

23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

THE COSTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

*“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14: 27).*

**Our Day’s Story:** As I reflect on the Readings of this 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, I cannot but remember my friend, Mario. His father was a pagan. He was against everything Christian and Catholic. But Mario felt he had a call and wanted to be a priest. Expectedly, his father was vehemently against the idea. But Mario was persistent. After many arguments and threats, with carrot and stick persuasions, his father decided to renounce him and sent him out of the house. Mario did not give in, he left the family, forsaking his inheritance and moved into the mission house with a priest, who offered to mentor him. With the help of the priest, Mario got into the Major Seminary. This is where we met. We went through the formation successfully and Mario had the approval of the formators for ordination. Unexpectedly, Mario’s father, who had sworn on his corpse to have nothing to do with him and had since not set his eyes on him, was excited at the news of Mario’s successful completion of the training for the Catholic priesthood. He renounced his pagan ways and converted into the Catholic Church before Mario’s ordination. He attended the ordination and proudly celebrated his son. He loved and revelled in being called “Papa Fada” and would not waste a second to correct anyone who addressed him differently. Fr. Mario’s story resonates with the challenge of Jesus in the Gospel today. Mario was convinced about his vocation. He was firm in his decision, and never allowed family ties to interfere with his response to the call. He determinedly bore the rejection, persecution, and abandonment for the sake of Christ. This is what Christ invites us to do as we read the lines of today’s Gospel (Lk. 14: 25-33)

**The Great Crowds:** “Great crowds accompanied Jesus on His way and He turned and spoke to them” {Lk. 14: 25): The idea of “Great crowds” implies popularity. No doubt Jesus was popular. But Jesus was not after such mundane attention and attraction, as politicians and celebrities of today. He was not after numbers and quantity but was interested in commitment and quality – people who would be prepared to pass through the “narrow door” for His sake (Luke 13: 24). It became very necessary then to emphatically declare the terms and conditions in following Him to sift the wheat from the chaff (Matthew 13: 24-30). Each of us is a part of the “Great crowds.” The Words of Jesus in the gospel

are for us. Are we just going along? Are we listening to what He is saying as he walks along? How far are we prepared to go with Him? Shall we follow Him to Jerusalem? Shall we accompany Him on His Passion? Or shall we too go away? Jesus knew where He was going, and what was awaiting Him there. For the love of each of us, He “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Lk. 9: 51) to be betrayed, rejected and crucified.

**Family Ties:** To this “Great crowds” Jesus gives three conditions for discipleship, first: “If any man comes to Me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14: 26). This is very straight and strange coming from Jesus. Would the One Who taught us to “Love our neighbours as ourselves, and even enemies” now turn around to ask us to “hate” our parents, family members and even our own lives? No, He would not. But He said this to reveal how uncompromising status of the call. He does not mean that we should “hate” as having ill will against someone. Jesus is here employing a communication technique known as “rhetorical hyperbole” that exaggerates the negative to emphasise the positive, to make it memorable and to emphasise His point. We have a similar usage in Mark 9: 43-47, where Jesus said: “If your right hand ... your foot ... your right eye causes you to sin, cut it off ...” Thus, Jesus does not intend us to understand Him literally, but He is obviously stating the fact that if anyone wants to follow Him, he must be prepared to love Him as an incomparable priority. We can understand what Jesus is saying here when we read Matthew 10: 37 – “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; he who loves son or daughter

more than Me is not worthy of Me.” The love of Christ demands that we detach from all affiliations including the most primordial ones like the family and self. It is a relationship that demands us to “hate” the old man, the turn from the old life, reject the old desires and begin afresh to love and embrace the new man living the new life inspired by new desires of Spirit in purity and love (2 Corinthians 5: 17).

**Take Up Your Cross:** The second condition is: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14: 27). The cross is a symbol of suffering. But to those Jesus was addressing, the cross meant something more fatal. Only the condemned carried the cross upon which they would be crucified. Death by crucifixion was preserved for criminals in the Roman Empire. Thus, the implication of Jesus’ challenge here is that anyone who wants to come after Him must be prepared to make personal sacrifice, endure suffering and be ready to offer his life for His sake, if necessary. Are we

ready for these?

**Give up Your Possessions:** The third condition is: “So, in the same way, none of you can be My disciple unless he gives up all his possessions” (Luke 14: 33). Material possessions have the natural potential to cause us to cling to it, to distract us and obstruct us from attending to things spiritual. For the material and the spiritual are parallel and opposed to each other. Discipleship is a call that demands we detach from material possessions so that we cling to nothing earthly, trust in nothing mundane, rely on nothing ephemeral and hope in nothing but in Jesus and in things heavenly. This love is not only exclusive but sacrificial; it is a love soaked in the sponge of vinegar, which we must drink.

**My dear friends,** Jesus is inviting us to follow Him, not blindly but with the knowledge of the cost of discipleship. With the parables of the man who intended to build a tower and the king who set out for war against his opponent, Jesus asks us today: “Are you still willing to follow Me? Have you counted what this will cost you?” He wants us to know this before we put our hands on the plough (Luke 9: 62). Discipleship is a call that we respond to, not based on our merits or on our efforts. God makes the choice and gives His grace. It is our duty to seek the Wisdom

of God, which the First Reading (Wisdom 9: 13-18) presents to us as that which is not decipherable by mere human knowledge. This same Jesus is the Wisdom of God, Who has come to lead us to the Father. We, who were slaves, like Onesimus, in the Second Reading (Philemon 9-10, 12-17), have been redeemed through Christ and offered to the Father, not as slaves any longer, but as children through Christ Jesus, Who died for us. Jesus is the surest Way to the Father. To get there, we must dare to be bold and courageous like my friend, Fr. Mario. May the Lord's grace be sufficient for us.