

## 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Reflection

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him,

“God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.”

He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.

You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Or what can one give in exchange for his life?

For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory,

and then he will repay all according to his conduct.”

Mt 16:21-27

I want to pay attention. I know by now that when Jesus says things like, “Whoever wishes to come after me,” I want to pay attention. He will say something important about himself. What he says is not easy. “He must deny himself, whoever wishes to come after me.” Deny myself. The first wave of doubts takes on the shapes of my favorite pleasures. I don’t really care about these things I tell myself, yet I like to have them around me. Deny myself? That would hurt. I don’t really want to do that. But if he insists, I am ready; I will deny myself those things. I will be the hero of my own story: no ice cream (at least not on Mondays), no computer games (at least not on Friday morning), no coffee (I should have switched to green tea a long time ago), and no desserts on Sundays (it’s healthier anyway). Just when I am ready to build a monument to my amazing heroism and my ability to surrender everything to God, I realize that this is not the end. This is just the beginning.

I realize that my heroic (or pathetic) little gifts to God opened a whole process within me. I can still hear his words like an echo sounding in my heart, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself.” What more can he possibly want? Does he want me to stop being a narcissist? Does he want me to stop doing anything just for myself? He knows I cannot promise that (partly because I don’t know how, and mostly because I don’t want to). I cannot really imagine my life without my little celebrations. How can he demand that from me? Should I stop pretending that I’m conquering the world, should I forget my “me” time, should I stop treating life like a never-ending opportunity to give myself more presents? That would require a radical restructuring of my life. That would require reaching to the very depth of my soul. I don’t know if I can imagine it. I would have to start seeing people around me and treat them like persons - human beings who are loved by God. The second wave of doubt is reinforced by the whisper in my mind: Is it even healthy to psychologically deny myself? Isn’t there a name for this in some book on the pathologies of human psyche? Don’t we see it happening all the time? Does God of Love mean God of co-dependence?

Yet a gentle and persistent voice keeps sounding in my heart: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." He knows that denial is negative and that one cannot build life on the negative. That's why he offers a positive value: take up your cross and follow me. In what world is the cross a positive option? What would have to happen for me to see it? "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." I begin to see it. Behind the tears of my wounded ego, behind the ruins of the plans that I dreamed of, but never really pursued, I finally begin to see reality. I see husbands and wives who faithfully and persistently, inch by inch, through tears and joys, change themselves for each other; I see children that, despite the confusion of their youth and appeal of the delusional world, search through shame and glory for the truth of life; I see priests forgotten in small parishes or lost in important offices, patiently giving witness to the power of the word of God, even through their daily routine; I see nuns in classrooms and sacristies that quietly inspired so many people to love. All of this is mixed with the world of suspicion, of scandal, of weakness. All of this is intertwined with the exhausted world, longing for the Messiah but ready to crucify him. "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Now, seeing Jesus hanging on the cross just as he foretold, I can see a pure gift given to the Father on my behalf and, at the same time, given to me by the Father Himself. Now I can see that denial of self and suspension of ego is a necessary step to see the truth that will lead me to love. The repayment that he mentions becomes almost obvious. When you follow the Son, when you imitate him, when you allow your life to be transformed by his mission, you will encounter the Father's glory. You will be thinking as God does, not as human beings do.