

A Disciple Of Christ Must Give Up All His Possessions

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'And indeed, which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, if he laid the foundation and then found himself unable to finish the work, the onlookers would all start making fun of him and saying, "Here is a man who started to build and was unable to finish". Or again, what king marching to war against another king would not first sit down and consider whether with ten thousand men he could stand up to the other who advanced against him with twenty thousand? If not, then while the other king was still a long way off, he would send envoys to sue for peace. So in the same way, none of you can be My disciple unless he gives up all his possessions.' (LK 14:28-33)

The disciples of Christ are asked to realize that all that they are, and all that they have, are assets to be used to express love, and to grow in love. Someone who really loves another asks for nothing more than to be able to use their time, talents, and resources, to benefit the one they love. How much more should the Christian hunger to burn himself out in the service of God. If a Christian is careful to see to his own essential physical, psychological, and spiritual needs, it is because these are assets to be built up and used in the loving service of God, and of other people for God's sake. Every Christian should hope that, should he be able to serve God better by sacrificing even those things men usually regard as essential, he would do so. As grace builds on nature, and perfects it, it is not usual for God to ask for such heroic acts, but rather a life of loving, faithful, service. Since a man's possessions are a type of extension of his natural talents they play an important part in his growth in love. Christ teaches us that we must stop looking on material possessions as 'ours to do what we like with' and must come to see them as His. When we respond to the love of God, revealed to us in Christ, we respond by giving Him all that we are and all that we possess.

Through various examples in the New Testament it is clear that there are three ways in which a disciple of Christ may answer the call to give up all his possessions:

The first is by seeing his possessions as things that are not his absolutely, but as things given to him in trust by God. They are assets to be used wisely, for his own benefit, and that of others, as the spirit of love dictates. This is the absolute minimum required of a disciple of Christ. Christ clearly teaches that each will be called to give an account of the way he has fulfilled his trust. Finding excuses to avoid one's responsibilities in this matter is likely to have eternally disastrous consequences.

The second way is to form communities of Catholics in which everything is held in common. Catholics are called to love one another for Christ's sake. The example of the family, of the early Church and of the religious orders down the centuries illustrates the fact that one of the most common expressions of love is to live in community with those loved. There is strong evidence in the scriptures and in the life of the early Church that such communities were intended by Christ to be the rule and not the exception.

The third, and the most rare, is total poverty. Some have been called to undertake this in every age for the love of God and the salvation of souls. Everyone's calling in life is a grace of God. It is the teaching of some of the holiest and greatest of the Church's teachers, for example St. Alphonsus Liguori, that anyone who fails to respond to that grace makes his salvation difficult, if not impossible. The call to total poverty requires that a person own nothing personally, but makes do with the bare essentials which are obtained through some sort of labour or provided by the generosity of others. From a practical point of view such a person might be called to dedicate their life to prayer or to go from place to place teaching others the way to God. In any case the example of such a life provides a striking reminder of the primacy of spiritual things and the passing nature of material things.

All those who wish to be disciples of Christ must seek God's Will on which of the above three ways they are called to renounce their possessions. The fact that others are ignoring this obligation is no excuse. Each must render his own account to God, therefore each must have the courage to face the call of the Gospel and must not hide behind the ignorance, or apathy, of others. The example of the kings going out to war, that is quoted above, is intended to illustrate the point that it is no good starting something you are unable to finish. The point being that if you refuse to renounce your possessions you will not have what is required to fully live out God's Will in your life. Lacking that total commitment of yourself, and your possessions, to the love and service of God, you are certain to lose the battle of life. Think about this carefully. It is your eternal salvation that is at stake. It is not that God wants to reject you. It is you who may be prepared to prefer selfishness and greed to God.

APPENDIX

A word of caution

Fear hinders a person's effectiveness. Nothing is to be gained by needless anxiety. There are those who may never get to do much about the teachings outlined above. This can happen without any guilt on their part. There may be some who are married to a partner who does not agree with such ideas. They are already committed to their partner and their children. They cannot desert their family, nor can they simply set aside the demands of the Gospel. A balance is necessary. Part of that balance is to love partner and children, to pray for them, and to talk things over with them. Another part of the balance is to do what they can in their own lives. There may be others who have great personal problems. One result of this might be a great dependence on material goods. God understands. A person can only do his best. There are, no doubt, other cases as well.

There are others, however, who are not limited by such obstacles. It is these who need to do some very serious soul-searching.

REFERENCES

To avoid breaks in the discussion, reference to supporting evidence is given below.

Reference to support the idea of seeing the things of this world as a type of trust given to you by God to be used primarily for his greater glory, your own spiritual growth and the good of others:

cf. Luke 12:16-21; Luke 6:36-38; Luke 16:9-13; Luke 12:33-34; Matt. 25: 31-46; The documents of the Second Vatican Council, The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), Article 69.

Reference to forming communities and holding goods in common:

cf. Acts 2:42-47; James 2:15-17; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 2 Cor. 9:6-15. For an excellent study of the community nature of the early Church: "THE CHURCH, COMMUNITY, LEAVEN, AND LIFE-STYLE", Max Delespesse, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, U.S.A. 1973.

For references to the vocation of total poverty: cf. Matt. 19:16-30; Matt. 8:18-22. "THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS", by Brother Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria, A Doubleday Image Book, D69.

For St. Alphonsus Ligouri's teaching on the need to follow God's call in order to be saved:

"THE GREAT MEANS OF SALVATION AND PERFECTION", The Ascetical Works Vol. 3, Edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, published by the Redemptorist Fathers, Brooklyn U.S.A. 1927. See pages 381-383 and following.

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