

Jesus offers us a rather difficult invitation: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

I once heard someone described as "a priestly priest." I am not really sure what that is, but I believe it meant that that priest matched perfectly somebody's idea of a priest.

And that was the problem of Peter, as he wanted Jesus to match perfectly his understanding of the Messiah. We then find Jesus lashing back at this, “Get behind me Satan!” We might recall Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, telling him that the cross was not necessary nor convenient.

No need for all that sacrifice and suffering! I suspect in our society many might recoil about denying ourselves our comforts in our pursuit of happiness and the American dream.

But Jesus wishes to offer something much more, a joy that rises from suffering that is far deeper than a McDonalds Happy Meal. When you rise above it, make it through, then you can understand true joy. One who avoids their crosses will never experience this.

I came across one of my favorite authors, Fr. Rolheiser, an article that in turn, offered his insight through an author named James Martin on discipleship and the cross.

1). First, we have to accept that suffering is a part of our lives. Accepting our cross and giving up our lives means that, at some point, we have to make peace with our frustrations, disappointments, pain, misfortune, illness, unfairness, sadness, and death are a part of our lives.

+Wanda Vassallo spoke of a friend named Linda, who teaches first grade, and told her about an interaction she had with one of her students on the first day of school. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, Ryan was getting his things ready to leave for home when he was actually supposed to be heading to lunch with the rest of the class.

Linda asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. Linda tried to explain that, now that he is in the first grade, he would have a longer school day. "You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home."

Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Convinced of her seriousness, Ryan then put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

As believers, it's easy to feel a little like Ryan when we consider the Christian life. The requirements are daunting—"Surely he doesn't want me to turn the other cheek when someone hurts me;" "What does he mean, 'take up my cross'?" It isn't long before you want to say, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

I could say the same about the priesthood over these past few weeks. Nevertheless, I have to accept this cross in my priesthood or I can grow bitter and all you would hear would be bitter and angry homilies. No, we must learn to accept our crosses without bitterness.

2). Taking up our cross and giving up our lives, means that we may not, in our suffering, pass on any bitterness to those around us. We might want to say on occasions, “Why are you so darn happy and I am struggling so much each and every day!”

We want people to be unhappy as we are unhappy! This does not mean that we cannot share our pain with others. But there’s a healthy way of doing this, where our sharing leaves others free, as opposed to an unhealthy kind of sharing which subtly tries to make others unhappy because we are unhappy.

+Some die with bitterness, while others witness through it.

There’s a difference between healthily groaning under the weight of our pain and unhealthily whining in self-pity and bitterness under that weight. The cross gives us permission to do the former, but not the latter.

Jesus groaned under the weight of his cross, but no self-pity, whining, or bitterness issued forth from his lips or his beaten body.

3). Third, walking in the footsteps of Jesus as he carries his cross means that we must accept some other deaths before our physical death, that we are invited to let some parts of ourselves die. When Jesus invites us to die in order to find life, he is not, first of all, talking about physical death.

Some of our younger folks probably won’t really grasp this until you begin to get a little older. There are things in us that die. There are a countless number of other deaths that we must undergo before we die physically. The longer we live the more we understand this. +So long to the 6 pack abs!

4. Only through our crosses, can we understand the full meaning of courage. G. K. Chesterton put it this way: “Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live, taking the form of a readiness to die. A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying.

He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then there will be a suicide, and he will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.

5. Lastly, accepting our cross means that we must wait for the resurrection, that here in this life some symphonies may remain unfinished. Unfortunately, the Apostles may not have heard the word “rise” but only “suffering” and “death.” They would surely witness this for the rest of their lives after that Easter morning.

Beyond any cross that we are willing to accept there will come the resurrection, be it this life or the life to come. The book of Proverbs tells us that sometimes in the midst of pain the best we can do is put our mouths to the dust and wait.

That afternoon in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus taught an important truth about the Messiah and about our discipleship. We come to the Father’s glory not by going out of this world but through it, not by avoiding our cross but by embracing it.

Everyone on earth has a cross. About that we have no choice. That cross can make us bitter or it can make us holy. That choice is ours. If we follow the Lord with it, the cross we have in our life becomes the path that leads to holiness here and eternal glory with Christ.