that source is just a movie, it reflects an underlying attitude of society that the best of us make things better for those around us, whether it be the family, community, or the world.

But there are many ways to do this, and certainly a variety of perceptions about how to *best* accomplish such a goal. Without farmers and ranchers, there would be no food the world needs to live. Plumbers, electricians, construction workers, I.T. folks, mechanics, etc., keep society's infrastructure going. Doctors and nurses care for our health. Scientists and mathematicians make discoveries, and engineers utilize those discoveries to build civilizations. Etc.

Young people—and sometimes *not* so young people—search for ways to "make their mark" in the world. Some take a tragic path in criminality, making a "big score" in attempted robbery, or seeking notoriety—even despicably—by some newsworthy crime. But greater is the unknown person who does *no* evil than anyone who does evil in anything. Yet the vast majority of people would much rather have society's approbation and admiration rather commit something that makes their name a curse. For instance, a "Ponzi scheme" is a method of cheating people out of their money, and thus, the name of one who developed that gimmick—Charles Ponzi—is forever associated with fraud. We might also think of traitors who might receive the notorious epithet "Benedict Arnold" or "Judas."

But how do we make our lives of the *most* benefit? Certainly in raising families of good kids, thus multiplying the effect of our lives as well as enjoying the love and support of one another; for instance, kids that have parents of examples of goodness and charity will have that firm foundation in their conscience for the rest of their lives ... hopefully raising their kids in like fashion and virtue. And we live in an era of an unprecedented variety of beneficial occupations; often, the toughest choice for young people in one of the many hundreds to settle upon.

But, O Christian, with what can WE occupy our time best? For this, as in all things, we look to our model: Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who Himself was/is divine, worked 1) humbly, 2) at His occupation (carpentry), until He went on His mission to 3) teach others of the reality and goodness of God and of the Way. All of these are essential elements of Christian life, which include kindness, charity, forgiveness, and all the virtues He embodied.

But perhaps most often overlooked—though perhaps most beneficial of all—was Jesus' example of prayer. The secular world will often poo-poo the idea of prayer and ridicule its seemingly apparent lack of effect, but we Christians remember that Jesus spent much of His time in prayer to His Father. And, as He did all His works for the good of humanity, prayer cannot NOT be seen by the perceptive Christian as one of the greatest works of all—not for self, but for the world. This is why we Catholics esteem cloistered orders so highly, for they work ardently not so much materially but rather spiritually, spending their lives in prayer—not so much for themselves, but for the world.

So, as we approach the time of Holy Week and Easter, let us renew devotion to our occupations, families, and most of all, to prayer—beneficial in every aspect. This is an annual time to reflect particularly upon the passion and sacrifice of Jesus for us, and His opening of the gates—His blazing of the trail—to eternal life with the Father by His resurrection. As the apostles remind us, He is the "first-born" from the dead; we are called to follow. And there is no greater reason for prayer of thanksgiving—and for perseverance!—than that.

So...you want to "count for somethin'?" You want to stand tall? It is on our knees before God that we count most of all.