

*Time 23C 2016*

*“The Gift”*

This coming Sunday, in Rome, Mother Theresa will be canonized. That she will be canonized is not surprising. She was a woman of extraordinary holiness. At an early age, she gave herself entirely to Christ, promising to do whatever Christ asked of her; and so throughout her life she worked with the poorest of the poor. Her life exemplified what Jesus says in today’s gospel: “take up your cross and follow me.”

But it is only recently that we have learned something else about Mother Theresa. Throughout much of her life, she experienced what many saints have called “the dark night of the soul”—that terrifying experience of the absence of God. She experienced what Jesus did when he cried out from the cross: “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me.” She followed in the steps of Christ, but her life of discipleship was not all light and joy. Her spiritual life was often dry, and instead of the warm light of God’s presence she often lived in the darkness of God’s absence.

All of this brings me to today’s gospel, which challenges us to give ourselves entirely to Christ. For, it is only when we give ourselves to Christ that we find ourselves; it is only when we surrender ourselves to God that we receive all things in return. But before we can receive all things in return, we must first give ourselves to Christ.

The demands that Jesus makes in today’s gospel are unrelenting; some would say they are unrealistic. Jesus turns to the crowd following him and makes three demands. (1) If you prefer your family to me, stop following me. (2) If you prefer your own life to life

with me, stop following me. (3) If you are unwilling to share in my passion by taking up the cross, stop following me. But he goes further. Calculate the cost of discipleship, he says, before you decide follow me; otherwise you will not be able to finish what you begin. For, if you are unwilling to surrender everything for my sake, you will not be able to follow me.

I wonder how many people were left in the crowd after Jesus spoke in this way. Did the crowd begin to disperse until he was left with a handful of followers? I wonder how I would have responded. Would I have walked away? Would I have embraced the challenge? How would you have responded?

How can Jesus make such demands of us? Why does he make such demands of us? To answer this question we need to learn from the saints—men and women like Mother Theresa. What they understood, and what we are trying to learn, is that *the demands of Jesus are a gift*. Yes, the demands of Jesus are a gift. They are a gift that makes us free; they are an invitation to live our lives with Christ; they are a gift to embrace the fullness of life. The saints understood this. They understood that if they gave everything to Christ, they would receive everything in return. They understood that it was God's Son God who was calling them to a life of holiness and of sanctity, a life of intimate union with God.

Is such a life possible or is it meant for only a few? Although we often think of the saints as special people, they were as ordinary as we are. They experienced the same fears and failures we do every day. They experienced dryness of prayer. But they understood the gift of God and, because they did, they received everything in return.

Sanctity is for the many, not for the few. The life of discipleship is for all who embrace Jesus Christ in trusting faith. Embrace the gift and your life will be changed.