

Fr. Budzinski from over at St. Vincent's texted me this morning and said "In one sentence, what does it mean to take up your cross?" I guess he was trying to write his homily, and I was very tempted to text him back and say "Well, for you, it would mean not being able to eat for a couple of days", but I restrained myself. His question did get me thinking, though. How could you describe it in one sentence?

I came up with this:

"Taking up your cross means being faithful to God, in general and according to your own vocation, no matter what the suffering and (and this is hard) not complaining about it."

So let's flesh this out a bit. Let's talk first about the cross and living the Christian life in general. So, for example, we are asked by God to be faithful to Him regarding the moral life. In fact, at the very core of our being, at the very heart of our conscience, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us, God has written a divine command:

"Do good, avoid evil."

By God's design, our conscience, for all of us, continually whispers this: "Do good, avoid evil."

But when temptation comes our way, something shiny is put before us, something enticing, something which would seem to give us pleasure. A great image of this is from the movie, Lord of the Rings. The ring in the movie represented sin, original sin, something shiny, something enticing, "my precious".

So taking up our cross means denying ourselves, being faithful to that voice in our conscience: "Do good, avoid evil." And this entails a certain suffering, a taking up of the cross, because we must deny our flesh, something that it wants for momentary pleasure, like gossip, anger, sexual, you could think of a thousand things.

When we give in to the temptation and ignore the voice of our conscience, it's like we throw off the cross: "I don't want that on me... I want the easy way... The cross is too hard. It's too constricting" But the easy way is not the way to heaven or to true happiness or to God. Jesus told us "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

The same could be said with our vocations. All vocations – priesthood, religious life, marriage, fatherhood, motherhood – if lived well and faithfully will involve the cross, denying one's self. Let's take an example. When things get difficult in marriage. Among all the joys and true blessings in marriage, I know, from all the confessions I've heard and from the annulment cases I've read, that in

every marriage there are difficulties. Maybe some of you are thinking “Father, you have no idea!” Okay, fair enough, but I have some idea. Being faithful means **continuing** to learn to love, to forgive, to bear with, to put yourself in several places many times, to be patient, and so on. In a word, it means the cross, denying one's self.

The one who throws off the cross is the one who tries to find an easier way: another relationship, maybe, which seems more exciting and less work. Or when a marriage becomes difficult, sometimes one draws into isolation, spending hours and hours on video games, Facebook, or worse, trying to escape the hard work and self-denial which a flourishing marital relationship takes.

Now we might ask ourselves: “Why would I want to do that anyway?”, “Why not take the easy way?” Well, for one, the easy way leads to hell, but Jesus gives us an even deeper reason, a reason which goes against what the world tells us we should do.

The world tells us “If you want to be happy, look out for #1. If you want to be happy, do what you want to do.”

And Jesus says “That’s not how it is. If you want life, if you want to save your life, you must lose it. You must deny what temptation tells you. You must not follow the easy way. If you want to have true life, you have to carry the cross, with Me. And as you walk the road with my cross on your back, you will find that you are truly living and it will lead you to eternal life.”

All of us at times try to avoid the cross in our lives. So we have a constant need for Jesus to teach us how better to carry the cross. And we can measure how we are doing by seeing how much we might be complaining, as I mentioned at the beginning. Complaining in the midst of our struggles is a sign that we have not fully embraced the cross.

And when our cross seems too heavy, we have to remember that we don’t carry it alone – we carry it with Jesus, who is our helper and our strength and near to us most especially when we carry the cross.

**Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2012.**