

He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me.¹

Our Divine Savior often speaks of many demanding and difficult things. He has many hard sayings, some of which are not only difficult to practice, but difficult to understand. And sometimes, what He says is so disturbing, that we find Him hard to take. Simply listening to His words can be difficult.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; / it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. [...] if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; / it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where [the] worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mk 9:43–49).

Jesus' preaching disturbed more than just a few people. Many could not bear it. Saying that they must *eat* His flesh and *drink* His blood, was just too much. They objected and said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (Jn 6:60).

¹ "I tell you that you have less to suffer in following the cross than in serving the world and its pleasures." St. John Vianney

Scripture says, "...his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him" (Jn 6:66). All but the twelve Apostles left Him. Although Peter must have been as bewildered by Jesus as anyone else, he knew one thing. When Jesus asked, "Will you also go away?" Peter replied:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God (Jn 6:68–69).

The words of eternal life, and the Holy One of God, Himself, are present, living and active in the Church, which He founded. This too is a hard saying. After all, there are scandals and evil men in the Church, both laity and clergy alike. | Do you remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds? The good and the bad remain together until the Lord returns (Mt 13:24-30). And recall the parable of the master who put his

servants in charge of His house. The master is Jesus, the servants are us clergy, and the house is His Church. When the master returned, and found those in charge engaging in evil deeds, he severely punished them. Jesus says of the worst one among them, that the master will, "...cut him to pieces and assign him in a place with the unbelievers (Lk (12:47). | And there are also false teachers among us in the Church. Jesus says of them,

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Mt 7:15–10:16).

Can we begin to see that our Lord warned us about all of these things? And He experienced these things Himself with the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter, along with the rest of the Apostles who abandoned Him.

The mystery of the Church is, perhaps, the Lord's hardest teaching – difficult to understand, hard to accept, a

teaching that many find too difficult to bear. According to St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, our Lord established the Church on the foundation of the Apostles, with Himself, Jesus, as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). Jesus reveals Himself as the Church's founder, when he says to the Apostles, "I will build my Church" (Mt 16:18). And He promises that the Church will prevail, even against the powers of hell. He gives Peter, a mere man, the keys to the kingdom. He also gives to him, and to the other Apostles, the authority to loose and to bind (Matt 18:19). It is even more difficult to comprehend, that He gives these same men the authority to forgive sins or to hold them bound (John 20:23). He then commissions them to go forth in His name and to teach the world everything that He has commanded, and to Baptize for the salvation of souls (Mk 16:15). Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit, who will guide them to all truth (Jn 16:13).

This is all quite remarkable, to say the least, and it ought to totally amaze us. Is it really surprising that many walk away from the Church? The mystery of the Church is one of our Lord's most difficult teachings. It is, indeed, hard to bear. Jesus founded a visible Church and put such men, like the Apostles, in charge of it. But not only that, the Church is often led by men who are even less competent and worthy than the Apostles were, and some have been downright evil.

In addition to all of this, the very teachings of Christ, which come to us through the Church, are also difficult for many to bear. These days, the most contentious of these teachings concern morality, in particular, sexual morality. Sexual relations, of any kind, which are outside the marriage of one man and one woman, are gravely immoral. So is contraception, artificial insemination, invitro fertilization, the commercialization of human seed, freezing embryos, so-called

“sex changes”, abortion and the buy and selling their remains. And this is not the whole list of atrocities that pervert the meaning and purpose of human sexuality and attack the dignity of the human person.

The Church, in many of her members, is in the midst of a serious crisis of faith and morals. So is our society, and most, if not all, of the Western world. Who could have imagined that since the close of the second Vatican Council, less than 60 years ago, that we would find ourselves in this situation? Who could have predicted the sad state of affairs today in the Catholic Church, in Germany, and elsewhere?

What are we to do? How does the Lord want us to respond to all of this? Jesus sums it all up in a warning:

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And so, we must suffer through all of this as Christ suffered throughout His sojourn on earth. We must remain faithful as

Christ remained faithful, even unto death. In the words of St. Peter, “Christ [...] suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (1 Pe 2:21). Any other way is not from God.

And so, we must stand firm in faith. We must reject the temptation to discouragement, whether because of evil in the world or because of our sins. We must avoid schisms and hateful rebellions. You can be certain that these things are from the devil.

What are we to do? Stay close to Holy Scripture, let it be your daily bread. Hold fast to the Apostolic Tradition that has come down to us from Jesus and the Apostles (2 Thess 2:15). In this Tradition, you will find preserved all that the Church *is* and all that she *possesses* from her Lord. Open your

heart to the grace of the Holy Mysteries, particularly, Confession and Holy Eucharist. And with all of your strength, avoid sin, and strive to be virtuous and holy.² If you sin gravely, then, be the Parodical son and run back to God. Entrust yourself to the mercy of your Father in heaven and He will embrace you. Every one of you, without exception, is to be a saint. This transformation of your soul, by the grace of God, starts now, in this life. | Don’t anyone of you dare to say that you can’t be a saint! Think of what that would mean? My friends, there are only saints in heaven.

Our situation is nothing new. It’s as ancient as the Church herself. And Jesus told us about these things.

I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!

² “With the help of grace, they grow in virtue, avoid sin, and if they sin, they entrust themselves as did the prodigal son to the mercy of our Father

in heaven. In this way they attain to the perfection of charity” (Catechism 1700).

He has overcome the world! Do you believe Him? | We must remain faithful to Him as He teaches us and saves us, through the Church that He, Himself, has founded. Let us take to heart, then, the words of the Holy Apostle, St. Peter:

Humble yourselves...under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pe 5:6–11).