

The Disciple of Christ

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ~ Matthew 16:24-25

THROUGHOUT OUR PREPARATION for the sacraments of Christian initiation, we have been learning about Catholic beliefs and about what it means to follow Jesus. Having accepted Christ as our Savior and master teacher, and having received the sacraments of initiation, we are fully members of the family of God. We have been made children of God by grace: “*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are*” (1 Jn 3:1).

Now that we have been initiated, we are able to benefit fully from all the riches of grace that Jesus entrusted to his Church. We have committed ourselves to living his way of life, believing and obeying his teaching, and remaining close to his heart as the source of our spiritual life. Let us now take a more detailed look at the kind of discipleship to which Jesus calls us. Although each person’s relationship with our Lord is unique, all of us share the same call to live as his disciples and, though we will each live out this discipleship in different ways, there are elements that will always be the same for every disciple of Christ.

The Meaning and Goal of Christian Discipleship

The word “disciple” literally means “learner” or student. In biblical culture, to be a disciple was to be a student of some master teacher, who taught his disciples much more than mere infor-

mation. He taught them a whole way of life, forming their thinking and attitudes in every area of life. True disciples of Christ accept and follow him as “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (Jn 14:6).

The purpose or goal of discipleship is to become so much like our master teacher that we become “like Christ.” In other words, Christians are called by the Lord to become holy. Sacred Scripture tells us: “*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’*” (1 Pt 1:14-16), and encourages us to “[s]trive for ... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

The goal of holiness is complete union with God for all eternity in Heaven. This holiness is not optional, for nothing unholy can enter Heaven (see Rv 21:27). This means that anything in our lives that is in any way unholy, that is, unlike Christ, must be changed.

Since we are all called to holiness, we must ask the Lord to give us a burning desire for ongoing conversion and to always seek first the Kingdom of God (see Mt 6:33). But our conversion to Christ is not just a one-time event. We are called to daily convert more and more to Christ throughout our whole lives. Becoming holy as Christ is holy is the lifelong pursuit of the disciple. Growing in holiness means becoming more and more like Christ;

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Descent from the Cross, 12th century miniature, Psalter of Queen Melisenda of Jerusalem

seeing things as he sees them, loving as he loves, forgiving as he forgives. It means that our lives become more and more characterized by *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”* (Gal 5:22-23). This is what it means to become a saint.

Let the Children Come to Me

We can keep our pursuit of holiness from becoming too complex by recalling a scene from the life of Jesus. People brought their children

to him so that he could bless them. The disciples tried to prevent this, but Jesus said, *“Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it”* (Mk 10:14-15).

Little children give us a window through which to see some qualities of godliness. Jesus had in mind such qualities as a clean conscience, purity of heart, a readiness to trust and believe, humility, gratitude, a delight in God’s gifts. Our Lord is commanding adults to become, not childish, but child-like.

Obedience

We think of obedience as a virtue needed mostly by children, and all of us as children chafed at the rules and restrictions of our parents and teachers. Yet Jesus came to undo the sin of our first parents’ disobedience, which enslaved all of us to sin. God the Son, in obedience to his Father’s will, entered the womb of Mary and became man. Throughout his childhood and young adulthood, until he was thirty, he lived at home, was obedient to his parents, learned a trade, and fulfilled the ordinary demands of life, sanctifying family life and work. He was an observant Jew, revered the laws of Judaism, and passionately loved the Temple in Jerusalem (see Jn 2:13-17). He said several times that he had come to do his Father’s will (see Jn 5:30; Jn 14:31); with perfect



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truth, he could say, *“I always do what is pleasing to [my Father]”* (Jn 8:29). At the threshold of his Passion, his human will recoiled in horror from the suffering and humiliation that awaited him, yet his prayer was one of subordinating his will to that of his Father (see Mk 14:35-36). Having been liberated from the slavery of sin by Jesus’ sacrificial death, the disciple of Christ finds his greatest *freedom* and *joy* in obeying the will of the Father, who as a loving parent draws his adopted sons and

daughters to their true home within the embrace of the love of the Triune God, even when the journey leads through persecution and suffering.

Persecution and Suffering

From Jesus’ birth to his death, he experienced persecution and suffering. His parents had to flee with him into Egypt to escape the murderous intention of King Herod the Great, who killed all the male babies in Bethlehem to try to prevent Jesus from growing up to claim his throne (see Mt 2:13-18). At the beginning of Jesus’ public life, his own townspeople of Nazareth tried to kill him (see Lk 4:28-30), and he at times had to avoid Herod the Great’s successor so as not to face the same death as his cousin John (see Lk 13:31). For a considerable period, the leaders of Judea plotted to kill him (see Lk 22:1-2; Jn 5:18; Jn 7:1; Jn 11:47-53). They finally succeeded in having him crucified by the Romans on the pretext that he wanted to make himself king (see Jn 19:14-16).

Jesus also experienced great suffering. He was rejected again and again by those who knew him best — his own neighbors in Nazareth (see Mk 6:1-6) and the residents of towns in Galilee in which he had performed his greatest miracles (see Mt 11:20-24). Nearly all of his disciples left him when he told them that he was the Bread of Life and that they would find eternal life in eating his flesh and drinking his

blood (the Eucharist) (see Jn 6:60-66). One of the twelve apostles, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him for money (see Lk 22:3-6). During his trial before the Sanhedrin, witnesses lied about what he had said (see Mt 26:59-60). The extreme physical suffering of the Roman process of crucifixion, which normally included a scourging in advance, was made even worse by the indifference of Pilate (see Mt 27:15-26; Lk 23:22-25), the mockery of the Roman soldiers (see Mk 15:16-20), and the crowd in Jerusalem crying “*crucify him!*” (Lk 23:21) and ridiculing him as he hung dying upon the cross (see Mt 27:39-44). “*Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*” (Heb 5:8).

Jesus tells us that we, too, will suffer and be persecuted for his sake. “*A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you ... all this they will do to you on my account*” (Jn 15:20-21). “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*” (Mt 5:10). “[*H*]e who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:38).

At the same time, he promises that his true disciples will find comfort and rest even in the midst of suffering: “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Mt 11:28-30).

As we learn from Jesus’ example, suffering leads to perfection. It is not a sign of God’s disfavor, but instead a sign of his love: “*My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights*” (Prv 3:11-12).

With God All Things are Possible

When we begin to realize what the call to holiness really involves, it might seem overwhelming. Yet we must recall that Holy Scripture assures us “*with God all things are possible*” (Mt 19:26) and “*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion*” (Phil 1:6). Only God can make us holy. It is the result of his

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grace working within us. Yes, we must do our part. We must prepare the soil. But

God alone will make the fruit of holiness grow within us. He has provided all we need to become saints. We must simply make use of it to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

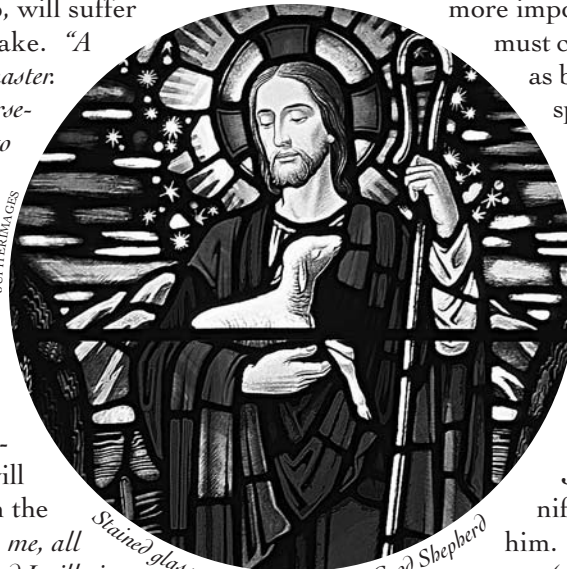
A New Way of Life: the Spiritual Life of the Disciple

Among the common elements that should be present in the life of every disciple of Christ are personal prayer, meditation on Sacred Scripture, sacramental living, and Christian fellowship.

1. Prayer — Our relationship with Jesus is more important than anything else. We

must come to see prayer as important as breathing. It is that vital to our spiritual life. Jesus says, “*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*” (Jn 15:4-5). Part of what it means to “abide” in Jesus is to spend regular, significant, “one on one” time with him. This is the habit of personal prayer (see Mt 6:5-13). The most important way of deepening our relationship

with Jesus is through prayer. Without prayer, our spiritual life will dry up and we will gradually begin to “go through the motions” of living as a Catholic, but our hearts will not be in it. In a marriage, husband and wife must spend quality time with each other in order to keep the flame of love alive and growing. If they do not make this a top priority, they will drift apart. The initial flame of the relationship will grow dim and may even go out completely. Likewise, a disciple must take the life of prayer seriously. It is especially in prayer that the Holy Spirit deepens and increases our love for Jesus, his Church, the sacraments, and our neighbor, making us more and more like Jesus. Prayer also gives us the ability to discern God’s will, and the endurance to follow wherever he might lead us (see also handouts on Jesus: Our Exemplar in Prayer, Christian Medi-



Stained-glass window of Jesus, the Good Shepherd

tation, and The Heights of Prayer: Contemplation). The Church also calls us to seek a living relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, who longs to help all of us grow closer and closer to her Son Jesus. She will pray for us and help us grow in sanctity.

2. Sacred Scripture — *“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for... training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete”* (2 Tm 3:16-17). The true disciple of Christ is the one who longs to know and understand him better and better. And to know Christ, we must meditate on the Holy Scriptures. St. Jerome said it well: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”¹ (CCC 133).

Meditating on and memorizing the words of the Scriptures greatly aids us in “abiding” in Christ. Attentiveness to Scripture, as proclaimed by the Church in the liturgy, is the pre-eminent way of being attentive to God’s Word. In addition, just as we must make time in our busy lives for personal prayer, so we must also make time to read Sacred Scripture. Meditating on the Holy Scriptures is central to being

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“transformed by the renewal of [our] mind[s]” (Rom 12:2). Much of the spiritual battle we face every day takes place in our thoughts. If our thoughts are filled with the truth and promises of God’s Word, our lives will be gradually transformed so that we come to think and act like Jesus. We should focus especially on the Gospels and letters of the New Testament. If we do our part by filling our minds with the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will bring forth great fruit in our spiritual

lives. Whenever we have a need, whether in temptations, or trials, or in a desire to tell others about Jesus, the Holy Spirit will often bring to mind the Scripture passages we need for that moment.

3. Sacramental Living — Sacramental living is the third way we “abide” in Christ (see Jn 6:56). Sacramental living simply describes the living out of a normal, adult Catholic spiritual life. Sacramental living means a real awareness of our status as children of God by Baptism. Through Confirmation, we have been strengthened in our efforts to please God and defend his teachings against those who would tear his Church asunder. We are conscious of our weaknesses and our proneness to sin, but are heartened by the availability of God’s constant forgiveness in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Most of all, we remain connected to the True Vine by frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist, buoyed by the joyous fact of being sacramentally united with Christ himself. No joy could be more complete than knowing that we can actually enjoy the presence of our Lord within us just as he was in the womb of Mary, his mother.

4. Christian Fellowship — The Lord did not intend us to live the Christian life alone. We need the support, encouragement,



The Sacrament of Reconciliation

DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

¹ *Dei Verbum* 25; cf. Philippians 3:8 and St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii* prol. from J.P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia Latina* 24, 17b (Paris: 1841-1855)



The Way of the Cross, by Ernest Wante, 1872-1960

“As we learn from Jesus’ example, suffering leads to perfection.”

and friendship of other faithful disciples. This is vitally important, especially for new Christians. Living in the world can be extremely draining. The workplace is often stressful and hectic. We may find ourselves surrounded by people who delight in sin and want nothing to do with God. Sometimes it can seem like the world is evangelizing us, rather than us evangelizing the world. Alongside the joys of family life,

there are also various kinds of stresses that can make us weary. We must do our best to find other devout Catholics with whom to pray, to find support, and just “hang out.” If for some reason Christian fellowship is lacking, we should consider asking the Lord in prayer to direct us as to what we could do to fill this need.

Conclusion

There is a single quality that characterizes the overall attitude or mindset of disciples of Christ; it is joy (see also handout on Holiness and Joy). The Christian life is all about joy. Wherever Jesus went, his presence brought great joy and excitement. Of course, the Resurrection of Jesus brought unimaginable joy to his disciples (see Lk 24:52). Not even persecution could squelch their joy in the Lord. In fact, it even increased their joy (see Acts 5:41). St. Paul tells us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4).

God is faithful to his promises. For those who persevere in their faith, he has promised a life of eternal joy and peace with him and all the angels and saints in Heaven. St. Paul tells us that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). And that is reason to celebrate.

(CCC 133, 426-429, 530-534, 618, 1691-1698, 1816, 1822-1832, 2098-2100, 2813, 2824-2826)



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A priest and deacon exchange the Sign of Peace at Mass