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9 September 2007

The Twenty-third Sunday of the Year (C)

Christian discipleship is not for the faint of the heart. It is not for the weak, the timid or the cowardly. It is not for those who run from labor and growth and sufferings. The demands of discipleship are high and costly. Jesus demands that we relinquish all that we have, all that we think brings us happiness. Hearing his demands we begin to wonder: Is it worth it? The answer to this question can be found if we examine the three conditions Jesus gives us today.

Why does he demand that we hate our parents, our siblings, our spouse in order to follow him? If we look closely at these relationships we see that each of them is a relationship that is very much bound to this earth, to this world. If we focus solely on these relationships we lose sight of the relationship that we are given in Baptism, we lose sight of the new relationship required to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

You know that my parents have been dead for many years now. Trusting in the mercy of God, I have confidence that my parents are with the Lord. By his grace, the Lord has shown what my entrance into heaven might be like if I remain faithful to him. I have seen my parents waiting for me and I have seen us embrace each other, but only briefly. My parents then take my hands and

present me to the Lord. That is our reunion. It is brief and, when thought of through the lens of this world, all too short. But in terms of heaven, this is at it should be. What do I mean?

Through holy Baptism our relationship to each other and to God changes drastically: we become brothers and sisters of each other and sons and daughters of God Most High.

Through Baptism, the Church is both my own Mother, and the Mother of my earthly parents; indeed, Holy Mother Church has given birth to each of us in the waters of rebirth. We entered into the waters as if being buried in the tomb with Christ, and we came out of the waters as though emerging from the womb. It is this new relationship with the Church, whose Head is Christ, that must take precedence in our lives. This is why Jesus demands that we renounce the relationships of this world.

We see this in the example of Saint Paul and his relationship to Onesimus, who was once a slave, and his master Philemon. Paul proclaimed the Gospel to Onesimus and he accepted it and received Baptism. These two men are given a new relationship in the Church and for this reason Saint Paul refers to him as "my child Onesimus" (Philemon 10). And because the master and slave are now both Christians, Paul encourages Philemon to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so

to you, as a man and in the Lord" (Philemon 16). They are no longer master and servant, they are no longer even brothers, but "partners" in the Lord (Philemon 17). So it is with each of us.

Everything that we have is a gift from God and must be generously and lovingly given back to him and placed at his service. Every Christian must keep these words of the Savior ever in mind and heart: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Why must we carry our cross?

Christ came among us to suffer and die for us, to redeem us and give us eternal life. If we are to be his followers we must follow his example. We, too, must accept the cross in our lives, we must embrace it, both to purify ourselves and to purify others. If we do not look to the cross with joy, then we keep our focus here in this world and we cannot follow Christ.

What then of our possessions? If there is anything in our lives that we would not readily give to another in need, we are not in possession of it, but it is in possession of us. Everything that we have must be placed at the disposal of the Lord, for he alone must be our one and only possession. He is the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field for which we must sell all that we have to acquire.

Here, then, we return to the question: Is it worth it? Is it worth it to count all things - possessions, family, life -

after Christ Jesus? I answer you: Yes! Yes, it is worth it, for only in doing so will we ever find the true possession that never fades. Only in doing so will we find our true family, the saints of God. Only in doing so will we ever find life everlasting. "You may be certain: a life dedicated to God is never spent in vain."<sup>1</sup>

We need only look to the lives of the saints. We need only look to the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, who suffered the absence of the Lord for forty years, who served the poor, the destitute and the dying of Calcutta. We look at her smile, at the love of God radiating from her and we know that this life is worth it. We need only look to the life of the Servant of God Pope John Paul II who lived in Communist Poland, who survived an attempt on his life, who suffered from Parkinson's disease. We see his smile, we hear the joy in his voice and we know that it is worth it. We can also look to the example of the Holy Father Benedict XVI who before the conclave asked the Cardinals not to vote for him. During the conclave as it became clear to him that they were leaning in his direction, he prayed, "Lord, don't do this to me." We remember the joy - and the trepidation - in his eyes as he stepped out onto the balcony that first time. Now, after he has accepted the cross of his

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Prayer Vigil with Youth in Loreto, 1 September 2007.

office - remember, he had hoped to return home to write - the joy of Christ is evident in all that he says and does.

Each of these dedicated every aspect of their being to the Lord and, though their lives were beset by hardship and difficulty, they found true joy and lasting peace.

Let us then beg the Lord to "prosper the work of our hands," that we might each remain faithful to his calling (Psalm 90:17). Being his faithful servants before all else, we, too, may cry out to him: "Fill us at daybreak with your kindness, that we may shout for you and gladness all our days. And may the gracious care of the Lord our God be ours" (Psalm 90:14, 17). Amen.