

If anyone follows me ...

23th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Wisdom 9:13-18b; Philemon 9b-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

The Gospel reading for today is one of those that we would be tempted to smooth out and sweeten because it seems too hard for men of today: "If anyone follows me without hating his father, his mother."

Let us immediately make one thing clear: It is true that the Gospel is sometimes provocative, but it is never contradictory. A little further on in the same Gospel of Luke Jesus firmly re-emphasizes the duty of honoring father and mother (Luke 18:20), and in regard to husband and wife he says that they must be one flesh and that man does not have a right to separate that which God has joined together. How, then, can he tell us to hate father and mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters?

We need to keep in mind a certain fact. The Hebrew language does not have comparatives -- it is not possible in Hebrew, for example, to speak of loving something "more" or "less" than another thing. It is only possible to speak of loving or hating. The phrase, "If anyone follows me and does not hate father and mother" should be understood in this way: "If anyone follows me, without preferring me to father and mother." To see that this is so we only need to look at the same matter in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says: "Whoever loved father and mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

It would be a big mistake to think that this love for Christ enters into competition with the different human loves: for parents, husband and wife, children, brothers and sisters. Christ is no one's rival in love and he is not jealous of anyone.

In Paul Claudel's play "The Satin Slipper," the female protagonist, a fervent Christian, who is deeply in love with Rodrigo, exclaims to herself, almost finding it hard to believe: "Is it permitted, then, this love between creatures? Truly, God is not jealous?" And her guardian angel answers: "How could he be jealous of what he himself has made?" (Act 3, Scene 8).

Love for Christ does not exclude the other loves, but rather orders them. Indeed, it is in him that every genuine love finds its foundation and support and the necessary grace to be fully lived out. This is the meaning of the "grace of state" that the sacrament of marriage confers to Christian husbands and wives. It assures that in their love they will be sustained and guided by the love that Christ had for his Church.

Jesus does not disappoint nor deceive anyone; he asks everything because he wants to give everything; indeed, he has given everything. Someone might ask themselves: "But what right does this man have, who lived 20 centuries ago in an obscure corner of the world, to ask this absolute love of everyone? We do not need to look too far to find the answer, which is in his earthly life about which history tells us: It is because he first gave everything for man. "He loved us and gave himself up for us" (cf. Ephesians 5:2).

In the same Gospel Jesus reminds us what the benchmark and sign is of true love for him: "taking up your own cross." Taking up our own cross does not mean seeking out suffering.

Jesus did not seek out his cross; he took on himself in obedience to the Father what men put on his shoulders and with his obedient love transformed it from an instrument of torture into a sign of redemption and glory.

Jesus did not come to make human crosses heavier, but rather to give them meaning. It has been rightly said that "whoever looks for Jesus without the cross will find the cross without Jesus," that is, he will certainly find the cross but not the strength to carry it.