
25. Jesus Takes Up His Cross

A few years ago someone very dear to me faced the unspeakably heavy cross of having her only child killed by a prowler. What do you say? There was nothing to say. Unseen, unexpected, like a bolt of lightning, this terror came into her life.

And she said to me, “I read once that if we could see all the crosses of the world piled up, we’d take the one we already have. I don’t want this cross. I’d rather be dead. But since I have been given it, I will carry it.”

Maybe you have felt that way. I know I have. “O Lord, any cross but that one!” Today we meditate—and are grateful—because Jesus takes up his cross. We ask for the courage to carry the cross that comes our way. It only becomes sanctified by God’s will when we lovingly accept it.

26. Don't Forget

Jesus said that he came to save sinners, not the just. He came to heal the sick and not the healthy. St. Benedict Joseph Labré is the patron of homeless people. When you pass one of these poor folks on the street, don't forget that they have their own patron saint who himself was a homeless and mentally ill vagabond for fourteen years. The church's arms are open infinitely wider to the huddled masses than are those of the Statue of Liberty.

27. Open to Everyman

There is an interesting historical parable about vanity. In Vienna the emperors of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are buried in a Capuchin friary. I suppose it was considered the humblest place to be buried.... The funeral ... procession would go from St. Vitus Cathedral down to the Capuchins. The grand duke would ceremoniously knock on the locked doors of the friary. A little window would open and the superior would say, "Who is it?" The duke would answer something like this: "Franz Joseph, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, king of Hungary, margrave of such and such." The superior would say, "We don't know him." So he'd knock again. "Who is there?" "Franz Joseph, his most Catholic imperial majesty, elector of the Pope, etc." The answer would come again, "We don't know him." The duke would knock a third time and the superior would say, "Who is there?" Then the grand duke would say, "Franz Joseph, a wretched sinner who seeks a place to lay his bones." Then the door would open. Only in death do some of us face the need to divest ourselves of the world's vanity. It would be wonderful if we could get over our sensitivities sooner.

28. The Geographic Cure

Though we are all in a constant spiritual battle against worldiness and the devil, it seems to me that the biggest and most persistent enemy is always *self*, that dangerous Trojan horse within the gates. Have you ever tried the “geographic cure” for some chronic problem like alcoholism or depression—that is, changing jobs or moving to another city? The problem is, you have to take yourself along with you. You can never escape yourself; you can only change yourself.

29. Sex and the Key to Happiness

Perhaps one of the most persistent and obviously invalid assumptions of our civilization is that sexual behavior brings happiness. The media trumpet the message, “Sex brings happiness.” If this were true, we would indeed live in an earthly paradise, and the world would be “Happy Valley.”

I suppose that half the people you meet on a bus, or in a shopping center, or even at church on Sunday have had some genital sexual experience during the preceding few days. It is the observation of an old celibate from way back that they are not all so very happy. If sex brought happiness, the world would shine like the sun, at least half the time. Celibates need not try to convince themselves that chaste celibacy is the road to earthly bliss, but on the other hand they need not feel deprived of the key to happiness. If there is a single key to contentment, it cannot be sexual experience.

30. Working for Righteousness

Even though Dr. King firmly disagreed with the actions of his enemies, he could sit patiently in a segregated restaurant somewhere in the Deep South, while some bigot poured a bowl of sugar over his head. Rather than take the insult personally, Dr. King silently took the abuse because he knew that he was working for the cause of righteousness and justice. The newsreels which reported this particular act of persecution and the expression on his face—patient, yet profoundly disapproving—probably did more for the civil rights movement than many of the speeches he gave.

Too many times in history Christians have tried to be Christians in decidedly unchristian ways. But you don't produce the fruit of righteousness by behaving unrighteously. You don't promote peace by being violent. You don't further justice by being unjust. Scripture clearly tells us that the kingdom of God is to be inherited by those who are righteous and who act righteously.

31. Real Faith, Real Courage

I recall a frail little woman in her late fifties, who had few financial resources and a skimpy kind of job. She was telling me quite blandly that she was getting ready to go to jail for six months. She had given up her modest apartment, put her few possessions in storage, and given notice at her job—with no assurance that she would get it back. She later participated in a rescue at an abortion clinic, would not plead guilty, and was sentenced to jail.

While I agreed with her on the iniquity of abortion, I counseled her on some procedures that might protect the little security she possessed.... I stopped in the middle of my efforts to realize she understood something I had forgotten. Whether I agreed with her decision or not, she was very clear on one basic fact: that faith in Christ may bring suffering to his disciples.

If you find this lesson too tough to swallow, recall those words carved on that monument of martyrdom in St. Peter's Square: "Christ conquers, Christ captains, Christ commands. Christ delivers his people from all evil." We must not lose hope, and we must not run away.

32. Reverent Prayer

Let me be in reverence of your majesty and greatness and let me be in silent awe of your mysterious being and endless days. But most of all, Holy Spirit, let my reverence be like that of a child for his parents. Let me have the reverence toward you that loving spouses have for each other. Let me walk in silence in the beauty of your creation and see the fingerprints of your majesty on the sky and in the earth. Let me be deeply moved by your beauty when I see it on the face of a child and let me be most compassionate when I see your wisdom etched over a face marked with suffering. O Holy Spirit, give me your gift of reverence that I may always pass through life in a certain silent awe, knowing that you will have passed over the darkness and emptiness of the void and called it to life and that you call me to a more loving life in this world and to eternity in the next.

33. A Place for Perfection

A saint is just a sinner who is more repentant than most of us. If there is any place for perfection in our lives, it is perfect contrition for our sins. *Perfect contrition* is grief of the soul because we have offended God who is infinitely good, coupled with a firm resolve to cease offending him. *Imperfect contrition* is sorrow for our sins because we know we have been caught and fear the punishment due to them. Most of us are a mixture of holiness and selfishness, and hopefully we grow in grace and love of God as we mature in our spiritual lives. Some of us unfortunately never grow enough to take responsibility for our failings.

The journey to holiness begins anew every day when we begin to see some fault of our own, something we haven't yet given up. It can look like a seven-story mountain to us. We will despair of ever getting past such a huge barrier ... until slowly the grace of God shows us the only clear path over it. And then we begin the arduous climb, one labored step at a time.