

My friends in Christ...there are two rivers that I would like for us to consider, compare and contrast: the Colville River and the Columbia River. You probably have heard about the Columbia River – one of the largest rivers in the entire world with regard to sheer volume of water, and we all get to see it whenever we want, right here in Eastern Washington.... But maybe not many of us are as familiar with the Colville River. Not very wide, long, or deep, not very much water flowing in it; this river flows through the valley where Chewelah is located and makes its way north through part of the historic Colville tribal lands, through the town of Colville, and then joins with the Columbia River just outside of the town of Kettle Falls.

Now, as rivers tend to do each spring, they swell, and their water moves faster because there is more of it. And the Columbia River (because it *already* is large and its water *already* moves fast and therefore it *already* is a powerful river) *now* is even *more* powerful. And the reason why is because the river *stays* within its banks. Much of the Columbia flows through gorges, which keep the Columbia contained within its banks such that the river *really* has only one choice, only one direction towards which to flow.... And *that*, as I say, makes it *powerful* – again, one of the largest and most powerful rivers in the whole *world*.

Compare that to the Colville River; each spring, it *also* swells, and it now *also* has a lot more water in it. But unlike the Columbia River, which is contained strictly within its banks in gorges so that it only has one direction toward which to flow (and it flows *powerfully*, therefore)...the Colville, each spring, overflows its banks...such that the water does *not* go only in one direction – the water now goes *everywhere*! And the whole valley floods. Sometimes, parts of Chewelah flood. The fools are those who live in town but do *not* have a sub-pump in their basements – if the house even *has* a basement). And when the flood happens, the Colville River – it is no longer a *river* but a *lake* (*really* more like a swamp); *certainly*, the Colville is no longer powerful – it is *barely* even *moving*...because it overflowed its banks and now no longer has *any* direction.

The Catholic Church frequently is scorned – even by her own members – as being a church of “no,” a religion with too many rules. “Pray, pay, and obey” are the only three things that a good Catholic should be doing, am I right? But the rules, you see – they are like the banks of a river, and

if they are strong and steadfast, then yes we are limited to only *one* direction – but that direction...is toward God! And when we remain “confined” as it were to those banks, then how powerful *we* are in our pursuit of holiness, our growth in virtue, our proclamation of the Gospel for others, and our pilgrim’s journey toward God and all of the angels and saints...that is, our homecoming to halls of heavenly realms.

But if we allow ourselves to twist with the wind...if we choose to overflow our banks...we may *think* that we have all the freedom in the world...but in fact, we will have become just another swamp: moving *nowhere*...weak, still, dank, and dead.

Consider FOMO – the “fear of missing out.” This seems to be all the rage these days. We are trapped in “option paralysis” as I call it. We have so many options in life that we are paralyzed, and instead of doing *anything*, we end up doing *nothing*. Think about if you have Netflix, or Disney-plus, or Apple-TV, or whatever-the-heck; just think about how much time is *wasted* trying to decide what to watch...and how frequently you end up watching *nothing*.

We have adults – grown adults living in our society today – who *still* cannot seem to decide what to do with their lives...so they end up doing *nothing*. The perfect opportunity will be coming along any moment now, just you wait...but it never comes.... When I studied business at WSU, I learned a profound lesson that really has guided my life in so many ways these last twenty years or so: a *good* answer *today* is *better* than the *perfect* answer *tomorrow*, and that is because the perfect *never* comes...yet when *tomorrow* comes, what we had *thought* would have been perfect now no longer *is* perfect – *why*? Because circumstances have changed...and so we wait *again* for the *new* perfect to come *tomorrow*...and we *wait*...and we *wait*...and we *wait*.... And so, we end up doing *nothing* and going *nowhere* – just like that swamp, the Colville River that overflowed its banks.

And now, consider the Good Shepherd. The Fourth Sunday of Easter (which we celebrate today) *also* is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” because the Gospel text *always* features the Good Shepherd, and the Psalm always has us sing of it. The Good Shepherd (Jesus of course) is Himself the perfect model for every priest and pastor, and so in recent years, the universal Church has used this occasion as the World Prayer Day for Vocations (in a particular way, vocations to the *priesthood*).

Now it is *hardly* a secret that I promote vocations. Some might say that I promote vocations *aggressively*. Hm! So be it! Because statistics show that I rank among only thirty percent of priests in the United States who do so! In any event, I pray and discern a *lot* about who to ask to consider the vocation – *all* vocations, really. Is it *really* any wonder, therefore, that wherever I am sent as a priest, there is a curious tendency for weddings suddenly to skyrocket, and young women discern religious life, and young men enter the seminary?

At present, I have twenty-four people who see me regularly for spiritual direction – eight of whom in order that I may help them to discern their vocations. One young woman has entered the convent; another may soon be on her way. Many young people have discerned their God-given call to marriage and have since met their future spouses and now are married. Three high school senior boys will become the first class of seminarians in our new Cor Christi formation program. I have a prayer and faith-sharing group going on right now with eight high-school boys called “Melchizedek Project” to help them in a setting of guided discussion to discern seminary and priesthood. Here at Saint Mary, I have asked six of our boys if they have ever thought about the priesthood; they know who they are, and I pray for them, by name, each day in my daily Rosary.

Now I say all that not to *brag* or anything. How lame is *that*? But I say all that to emphasize that I kind of know what I am about when I preach and teach about vocations. And with regard to boys in particular, when I ask them or talk to them about seminary and the priesthood, by far what is the biggest block to any serious discernment on their part is this, “Father, I just want to keep my options open.” Boom! Option-paralysis! FOMO! As if to be a priest is to confine you so tightly and with such awful constriction that life itself becomes unbearable.

False. False! In fact, by saying “no” to these other options, I am saying “yes” *fully* to what God wills for me – and *that* is *so* powerful! Once upon a time, I thought I wanted to make movies, and I even had drafts of screenplays written. That epic science-fiction film *Dune* just came out last fall and won all of those Oscars – I started writing a draft for a screenplay for that novel way back when I was at WSU! That could have been *me* making that movie.... But thanks be to God, I was

called to the priesthood instead...and I cannot imagine a happier, more joyous, more glorious, or more fulfilling life than *this* – *precisely* because God *called* me to this.

Now, it is true that I had to overcome that nagging FOMO – that I needed to say “no” to a great number of other things...but *only* so that, freely and faithfully, I could say “yes” to *this*. And I quickly came to realize that being a priest of Jesus Christ and serving the faithful people of God on our pilgrim’s journey toward the Kingdom is *way* more impactful, way more *important*, than making movies and fiddling around with the mere trinkets of Earth...because there *is* great honor, and joy, and power in choosing to answer “yes,” freely and faithfully, to the will of God.

The rules in the Church (in life in *general*) – they give us power and direction. And choosing to remain within those banks – we receive that power and flourish in that direction. And the calling to which God calls us – our *vocation*...there are definite boundaries and limits...but only because the Lord wants to empower us to move mountains and save souls. The Columbia River is so powerful, it can spin gigantic turbines, generate electricity, and power entire cities...and all because it remains within its banks, which give the river power and direction.... But the Colville River overflowing its banks could not even move a floating feather six inches without even a slight breeze to help it out.

Discerning a vocation, yes, does force us to choose...but *when* we choose...when at last we dare to answer “yes” to God’s high calling – whatever that calling, that vocation, might be...then it is a *powerful* calling, a *glorious* calling – because God makes it powerful and gives it glory.... May it be then that our young people – that *all* of us – *always* will pray and discern God’s calling...and that all of them (all of *us*) will respond to the Good Shepherd’s loving and merciful invitation to say *yes* and so to follow Him...that we will respond to Him with faith, generosity, and courage.