

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us

July 2, 2023.

On the last two Sundays, our gospel readings gave us the Saviour's instructions for those he calls to share in the mission he has received from his Father. This Sunday's reading (Matthew 10:37-42) is the conclusion of the passage we have been reading. Not surprisingly, it takes us to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our life as disciples has its beginning in our personal call to follow Jesus. Now he speaks to us of this unique relationship he has called us to - the absolute allegiance to which only God has a right. The original words of Jesus would have used the stark contrast of Semitic expressions - the disciple who 'loves' the Saviour must 'hate' those of their families (cf. Lk 14:26). In presenting these words of Jesus, Matthew removes the danger of misunderstanding. A right relationship with the Saviour will not destroy our human relationships, but deepen them and make them more wholesome. It's hard to follow Jesus Christ, to be a Christian, but it's worth it. At first, it almost seems like Jesus is trying to discourage us from following him. He warns that friendship with him is demanding, it means that everything else has to be put in second place. Everything has to be put on the table, even personal dreams and family ties. The demands of our friendship with Jesus Christ will require us to carry a cross, to sacrifice self-gratifying desires, maybe even to endure great suffering. But God knows what he is doing! And if he calls us to this kind of life style - which he does - it's only because he knows that this is the path to lasting happiness. If we are truly living for God, to give him glory and to build up his Kingdom in the world, God will take care of us. We will not lose our reward. St Paul understood this. This is why in the Second Reading he tells us that to share Christ's life - the life of the redeemed soul, the new life of grace won for us by Christ's passion and resurrection - we must also share Christ's death. We have to die to self, put to death all selfish desires, in order to rise with Christ, to live the life of the Spirit, the life that gives true meaning and satisfaction to our lives. Yes, it is hard to follow Jesus, but it is worth it - nothing else comes close. The most reverent Archbishop Fulton Sheen knew what it means to suffer, "The suffering busted holes in the walls of my life so God's blinding light could stream in."

One of St Paul's most famous phrases summarizes this crucial Christian truth. In his Letter to the Romans (8: 8) St Paul writes: "***For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.***" He doesn't deny that, as Christians, we will have to suffer in this world, as Jesus promised. But he points out that the goal of our journey is well worth those sufferings. St Maximilian Kolbe is a particularly eloquent example of how our faith in Christ gives strength and meaning in the midst of this world's sufferings. He was a Polish Franciscan arrested by the Gestapo during World War II because of his criticism of Nazism. Eventually, he was sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz, where he was treated with extra brutality because he was a priest. We have all heard of the famous incident where a fellow prisoner, a man who was married with children, was condemned by the guards to execution, and St Maximilian Kolbe offered himself in his place. His offer was accepted and he died with other condemned prisoners in a starvation bunker. But even before that dramatic finish, he was already bringing Christ's light into the darkness of the concentration camp. A fellow prisoner who survived the camp expressed the inspiring power of Fr Kolbe's presence, even in that hellish place: "Each time I saw Father Kolbe in the courtyard I felt within myself an extraordinary effusion of his goodness. Although he wore the same ragged clothes as the rest of us, with the same tin can hanging from his belt, one forgot this wretched exterior and was conscious only of the charm of his inspired countenance and of his radiant holiness." Whether we follow Christ or not, we will suffer during our earthly journey. But if we choose to suffer with Christ, our suffering will take on a meaning and fruitfulness beyond anything we could have imagined.

This was one of the topics that Jesus spoke about with his disciples during the Last Supper. That night, he told them: "***The world will give you trouble, but take courage! I have conquered the world***" (John 16:33). We will never experience the full reward of our faithfulness to Christ in this life, but every once in a while we get a glimpse of that reward, a reminder that God is still in charge, still watching over us. I shared the saying last week of the Vietnamese Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. Just six days after being named coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon, South Vietnam fell to communist control of North Vietnam. Soon thereafter, the future

Cardinal was arrested by the communist authorities. For the next fourteen years, the communists tried to break his faith, moving him between re-education camps, prisons, and solitary confinement. When he was finally released, he was permitted to go and visit Rome, but after leaving the country, he was never allowed to return - he died in exile in 2002, at the age of 74. In the year 2000, the Great Jubilee Year, Pope John Paul II asked Cardinal Van Thuan to preach the annual spiritual exercises - a retreat that lasts a full week - to the pope and the other cardinals who work in the Vatican. Later, the Pope asked Cardinal Van Thuan to publish as a book the powerful reflections he shared on the retreat. That's how a modern-day spiritual classic was born: **Testimony of Hope**. In the introduction to that book, Cardinal Van Thuan shares with his readers a moving coincidence, a coincidence that was more than a coincidence. It was a sign to Cardinal Van Thuan, just two years before his death, that his suffering had not been in vain. I like to share a beautiful message from the book: *“Today, at the conclusion of the spiritual exercises, I feel profoundly moved. Exactly twenty-four years ago on March 18, 1976, on the vigil of the Feast of St Joseph, I was taken by force from my residence in Cay Vong, and put in solitary confinement in the prison of Phu Khanh. Twenty-four years ago, I never would have imagined that today, on exactly the same date, I would conclude preaching the spiritual exercises in the Vatican. Twenty-four years ago, when I celebrated Mass with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of my hand, I never would have dreamed that today the Holy Father would offer me a gilded chalice. Twenty-four years ago, I never would have thought that today (the Feast of St Joseph 2000) in Cay Vong – the very place where I lived under house arrest – my successor would consecrate the most beautiful church dedicated to St Joseph. Following Christ is not easy, but it's worth it - no matter how bad things get, if we stay close to Christ, he stays close to us and gives meaning and fruitfulness to everything we suffer.”* (Testimony of Hope” p xvii-xix.)

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, as Pope Francis said to thousands of young people on July 29 at the 2016 WYD in Krakow: *“Jesus himself chose to identify with these our brothers and sisters enduring pain and anguish by agreeing to tread the 'way of sorrows' that led to Calvary, by dying on the cross, he surrendered himself into to the hands of the Father, taking upon himself and in himself, with self-sacrificing love, the physical, moral and spiritual wounds of all humanity by embracing the wood of the cross, Jesus embraced the nakedness, the hunger and thirst, the loneliness, pain and death of men and women of all times,”* He also said recently *“If in our hearts we are carrying some burden or suffering that seems to crush us, it is the moment to go out to meet Jesus, who is close, to open the tomb of our problems and look beyond the threshold toward his light. If you don't have much time to pray, there is a wise spiritual practice that can help you. Often throughout the day, you can repeat very short prayers, so-called aspirations, to remain “in harmony” with the Lord.”* Jesus is inviting all of us, once again, to take up our crosses and follow him. He knows that by following him, even though it's hard, we will discover the meaning and lasting happiness that we long for. Let's welcome this invitation. And we can't respond to it unless we identify what cross he is asking each one of us to take up, and unite it with Christ's own cross. Maybe your cross is an illness, or the illness of a loved one. If so, when Jesus comes in the Eucharist, unite your suffering to his. Maybe Jesus is asking you to leave behind a sinful habit – dishonesty, lust, greed, or neglect. Habits are always hard to change, but with God's grace, all things are possible. God knows that sin only makes us miserable in the end, and spreads pain and disaster in its wake. If that is the cross he is asking you to embrace, he will give you the strength you need to do so. Maybe he is calling you to a new project, or to set out on a new path and you feel fearful at the prospect, at the uncertainty, at the risk. That's why Jesus wants to come to you today in Holy Communion. He wants to be your strength, your confidence, your courage. And so he feeds your soul with his soul, your body with his body. This is the love of our God – a love that makes himself present in our lives, no matter what. It is a love that never leaves us to carry our crosses alone. Yes, Jesus asks us to take up our cross, but only so that, by dying with him, we can also rise with him, and live with him, meaningfully, here on earth and forever in heaven. God bless you all.