

## 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Cycle A-2026

The cross is the central symbol in the Christian life. That does not mean that suffering is the primary experience of life or of our Christian discipleship. The suffering and death of Jesus was the culmination of His life but did not totally define the broad range of His human experience. The Gospels reveal that He experienced joy and laughter, love and friendship, and the inherent pleasures of life and creation. Intermingled with all of these wonderful blessings, He also experienced suffering in body, mind, heart, and soul. The life of Jesus reveals that suffering is simply one aspect of our overall human experience, yet it has the great potential to be redemptive for ourselves and others. Jesus's death on the cross makes that abundantly clear.

In today's Gospel, Jesus proclaims: "Whoever does not take up His cross and follow after me is not worthy of me." With these words, Jesus is helping us to be realistic about our expectations concerning life in general, and

our Christian faith in particular. If we expect our lives to be without suffering, we are setting ourselves up for deep bitterness and great disillusionment. It is not a matter of “if” it will come, but “when” it will come.

At the same time, we are called to live in the present moment and not in paralyzing fear of what crosses may await us in the future. Instead, we are invited to enjoy and savor all the good things that come our way in a spirit of joy and celebration. The country music singer Garth Brooks provides us with similar encouragement and guidance through the following lyrics from his song, “The Dance:” “Looking back on the memory of, the dance we shared, beneath the stars above. For a moment, all the world was right, how could I have known that you’d ever say goodbye.” “And now, I’m glad I didn’t know, the way it all would end, the way it all would go. Our lives are better left to chance, I could have missed the pain, but I’d had to miss the dance.” May the future crosses that await us, whether they be the end of relationships, declining health, loss of loved ones and pets, as well as our own dying process, not prevent us from fully embracing the sacred dance of life and our sacred dance

toward our heavenly homeland. May we go forward, full steam ahead, in a spirit of faith, hope, love, and the deepest gratitude to God.

As we journey through life, when crosses visit us, they can take on a variety of forms. First, there are times we will be visited by internal crosses. These come from our ongoing attempts to accept and love ourselves, and to trust in the unwavering love and abundant mercy of Christ, with all of our sinfulness, weaknesses, limitations, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies. We may also experience them in the form of emotional suffering because of a lack of love and affection, personal rejection and betrayal, or abandonment and abuse.

Second, there are times we will be visited by external crosses. These crosses tend to deal with our relationships with other people. We all know how blessed but convoluted it can be to deal with other people. Things such as different perspectives, misunderstandings, unconstructive criticism, and personal conflict, can steal our joy and totally consume our life energy and focus.

Third, there are times that we will be visited by religious crosses because of our faith. The cross may exclusively revolve around the fact we believe in and follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. At other times, it may be our understanding of Jesus Christ and the interpretation of His teachings on matters of faith and morality. Sometimes the most deep-rooted and bitter crosses lie within our own families, between fellow Catholics, or between the various Christian denominations. There is a tendency to demonize one another and easily throw aside the basic demands of Christian unity and charity. We can overcome or minimize these spiritual sufferings by applying the words of Jesus to the situation, "Love one another as I have loved you," and "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." Yes, this even applies to people that do not share our religious beliefs or philosophy of life. After all, every person, without exception, is made in the image and likeness of God. God's love is not just limited to Catholics or other Christians, even though we proudly and courageously ground our faith in the divine revelation that "Jesus Christ, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

The final type of cross that may visit us are spiritual crosses that have more of an internal focus. I would like to label them as the “self-emptying” crosses. The lingo of the Sacred Scriptures is that we are to “die to sin and live for God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” become a new creation in Christ, live in the spirit and not of the flesh, and put off our old self and put on the new self. Even though all of this is for our personal and spiritual benefit, it can be very difficult and painful to integrate into our daily consciousness. It can be a steep, uphill climb to go from actively nurturing anger and hatred in our hearts, to forgiving others in our thoughts, words, and actions. It can seem like the death of a loved one to let go of our “pet” sins and habits that we have befriended or allowed to become our false “crutch” and “comfort” throughout the passage of time. These self-emptying crosses also include the suffering that can accompany striving to make God #1 in every aspect of our lives and no longer viewing ourselves as the center of the universe. As we continually strive and persevere in doing so, our experience of suffering gradually gives way to a new joy, peace, and internal tranquility.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate role model and guide in carrying our crosses. As He endured His own, He continually turned to God the Father in faith. This helped Him to handle everything with a spirit of hope. All of this made it possible for Him to go forward with a heart full of love. The same pattern is true for us. The Good News is that Jesus Christ helps us to carry our crosses. We are not left to our own limited resources. We are supported and uplifted by His grace. Jesus Christ is our Simon of Cyrene. You heard me right! Jesus is our Simon of Cyrene! The only difference is that He is human and Divine. By allowing Jesus to help us carry our crosses, we gradually begin to experience resurrection as we personally experience the truth of the following words from St. Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

