

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 15, 2018

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

I recently read a story about a young man who was hiking the Appalachian Trail in the eastern United States last spring. The journey is months long and is only advisable for the most skilled and strongest hikers. Leading up to his hike, the young man had purchased the lightest equipment available and had invested in the best hiking boots available. When the time came for his hike, he set out from Springer Mountain, Georgia, with several fellow hikers who would keep track of each other along the way. As he began his journey, he imagined what it would be like when he finished: five months later he would look back on the trail from Mount Katahdin in Maine and exclaim, "The world is mine!" or "I'm on top of the world!" or something similar.

However, by the time he reached Iron Mountain in Tennessee, a month into his trek, there were problems. A blister on his left foot which started off small had grown and become sore and infected. Having no other options, the young man saw a doctor who prescribed antibiotics for the infection and warned him to slow things down. He could no longer hike long days and he slipped into despair as he saw his dream of completing the hike fade away.

Perhaps each of us can see a bit of ourselves in this young man's story. We pray, we go to Mass, we even come to God when we are in need, yet we tend to think that we are in charge, that we are the "masters of our destiny." Too often we make plans to forge ahead on our own, relying solely on our own powers and resources, only to fall victim to our weaknesses and see our dreams fade away.

Like the young man in this story, at times, perhaps each of us needs to reduce our inflated sense of ourselves and acknowledge that, no matter what we may want, what really matters is our Lord's will for our lives. We may start with big plans, but eventually we must acknowledge our dependence on our Lord and follow His plan for our lives, for this is what is going to lead to eternal life.

Just a few moments ago, in our Gospel reading, we heard our Lord tell His disciples, *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.*¹ My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our Lord does not disguise the fact that wholehearted obedience to God's will calls for self-sacrifice and renunciation of the things that the world holds up as important. However, Jesus doesn't leave us on our own to figure out what this means; rather, He gives us the perfect example of what it means to follow God's will. Our Lord obeyed the will of His Father even, *unto death, death on a cross.*²

As we are called to follow this example, we must shed our own desires and our own self-centered goals, and so "die" to ourselves so that we may more perfectly unite our will to that of the Father and follow Christ as His disciples by serving those around us. After all, there is no better way to follow our Lord than to give of yourself freely, out of love for others. The Letter of Saint James that we have just heard in our second reading makes clear that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-18). We must put our faith into practice if it is to be alive.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of The Work, also known as Opus Dei, points to this very reality in a homily of his in which he said:

To remind a Christian that his life is meaningless unless he obeys God's will does not mean separating him from other men. On the contrary, the commandment God gives us is to love others as He has loved us, which in most cases means living alongside the rest of men and being their equals, giving ourselves to the service of our Lord in the world so as to make everyone know better the love of God.³

This, my dear brothers and sisters, is the vocation to which our Lord calls us: to be models of His love to a world that could not be more in need of it.

In light of this reality, the question that we must ask ourselves is: Are we ready to try to make our lives a model and example of Christ's love to those around us? Are we ready to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ, to all of those whom we encounter? I hope that we can all answer this with a resounding "Yes!" If, however, we cannot, let us ever more fervently dedicate ourselves to the process of "dying" to ourselves so that we may be born again to a new life in Christ. For our Lord Jesus, obeyed in this way, even unto death on a cross, and God exalted Him. So too, will the crosses that we bear certainly lead to our own resurrection and exaltation in the gift of eternal life.

As we prepare to receive our Lord in Holy Communion, let us ask our Father for the grace that we need to take up our crosses and follow Him as His disciples in spite of our weaknesses and personal shortcomings, and, in this way, be witnesses of His love to those around us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Mark 8:34-35

² Philippians 2:8

³ St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By* (New York, NY: Scepter, 1973).