

**Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.***

September 12, 2021.

**It is a hard decision for Christians to follow, to join oneself to God in Christ.** From the Gospel of Mark this Sunday (8:27-35), Jesus tells the disciples, ***Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*** This is our decision to move in a new direction, an act of will. In Matthew's gospel 4:16 and Isaiah 9:2, there is encouragement, ***"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."*** This illumination sets one's hopes, values, aspirations, and entire being on God.

In the July 6, 2021 (VOLUME 39/NUMBER 27) issue of **Knightline**, a weekly news for members of Knights of Columbus around the world, it tells a story of how Texas Knights make a ***"street retreat"*** with the homeless as part of their diaconate formation. Being a Permanent Deacon and a member of the Knights, the story touches my heart. No food. No money. No phone. A group of 26 men, including 22 members of the Knights hit the Austin streets in an elemental manner. For three days and two nights in March, they set aside comforts, carrying only a backpack with toiletries, medicine and a sleeping bag. They slept outdoors and made cardboard signs to beg for money to buy food. ***"When men follow the words of Jesus to take no food, no sack, no money in their belts (Mk 6:8), we have found that a great outpouring of grace takes place in their lives,"*** explained Deacon Rodriguez, associate director of the formation program and a Knight in Austin. The first such "street retreat" took place in 2003. Since 2006, this retreat experience has become an annual rite of passage required of all candidates enrolled in the diaconate formation program in the Diocese of Austin. Together with a team of three other permanent deacons, Rodriguez ate, slept and begged alongside the candidates, shepherding them through the long hours in which the men, many of whom are very successful engineers, doctors, lawyers, saw life from a new perspective. The men began each day with Mass at St. Mary Cathedral and then fanned out to intersections with their handmade cardboard signs. They met with people living in "tent cities" and ate most meals at a homeless shelter. The group also spent time together talking about their experiences and praying during a daily Holy Hour. At 10 p.m. each night they evangelized by handing out rosaries and pamphlets in Austin's busy entertainment district.

The sting of casual dismissal was the toughest part of the weekend. ***"Rejection after rejection after rejection — everybody walks past,"*** Tavarez, a Knight said, describing his experience panhandling as well as attempting to share faith and hand out rosaries. ***"It was very saddening that so many people did not care."*** Nevertheless, Tavarez found the group discussions with his fellow retreatants fruitful. *Hearing what they encountered, how God touched them, how the Holy Spirit was driving them was very inspirational,* he said. Hector Medrano, a Knight from Smithville said that living homeless for a weekend has made him rethink his relationship with material possessions. ***"All of the things that we think we need ... we don't need them,"*** he said. ***"It was a great experience. I felt like I was living as a disciple of Christ."*** An immigrant from Mexico, Medrano recounted a striking encounter he had with a homeless man who is in the process of becoming a citizen. *He told me his story coming from Slovenia to Germany and then the United States,* Medrano recalled. *"And he also told me he inherited a bad habit, which he is working on. I was so humbled because he asked me to pray with him about it, and it was just beautiful."* Kyle Hammons another Knight said the weekend retreat opened his eyes and heart to the homeless. ***"They have a voice. They cry out and who listens? As Christians, as children of God, we all need to listen to one another,"*** he said. ***"One of the most profound things from the weekend is just the simplicity of God and the fact that he is love. Being among the homeless was just such a blessing. We're***

**God's children, and we're all connected."** Although taking to the streets may seem extreme to some, Deacon Rodriguez said **"The benefits and blessings that a man discovers by relying on God's divine providence, outweigh the risks and the dangers (of being homeless people)."**

After reading the story, I wish that such street retreat would be part of our diaconate formation. As Saint Bernard said, **"There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge – that is curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others – that is vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve – that is love."** If we want to be the kind of people who lift our fingers to help others with their burdens, we must, therefore, learn to be with others, to feel with them, to put ourselves in their shoes so that we can understand their burden. **Our hearts need to have real empathy.** As we continue to grow and change as people faced with a variety of circumstances, we can lose sight of our true selves. This happens in all aspects of our lives, including our faith. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples that he himself must suffer and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts of his time. Then he will be killed and after three days, rise from the dead. Jesus later asks his disciples, the crowd, and ultimately us, two very important questions: **"Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?" (Matthew 16:26)** Or in plain language: **"What good would it do to get everything you want and lose the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"** If we live in Jesus's time, do we believe in the Jesus that will be rejected by so many and left to die on a cross, only to be resurrected? Do we believe in the ministry of suffering and self-sacrifice?

In the Gospel today, Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, **"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it."** This is clearly a different message than what we hear from the world around us and from our human nature that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. But Jesus is inviting us to unite our crosses with his making it meaningful and a source of salvation for ourselves and each other. **The cross, which is planted in the centre of our Christian living, does not lead to a life of misery but is a call to hope in the face of sufferings, which are normal part of human existence. We must accept God's way of doing things because our Lord's teaching is for real life and real life can be very difficult. But know that crosses are ladders that lead to heaven.** Let us choose to carry our cross on a daily basis, so it isn't as overwhelming. It is the little things that we do that create the tapestry of life that we look back on. They may not be noticed in the moment, but they are felt over a lifetime. I am sure the diaconate candidates in the Knightline story will remember their street retreat for life. A journey with Christ is in the way of the cross. We do not know exactly where it will lead us, but we know that we have a companion in the person of Christ. **We are invited to begin our journey with Christ. It is the decision that changes our lives.** And like the hymn says ***I have decided to follow Jesus....No turning back, no turning back.... The world behind me the cross before me, No turning back, no turning back. Though none go with me, still I will follow. Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back.***