

Our first reading brought to mind these words from the Book of Job.

“Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” (Job 38:2,4)

We cannot know the ways of God. We can only have faith, and trust in His wisdom. It is a wisdom far beyond our understanding.

G.K. Chesterton is supposed to have said, “Christianity is a faith that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.”

By that he means that the Church must be faithful to her founder, Jesus Christ.

Any parent knows that sometimes, “tough love” is what is called for. It does not mean that we do not love our children. In fact it is just the opposite. We love them so much that sometimes we act in ways that our children may perceive as harsh. But that is only because they do not see what we see or understand the way we do.

Christ loves us so much that He wants us to become saints. That is, He wants us to share in His life, and know eternal joy and happiness with Him in the world to come. And He is not afraid to shake us out of our comfort zone if it helps us to enter into a deeper relationship with Him.

His words in today's Gospel are very direct, and seem harsh, but they require some context in order for us to fully understand them.

“If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Is Jesus really telling us we must hate our family members in order to be His disciples? What about the great commandment to love one another as He has loved us?

While “hate” is an accurate translation, we have to understand how people spoke in the time of Jesus. The Jewish people of the time had a great affection for hyperbole and figures of speech. The more important the point the more vivid was the image.

For example, when Jesus told us “if your right hand causes you to sin, then cut it off,” He is not saying that every person who ever stole a cookie from a cookie jar should start amputating limbs, He is saying that we need to be serious in our fight against sin. He presents us with a radical image in order to make a point.

If a person or a situation or a place threatens to lead us away from God, then Jesus wants us to have the courage to renounce that situation or place, and establish healthy boundaries with that person.

Jesus is not telling us that we must hate our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, He is telling us that we must love Him more. We can't really follow Him unless we love Him more than our own life and all of those things we take comfort in.

And yes, one of the ways in which we show our love for God is by loving our brothers and sisters. But let us be clear in what we mean by that. How often do we love someone for what they can do for us? How often do we love a place or a thing or a person in a possessive way? This thing is mine, or this person is mine? If we put Christ first in our lives then we will come to truly, purely, love those around us.

Think of Saint Teresa of Calcutta holding a sick baby or a dying person, this is the love of a saint. This is the love of God above all things, expressing itself in the love of others.

And Jesus gives us the key to know this kind of love, by renouncing our attachment to anything and everything that might come between us and Him.

“For the deliberations of mortals are timid, and unsure are our plans... and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.”

This does not mean we have to walk away from our possessions and start living on the street. We have responsibilities to others to use our gifts prudently. But it does mean that we must recognize that clinging to things or even other people can weigh down our hearts and prevent us from fully following Our Lord.

We carry our cross when we renounce our attachment to things that make us comfortable. In return we receive the infinite gain of loving Him above all things.

Coleen Carroll Campbell is the author of the book, “My Sisters the Saints.” In her book she gives us an example of what it looked like when God asked her to give up her dearest possession – her desire for control.

She was struggling with illness and inability to conceive a child. She had heard the phrase 'carry your cross and offer it up and unite your suffering with the suffering of Jesus.' She had heard it for years and she thought she knew what it meant. We should trust God and offer up our suffering when faced with obvious trials like illnesses, difficult decisions, and the loss of loved ones.

What Ms. Campbell had never known or understood was what to do with the uncertainty that accompanies such trials, and the interior suffering that is often worse than the situation that prompted it.

She once told her mother, “I can accept the Cross of never having children, it’s the waiting, the not knowing, that’s driving me crazy.”

Her mother responded, “The waiting is the cross.”

Perhaps that was the problem. For years she wanted to analyze and dissect that cross so that she would know how much longer she would need to carry it and how carrying it would glorify God.

But Jesus does not ask us to understand our burdens, He only asks that we bear them with faith and trust in Him. He is asking us how much we love Him.

My mother and grandmother often told me, when I was experiencing some difficulty or problem, to offer it up. But they never told me what that meant.

It is actually a very ancient tradition of the Church. And it is also a very good way to renounce those things that may be holding us back from loving more.

Pope Benedict XVI helped a little. He wrote:

“What does it mean to offer something up? Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ's great “com-*passion*” so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race.

In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love.”

What we are really being asked to offer up is our desire for control. In reality there is actually very little we can control. So let us offer up our desire for something that is beyond our abilities to begin with. And then we can unite our sufferings, our irritations, and our minor annoyances with Christ's suffering on the Cross for the good of others.

How do we do this? We simply talk to Jesus, “I offer this headache up for this friend I know who is suffering...” “I offer this fear of the future for this person who just lost her husband...”

During Mass we participate in that eternal moment when Christ sacrificed Himself for our sake. Let us offer up our own difficulties to Him and with Him. Let us sacrifice our own wants and desires so that all we desire is to be united with Him. This is how we grow in our love for Him, and in our freedom to love others more.