

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 4, 2016
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Scranton, PA
Luke 14:25-33

When Jesus tells us that we must bear our own cross in order to be His disciple, we who have never witnessed an actual crucifixion should consider what his disciples heard that day. That is, crucifixion was a horrific method of capital punishment that all people living under Roman occupation would have been familiar with. What did Jesus mean, that His disciples must carry a cross?

Well, first, crucifixion was a penalty reserved for the worst offenses, in particular treason, which actually declared that the offender was an enemy of society. This association was not difficult to make because crucifixion was also at first reserved for slaves. Citizens of the Roman Empire could not be crucified, unless for high treason they had first been stripped of their citizenship. Recall that St. Paul, though he was executed as an enemy of the state, was beheaded, because as a citizen he could not be crucified as St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, had been. Thus, crucifixion said something about the crime the offender had committed while also saying from what segment of society the offender had come.

Second, crucifixion, from a physical standpoint, was excruciating. That's where we get that word: "excruciating" means literally "out of crucifying." When we call some pain we suffer excruciating, we are comparing it to being crucified. The condemned had to carry the cross beam, which weighed about one hundred pounds, from the place of sentencing to the place of execution. This is exactly what Jesus did when he bore His cross from the place called "the pavement" to the hill they called "the place of the skull." Therefore, carrying one's cross was challenging both psychologically and physically: the condemned had to endure the ridicule of an outcast's punishment while carrying the very beam he was about to die upon.

So to carry one's cross would have meant to Jesus' hearers that we must associate ourselves with the lowly and that this Christian discipleship is going to be very physically tiring even if it is not extremely painful all the time. The call of every disciple of Jesus Christ is to associate with the lowly and be willing, ready, and able to suffer acute physical discomfort in doing so. This is what it means to carry one's cross and come after Jesus. How do we apply this lesson to our contemporary circumstance?

Americans are not unaccustomed to suffering for the things want. A very common boast that I see on cars now, no matter where I am in the country, is the sticker with the number 13.1 or 26.2. Those numbers are the miles of a half-marathon and marathon respectively, and to place the sticker means one has completed one race or the other. I was the captain of my cross-country team, and we sometimes ran thirteen miles for practice. I can tell you that running more than thirteen miles involves a certain amount of intense suffering, so we can be sure that thousands, if not millions, of our countrymen are willing to suffer.

The key, it would seem, is that they be willing to suffer for the right thing. We suffer to enrich ourselves materially, to advance academically, to get in shape physically, to earn a promotion vocationally, and even, in the case of running for fun, we suffer recreationally. This is all suffering that involves personal growth, that is in some manner directed towards oneself. To bear one's cross is, in contrast, to suffer physically for the benefit of another.

Therefore, the fireman or soldier who must be in shape to do his job well bears his cross when he works out, since his suffering is to make him better at saving people. The researcher whose eyesight grows dim bears his cross, because his studies are to improve our health. The mother who never gets enough rest bears her cross because her sleep deprivation is teaching the next generation – and all of us – what it means to love sacrificially. Christian discipleship is hard, and St. Paul reminds us in I Corinthians, chapter 9, that we are to run so as to win, we are not to beat the air or run aimlessly. Rather, we are to pummel our bodies and subdue them, so that what we do is wholly consistent with the Good News we preach.

Remember, though, as I said at the beginning, that to bear one's cross means also to associate with the lowly. I would be remiss if I did not point out this morning that Mother Teresa of Calcutta is now St. Teresa of Kolkata, canonized today by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City. St. Teresa is an example of precisely this type of association, since she not only rescued abandoned children from Indian slums, she used whatever recognition she received from the West to lecture us about the sanctity of human life, repeating over and over that the greatest destroyer of peace is abortion. She reasoned that if a mother can participate in the death of her own child, whom can we not kill? And how can we insist that killing is wrong if we regularly kill the most vulnerable among us? She won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the poor and then used her speech to plead for the lives of the unborn.

Not all of us are called to work as missionaries in the slums, but we are all called to recognize that social stature in Jesus' day, as well as our own, is often determined by how much power we wield and how much wealth we possess. Associating with the lowly today means not measuring our worth by such standards. It means not justifying our existence by how much we own or how many people we are able to control. To associate with the lowly, to be people like St. Teresa of Kolkata, is to measure our success based upon our faithfulness. Remember that she said we are not called to be successful but faithful. So how well have I pursued virtue? How much am I growing in holiness, a holiness that wills to sacrifice even my body for the salvation of my fellow men? In this we will have an eternal legacy.

The alternative is to waste our potential. I was crushed this past week after reading about two Quebecois women working as mules for an international drug syndicate. They were found in Sydney Harbor with two hundred ten pounds of cocaine stuffed in their luggage, with a street value of \$22,000,000. They were on a cruise ship and had documented their \$14,000, two-week-long vacation on Instagram. They're twenty-eight and twenty-three years old and now face life in prison, half a world away from their families, who are understandably devastated. Each of them was bought for \$14,000. These young women tried to take the easy road, the way of the world, and now they must count themselves among the lowly, the imprisoned, to whom Jesus calls us to minister.

There was a time not long ago when young girls from Quebec either entered a convent or got married and bore large families. That willingness to bear the cross was the fruit of their Catholicism, lives of service devoted to the lowly. Quebec within the lifetimes of some of the people here had one of the highest birthrates in the world. Today Quebec's birthrate is the lowest in the Western Hemisphere. What happens when the Faith is lost? Well, too many of our young people, not just from Quebec and not just the women, make the choice to live the high life and end up being the lowly we must now serve.

They have to be challenged to use the freedom St. Paul speaks about in today's Epistle to Philemon, to use their freedom that their "...goodness might not be by compulsion but of [their]own free will." We can challenge them by asking them for whom they are suffering. Bearing one's cross after Jesus is hard, but not nearly so hard as the nagging suspicion at the end of our lives that we didn't do all we were supposed to. Challenge them now so that later, we hope after many years, they can meet with confidence, face to face, Him they were serving all along.