

The Call to Discipleship

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In his book, *The Models of the Church*, Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ, describes 5 models of the Church: the Church as institution, sacrament, community, herald and servant. In a subsequent article he summarized all of these models under the general heading of disciple. The Church is a community of disciples under the headship of Jesus Christ. In every model of the Church, in every member from the oldest to the youngest, believers are called to be dedicated followers of Jesus.

Baptism makes us members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Most of us were born into the faith and so the decision to become a believer was made for us. As we matured we received the sacraments of reconciliation, Eucharist and confirmation by which our faith matured and we more actively chose to belong to Christ. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God has chosen us, and quite literally we belong to him. **“I have called you by name: you are mine.”** (Is. 43:1) And yet there is a difference between being a member of the church and a disciple of Jesus. Some Christians are content to go to church when they are hatched, matched and dispatched. That is hardly what God had in mind. True followers of Jesus enter a school of discipleship from which they never graduate.

A disciple places himself/herself under the discipline of the master’s words and deeds. Jesus expects his followers to stay close to him, to pay attention to his words, and thus to be fruitful. (John 15:1-10) The twelve Apostles had the privilege of being in discipleship school with Jesus for about 3 years, and to a lesser degree the Blessed Mother and those who traveled with Jesus. (Luke 8:1-3; Luke 10:1-2) Jesus was a teacher, friend, confidant, shepherd and healer. There was an intimacy with Jesus that served them well long after the resurrection, and we must seek that same intimacy with Jesus. The teaching authority of the Church also frames the beliefs and practices which endear us to God and to one another. We will consider four elements of discipleship which bond us to our Master.

1. Personal Prayer

Prayer may be described as our lifeline to God, the foundation of our union with Jesus. It is a personal relationship with God that has elements of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication (ACTS). Prayer is a continuous dialog with our Creator and redeemer which entails speaking and listening with our hearts. The intimacy that we develop through prayer allows us to hear the voice of the Shepherd more clearly. Always available to us, the Lord delights when his flock assembles in church for Eucharist and other devotions. Reciting the Liturgy of the Hours is a good method of praying along with the Church at different times of the day. The rosary and Stations of the Cross are other ways of staying connected to God through our Blessed Mother.

But I strongly encourage all to spend time in quiet meditation in the loving presence of God. That is listening at its best. If we are busy saying things to God, when do we listen? The prayer of quiet occurs when we slow down and rest in the comforting embrace of God. You may even imagine the Lord surrounding you by a glowing light. If you become distracted let your eyes fall upon holy objects until you focus again upon the God who loves you. A goal would be to spend an hour a day in public and private prayer devotions.

Reading the Bible and other devotional books, e.g. biographies of the saints, feed our minds and give us inspiration. St. Jerome said that ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Jesus Christ. St. Paul

wrote: **“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”** (2 Tim. 3:16) If you are not in the habit of reading the Bible regularly, I suggest you start with the Gospel of Luke, followed by the Acts of the Apostles. Read short sections and reflect upon their meaning and how they apply to your life. I would not advise reading the Bible cover to cover. You could keep a marker at an Old Testament reading, e.g. the Book of Psalms or Proverbs. But I suggest focusing on the gospels and letters of the New Testament. The Bible is our daily bread, not cake for special occasions.

2. Living a Disciplined Life

To become a top athlete a person must spend long hours in training to build up stamina, speed, agility and mental toughness. No one faults an individual for spending all that time day after day in order to excel. Why do we expect less of a true follower of Jesus? If Christians are too busy to devote such quality time to their faith, they are literally too busy. Their priorities need to be readjusted. An essential aspect of ongoing conversion is to examine how we use our time. It really comes down to obedience to the daily call of God. It is too easy to become complacent with our culture of ease and convenience where God gets left over time.

To develop a life of virtue requires mental, emotional and spiritual toughness. The fruits of the spirit, e.g. patience, joy, humility, perseverance, are sure signs of the presence of God in one's life. (Gal. 5:22, 23) The Catholic Men's Fellowship uses the scripture passage **“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another”** (Prov.27:17) to indicate how by interacting with likeminded men we enhance the witness we give by our words and actions. Joining a spiritual support group keeps us focused on the things that matter in life. Gathering for weekend retreats and other conferences challenge us to put first things first.

The home is a school of virtue, an abode of grace, which requires loving presence on the part of all. When a man is negligent of his role as husband and father the family suffers. God had chosen men to be the spiritual head of their household. There are things which only they can do to enhance the quality of life together. The young learn from the witness of their parents, and they need affirmation, encouragement and direction throughout their lives. It is a fact that families which pray and attend church together have fewer divorces, less problems with their children, and greater tranquility in their home life. The adage is true: **“The family that prays together stays together.”**

3. Suffering and Persecution

Sickness and suffering are consequences of our sinful human condition, and they are part of everyone's life. From a Christian perspective, suffering has its rightful place in our spiritual development. Jesus experienced extreme physical torture and death at the hands of evil people, but God brought tremendous good out of it. I am sure the apostles were not happy when Jesus said, **“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”** (Mark 8:34) Some people are troubled by physical ailments and diseases that sap their strength. Others experience mental and emotional weaknesses often a result of abuse in one's youth, lack of affirmation, and dysfunctional family life. The cross weighs heavy through grieving, loneliness, rejection, etc. We need courage to accept the crosses in life that we cannot change while working to change what we can.

We believe in the power of redemptive suffering, and the suffering and death of Jesus is our supreme example. St. Paul invites us to unite our suffering to that of Christ for the sake of the Church (see Col. 1:24). It takes deep faith to acknowledge that God has a reason for allowing suffering in our world especially to innocent people. When a cross is not lifted from us we have the assurance that God's grace will get us through. (See 2 Cor. 12:7-10) A man named Joe wrote to me several times from prison asking for prayers and advice in his terrible ordeal. Gradually he made peace with God through long hours of prayer, and his letters reflected a lot more confidence and courage. He wrote, "I have been through hell these past months, and only through the grace of God and the protection of the angels could I survive...I came to realize that God has a much better plan for me than the road I was traveling before this... Essentially he saved my life and put me on a new path." Joe grew spiritually through the crucible of suffering.

Discipleship costs us something. It may cost us financial wellbeing, status, reputation, sickness and perhaps even our life. Persecution comes to believers from the world around us that is not open to the light of Christ. Speaking up for justice and morality in our culture of relativism is sure to bring us ridicule and harassment. The pendulum toward free thinking and secularism has swung to the point that celebrities and ordinary people dismiss the laws of God and even flaunt their behavior. Pride, greed, lust, laziness and other vices have their way at all levels of society. It is no surprise, then, that it is a struggle to witness our faith outside the home and sometimes even amid our family and relatives. But it is better to please the Lord than man. One pastor from South Africa summed up his struggles for justice in this manner. We will all appear before God some day and he will ask, "Where are your wounds?" And some will reply, "We have no wounds." And God will ask, "Wasn't there anything worth fighting for?"

4. A Shepherd's Heart

There was a time not too long ago when the expectations upon the laity were very minimal. Some would even joke that the laity are expected to pray, pay and obey. This is hardly a flattering way to look upon the exalted calling of a disciple of Jesus, especially when you consider the Church of the first Century. Today the doors are wide open up for lay persons to share their witness and spiritual gifts inside and outside our Church. How should a man of God bring compassion to the people he meets? I suggest with a shepherd's heart. I chose the word shepherd because of the beautiful imagery of Psalm 23, and the words of Jesus found in John 10:1-18. The heart of a shepherd is moved to serve the sheep in whatever way is needed: rest, food and water, guidance, correction, encouragement and protection. Thus the men of the Christian community, guardians of the flock, should pray for a heart like that of Jesus.

It is easy for us to become overwhelmed with the tremendous spiritual needs we find in the Church today. We cannot deny obvious facts: church attendance is down and churches are consolidating; priests are getting older with few candidates in seminaries; vowed religious are very scarce; deficit church budgets are common; the sexual abuse scandals of the clergy have hurt the faith of God's people, etc. In the midst of all this we hopeful Christians continue to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. When Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was asked by a reporter if she was discouraged that she could not help all the people on the streets of Calcutta she said, "No. I just love them one at a time." Good advice for all of us.

Disciples are expected to give loving service to the Church and society around them according to model of stewardship: time, treasure and talent. In one season of a person's life there may be more to give

than at another time. But one should always be careful not to ignore family commitments. It is good to pray for wisdom to know the call of God in our lives, and courage to fulfill our promises. There are several key passages in the New Testament which indicate the quality of community life and service that existed in the early Church before the persecutions began. I think these are normative for all times, and worthy of reflection. (Acts 2:42-47; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12 and 13; Ephesians 4:1-16.)

Closing

We are privileged to be called disciples of Jesus Christ. Each of us is unique and we have different talents and functions to fulfill in the Church. Cardinal John Henry Newman put it this way: “God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission; I have a part in a great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.” It is humbling to realize that God relies on us to bring his kingdom to earth. The frame of mind we should have is captured nicely in the prophet Micah 6:8: **“This is what the Lord requires of you: to do what is right, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.”**

St. Joseph is the patron saint for the Guardian of the Redeemer Catholic Men’s fellowship. Though the Gospels portray him as a silent witness, his actions speak volumes about his faith and dependence upon God for what he was asked to do as a husband and foster father. May St. Joseph help us to be better men, better disciples of Jesus, who bring God’s love to a troubled world, one person at a time.

Recommended Reading

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*
Cassaude, Jean-Pierre, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*
Ciszek, Walter, *He Leadeth Me* and *With God in Russia* (autobiography)
Dulles, Cardinal Avery, *Models of the Church*
Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*
Green, Thomas, *When the Well Runs Dry* and *Darkness in the Marketplace*
Kelley, Bennet, *Spiritual Direction According to St. Paul of the Cross*
Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*