

Pope Francis chooses to dine at a table of heroes

Pope Francis showed up unexpectedly in the cafeteria for Vatican employees on July 25 and grabbed a tray like everyone else. It was Friday, so he had fish with his pasta and grilled tomatoes. He even threw a few fries into the mix.

On the same day, the excellent new *Hercules* movie starring "The Rock" (Dwayne Johnson) muscled its way into the theatres for opening weekend. With a clever reinterpretation of the Hercules myth, the film's innovative storyline shows us a Hercules who defeats evil not singlehandedly (that's the mythic exaggeration) but rather by teamwork.

The movie cleverly contrasts the valor of Hercules and his team of heroes with the selfishness of kings and tyrants, like King Eurystheus (Joseph Fiennes) and Lord Cotys (John Hurt), who pur-



L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters / CNS

Pope Francis talks with Vatican workers during a surprise visit to the Vatican cafeteria July 25.

sue their own individual glory at the expense of other people. Despite the fact such wicked men exist, good can nonetheless defeat evil in the way dramatized by the film. True heroism may fearlessly serve the common good, no matter the

cost. And it takes the example of someone like Hercules to rally the team.

In his own way, Pope Francis is like Hercules. He shows us that the effort to defeat evil and bring about good cannot be achieved singlehand-

edly by a Pope. When Francis dines like a regular guy in the cafeteria, he is sending a message about how every person is important.

Everybody has a unique and irreplaceable contribution to make, a point which the

new *Hercules* movie pounds home. Each member of the team gets their own heroic "movie moment," where they get to do something great and indispensable in the battle against evil. The truth within the myth, says the film, is that we are all summoned to such Herculean heroism.

We love myths and stories that stir our deepest emotions. They can motivate us to be more virtuous. When a leader in real life like Pope Francis comes along, we are inspired, like Hercules' team of heroes, to spurn petty self-interest. We resolve to act heroically, to help others in dire need, whatever the personal cost.

Much like this sagacious new *Hercules* movie, the philosophers of antiquity were fond of using the Hercules myth to challenge their audiences. Epictetus, the ancient Greek philosopher, saw Hercules as illustrating life's most important truths. His student Arrian took copious notes and recorded Epictetus's inspirational style of lecturing on the topic.

I think Robert Dobbin's translation (Penguin Classics, 2008) best captures the nonsensical banter of Epictetus's *Discourses* with his students. Here's a sample (I.6.30-3, 41-3), which I modify slightly after having consulted the original Greek text. It begins with Epictetus mocking the sort of pathetic excuses that people give for not exercising their inner capacity for virtue:

"But my nose is running!"

"What do you have hands for, idiot, if not to wipe it?"

"But how is it right that the world has runny noses in the first place?"

"Instead of thinking up

protests, wouldn't it just be easier to wipe your nose? What do you suppose would have become of Hercules, if there had been no lion, hydra, stag, or boar – and no savage criminals for him to drive away and save the day? What would he have done if no such challenges had existed?

"Obviously he would have rolled over in bed and gone back to sleep. So by snoring his life away in luxury and comfort he never would have developed into the mighty Hercules. And even if he had, what good would it have done him? What would have been the use of those arms, that physique, and that noble soul, without crises or conditions to stir him into action? ...

"You still don't realize what you have within you or where it came from. Instead you sit crying and complaining – some of you blind to your benefactor, and unable to acknowledge His existence; others, out of sheer smallness of spirit, assail God with complaints and accusations.

"I, however, am prepared to show you that you have inner resources and a character naturally strong and resilient." Just like Hercules.

The philosophical lessons in heroism from Hercules and Epictetus are still with us today, both on the big screen and in the Vatican cafeteria. What kind of person do you really want to be on a daily basis? A selfish complainer who thinks they alone know better than everyone else? Or will you choose instead to dine at the table of heroes?

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