

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

Ask for a Sign from the Lord Your God

Fr. Kyle Manno

Alrighty. I'm excited to be here with all of you. I'm Father Kyle Manno, priest of the Rockford Diocese, assigned to the Newman Center at Northern Illinois University right here in my office. Also, vocation director for my diocese, and what a blessed time it is, that we get to journey through Advent together. This is a blessing. And today, what I want to talk about is praying big, and not being afraid to actually ask for a sign. I know it's going to seem crazy, because there's many times in the scripture when Jesus is like "Hey, this wicked generation asked for a sign, but no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah," right. The sign of the savior.

So, here's a question: Does Jesus condemn signs? No. Not in themselves, right. What He's actually condemning is those who seek the sign, and not the person who creates the sign. What I mean by that is the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Scribes, they just wanted Jesus to do a magic trick, right. They're like "Alright, guy who claims to be the Messiah, show us a little magic trick, alright." They didn't care about Him. They wanted Him to do a trick, right. God does not condemn us to fall madly in love with Him, to have us asking for Him to show His love. No, He condemns us if we don't desire the relationship, we just desire some little object. A magic trick. God is not a magician. He's a lover, right.

And think about what is a sign in itself. A sign, like a stop sign, has no value, right. Think about it. A stop sign is just an octagon, 8 sides, it's red, and it says "Stop." In itself, that sign means nothing, right. If I can't read the sign, if I don't speak English, and I see "Stop," if I don't know what that means I'll be confused. I would run right through that sign. I'll miss it, right. I could misinterpret it. If I think red means fire, I could think "Oh, there's an octagon with these letters that's red. It means danger, fire," right. So if I don't understand what the color means, right, "Stop," if I don't know "Stop" means stop, then I miss the sign. But the sign by itself is nothing. It's just an image. And so if we attach to the sign, we'll miss the point, right. Does that make sense? We don't attach to the sign, we attach to the person who gives the sign.

So let me give you an example, alright. When I was discerning, I was asking God for a sign all the time. I'm like "Jesus, alright, if you want me to be a priest, just, right, send me a box, I'll open it up, and it will say 'Be a priest' or something, right. And I'll go. I'll do it." And so I would pray for this every single day. "God, send me a sign." And you know what? At one point, I got to be honest, He kind of

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gave me a sign, and I'll tell you what it was. I was in mass one weekend, and I was also serving on the campus. You know, when you're at a college campus, little kids don't serve, like, the students do.

So I was serving mass, and I just received communion, and I was about 4 feet away from the lady giving out communion, and I could hear her saying "Body of Christ. Body of Christ. Body of Christ." And all of a sudden, I swear, like, as clear as day, I heard her say "Body of Christ. Body of Christ. Be a priest." And I was like "What?" I was like "Excuse me? What did you just say?" And she went back to saying "Body of Christ. Body of Christ. Body of Christ." And I was, like, super confused. So I was like "Alright Jesus, did I just hear her say 'Be a priest'? No, I must have misheard her. I'm going crazy. No, I'm mishearing her speak."

So I went back to praying. And in the background again I could hear "Body of Christ. Body of Christ. Body of Christ." And all of a sudden, I swear, I heard a second time "Body of Christ. Body of Christ. Be a priest." And I was like "What? What did you just say?" And again I was like "Alright Jesus, I swear I heard it a second time, her say 'Be a priest'. That was weird." And so now I'm thinking I'm crazy, right, and so I was like "Alright, I know what I'll do. I'm going to sit here and listen to her say 'Body of Christ,' and I'm going to make her say 'Be a priest.'" And if I can hear her say "Be a priest," then I could rationalize it, right. I could go "Oh, okay, okay, okay. Yeah, I heard it wrong."

So I was kneeling there, and I'm like "Say it. Say it." She's saying "Body of Christ. Body of Christ." And I was like "Okay. Say it so that I can hear it." "Body of Christ. Body of Christ." And I couldn't. She just kept saying "Body of Christ." I didn't hear her say "Be a priest." And after I gave up, I swear, a third time I heard her say "Be a priest," and I was like "That was weird." So I left mass that day and I thought "You know, I'm not going to tell anybody that, because that was really weird. I swear I heard her say 3 times 'Be a priest' while she was giving out communion." So I told nobody. Sunday, I went to bed. Monday happened, I went to bed. Tuesday. And then Wednesday came, it was 9 PM mass because I was on a college campus, right. Still here. Sunday mass, 9 PM, Wednesday mass, 9 PM, right I'm ready to go to sleep at 9 PM. That's why I drink coffee in the evening, alright, because college students don't go to bed.

Anyhoo, I was at 9 PM mass, and they read their readings, they read the gospel, and the priest started preaching. And he started preaching on the first reading, or the one reading, and what the reading was about, and the entire homily, was about a man being called 3 times. Let me repeat that: It was about a man being called 3 times. And the first time he's confused. He's like "Who's calling me?" Again, the second time he's called, and he's confused. He's like "What am I hearing?" Not

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until the third time did he recognize this, that he's hearing God's voice. And I'm sitting there in the pews, right, and I'm like "What is happening? 3 days ago I swear I heard 'Be a priest' 3 times." I didn't tell anybody, and now the priest is preaching about that.

So after mass I ran to his office. I mean, I was like a crazy person. I'm like *knock* *knock* *knock* *knock* *knock* *knock* *knock*. "Monsignor!" I knocked. "Okay, open the door." Right. I came to this office right here, and I was like "Hey Monsignor. Okay, so, crazy story, alright, okay. Crazy story. 3 days ago I was at mass, and I could have sworn the lady giving out communion who was saying 'Body of Christ' said 'Be a priest.' And then you just talked about a guy being called 3 times. Am I supposed to go to seminary?" And he's sitting with me and he said "Okay, okay, okay, okay. Well, God, I think, spoke to you." He said "Well, we never run with a sign." He said "Ask God what happened in your heart when He said that to you."

And that's what I prayed about. What was happening in my heart when I heard "Be a priest." In that moment I felt so convicted that God was telling me "Be a priest." But you know what? A lot of people would think I went to seminary like a week later. Ooh, nope. I didn't go for another year, because when I prayed over this sign, I felt like God was calling me. But the problem was that my heart wasn't ready, right. I still had a lot of fears, I still had a lot of struggles. My heart wasn't ready yet. And so I kept praying, and I actually did pray bigger than the sign. Because the sign was one thing, but what I now had to pray for was "God, convert my heart." Right. It's easy, I think, for us to, like, ask God to speak to us. But it's even harder for us to ask Him to change our heart.

And so what I encourage each one of us to do today is, yes, pray big. Ask God for anything you want. But don't just ask for a little magic trick, right. Ask God to communicate through signs, right - He does it all the time, right. I mean, the sacraments are outward signs of inward grace, right, big things happen. When you go to the store and you see like something that sticks out, like a beautiful baby, and you're like "Oh my gosh, I want to have a baby," right, that's a sign that you desire more love. You might desire a child, right. A baby. When you're driving and you get angry and someone cuts you off, that's a little sign that you have a little frustrated part of your heart, right. When your spouse leaves like their socks out, or they don't clean up after themselves and you get angry, that's a sign that you're frustrated.

And so whether it's a voice, "Be a priest," or it's somebody leaving something out on the counter, if something stirs in your heart, it was a sign communicating something, right. Even in this moment, right, you're feeling something. You're

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experiencing something. That's God moving your heart. That's a sign. And now what you're called to do is pray big. Ask God to give you a sign that communicates His love. One that just won't be in your head, but will actually transform your heart. Because, I've got to say, I didn't go to seminary, right, for like a year, because what God had to do was communicate many things.

Now, I'll finish on this note: It is my, you know, my biggest fear in the seminary and the journey to become a priest, or discerning a seminary, was that I would be alone. I would wake up one day a miserable old man, no wife, no kids. And so I was praying about that. I said "God, I'm afraid I'm going to wake up one day, no wife, no kids, and be an unhappy priest, and be miserable." And so I was praying, and all of a sudden I brought this fear to God, and what He did was He had me pray over it. And all of a sudden I was praying, and I said "Okay God, what if I do wake up a miserable old priest, no wife, no kids, no nothing, and I die?"

So I brought that fear to God. I while I'm bringing this fear to God, I read this book about Mother Teresa, and this one little quote changed my life. This was a bigger sign than anything. The quote said "If I make one child happy through the love of God, isn't it worth everything?" I read the quote again. "If I make one child happy through the love of God, isn't it worth everything?" I closed the book, and I said "Okay God, what if I do wake up a miserable man? No wife, no kids, no happiness, and I die?" I imagined myself going up to heaven, and all of a sudden I was in heaven, there was 4 white walls, me and Jesus, He was standing there, and He said "Hey, thanks for being a priest." I said "Well, God, it wasn't that good actually." He said "No, thank you for being a priest." I said "God, it wasn't that good."

Then He turned to His side and there was a guy behind Him. He said "Do you know this guy?" I said "No." He said "Steve. You don't know Steve?" I said "No, God. Who is Steve?" He said "Well, you don't know Steve, but Steve knows you. When Steve was living on earth, he wasn't choosing My love, he wasn't choosing God. He was choosing sin and, see, he was going to go to hell for eternity. But on earth, Steve met you, and because you had become a priest, he met you and he met Jesus, and now his whole life has changed. He met Me, God. In that moment of meeting you, he had a 180. He had a conversion. Now Steve is here in heaven forever."

And all of a sudden, as God said "Forever," something opened up inside of me. Something changed, and I thought "Oh my gosh. If I give up my life, someone who was going to go to hell could go to heaven forever? Whoa. I don't care God. I'll say yes to whatever, whether it's good or bad. What's 50 years of misery for someone to be in heaven for eternity? Yes, I'll give up everything. It's worth one

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soul.” And the second we realize that if God makes us for something, He doesn’t make us for misery, depression, and loneliness. That would be a mean God. If God creates us for something, then it’s going to be amazing. And so that was a sign God had given me, the outward sign of “Be a priest.” I didn’t go for a year. But the sign of “Oh my gosh, someone could go to heaven?” That changed my heart, and I would give up everything for that soul.

And so ask God to give you a sign that changes your heart, and pray big. “God, transform me, breathe life into me, and show me what? That I’m called to live like You.” Because here’s a last thing: What happened in that moment when I prayed big and God gave me that image, was that I recognized that life was about others. It was about dying for others, being there for others. So yes, pray big. Ask God for a sign. And then live like Him, which is living and dying for other people. So this Advent season, don’t be afraid. Pray big, and ask Christ to give you the signs that allow you to live more radically like Him. May the Almighty God bless you and all of your loved ones, and transform your heart to be more like Him. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.