

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2020
Seminary of Our Lady of Providence
Providence, Rhode Island

Following the tradition of St. Benedict, many new monks begin their solemn profession lying prostrate on the ground, covered by a funeral pall. For the modern observer, everything about this seemingly macabre moment seems bizarre.

At a time as jubilant as this, why focus on death?

Dom Philippe, Abbott of Solesmes, puts it starkly: Our existence must be a novitiate for eternity. The entire liturgical life of a monk prepares him for the final hours (cf. Nicholas Diat, *A Time to Die*).

Lying prostrate with the pall over his back, the monk enters into a mystical death: death to his former way of life, death to his dreams, death to his will.

Spectators might find this tradition fascinating for the nice men dressed in black robes. But there's nothing spectacular about it. It's an instruction also meant for them—and for us.

Jesus couldn't be clearer in the Gospel: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

The mystical death of the monk, then, serves as a kind of liturgical education for the entire Church: Jesus expects all disciples—and especially his chosen instruments, his priests—to lay down their lives for Him, and Him alone.

As you began sharing with family and friends your intention to enter the seminary, what did people think?

Some may have been equally fascinated with your decision, even if it didn't begin as starkly as a monk, for this way of life stands in sharp contrast with the ways of the world.

A young man, with gifts and talents and a bright future ahead of him, who forfeits everything, really does shock the world.

This choice did not originate with you, of course. You responded to a divine invitation of love to follow the Master, no matter where He would lead you, and you agreed to lay down your life for Him, as He did so powerfully for you.

You left behind your aspirations and plans. You didn't negate your gifts and talents; you gave them back to God.

Against the backdrop of a culture which values self-determination and material success as the highest ideals, you might be tempted to doubt, at times, that this was the right choice.

Don't.

Never doubt that this forfeiting—this mystical death—will bring you the deepest joy that there is in the world. Because it is the joy that comes from God.

If it is authentic, your joy will instruct a world obsessed with autonomy that if we give everything to Christ—our plans, our aspirations, our wills—He will always outdo us in generosity. Jesus tells us so today: “whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

God will make good on his promises. To the one who serves God, God gives a more intimate share in his own Trinitarian life, which fills a heart which can only be satisfied by eternal love.

But to get there, He asks for everything—even unto death.

And that's a hard teaching—to risk everything; to give up one's life. A teaching so difficult, in fact, that even the Chief of the Apostles, who just received the keys to the kingdom, rebukes the Master when he hears that Jesus will sacrifice Himself on the Cross in order to save the world: “God forbid, Lord! Never shall that happen to you!”

Jesus just named him Peter; now Jesus gives him another name, “satan,” and admonishes him for putting up against God's plan a hindrance—literally a *skandalon*, or stumbling stone. Peter, *petros*, the rock—the strong foundation whose unwavering faith merited a share in sacred power—quickly becomes a tiny stone, which trips up the works of God in favor of personal plans.

It's completely understandable, then, that Jesus rebukes Peter with the name "*satan*," since Peter's intransigence stems from pride, the cause of the devil's fall.

Too often, we too, like Peter, begin excitedly by saying yes to the Lord—planning to forfeit everything for Him in our own kind of monastic profession, our own mystical death to self. We literally leave the material world to follow Him. But too often, we tightly grasp what's hardest to release: our will and our plans.

It's often said that the hardest promise for a priest to keep is obedience. The Lord speaks authoritatively through his Church (and that's a great mystery, given Peter's many faults). But sometimes our will and our plans take center stage in contrast to God's—the placements I want, the assignments I deserve, the recognition I crave.

When we begin speaking to the Lord with a sequence of "I's," we forget to speak to God as Thou, even though we pray every day: *Thy* Kingdom come, *Thy* will be done.

But the Cross requires we surrender in obedience to the divine will. Bishop Barron often refers to a helpful guide from the English priest Ronald Knox, who once taught that making the sign of the Cross teaches us how to be a Christian disciple. From the head to the heart, we sign the letter "I"; but from shoulder to shoulder, we cross out the "I"—the ego—and all its little plans.

When we surrender the "I"—when we literally *cross* it out—we will undoubtedly experience pain.

Humiliations, insults, trials, even betrayals, will come. It's a cross, after all.

But that doesn't mean we should escape it, as Peter did on Good Friday.

Because upon that Cross hangs our salvation.

As Father Jean D'Elbee shares in his masterful retreat, *I believe in Love*, "The tender Master will permit plenty of humiliations and plenty of deceptions. He will destroy many false dreams. The Divine Surgeon will put the lancet straight into the abscess, happy that you allow Him to do it. But do not be afraid—no, never be afraid. His hand is very gentle, very skillful, moved by his Heart, which loves you to the point of foolishness. To abandon yourself to Jesus is to permit Him to carry out

His whole work of love—to follow Him, even to Calvary, but also to the Resurrection, to the Heaven of glory!”

The Cross will inevitably come. It is the *sine qua non* of Christian discipleship. But we must remember that heavenly glory follows.

That’s why when monks lie prostrate on the ground for their solemn professions, the paschal candle shines brightly before them—reminding them gently that their mystical death leads to an eternity of light and love.

And as the monks lie prostrate on the abbey floor, they hear the chanting of the *Suscipe*, Psalm 119, to give them hope: “Receive me, Lord, as you have promised, and I shall live. Do not disappoint me in my hope.”

Brothers, we must live by the *Suscipe* every day: Receive us, Lord, as you have promised, confident that He will, because God is always faithful to His promises.