

The Difficult Call of the Gospel: To Place Our Faith in Christ

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Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" . . . He (Jesus) said to them, "It is the spirit who gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe."

—Excerpt from the Gospel of the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (John 6:60, 62–63)

LIVING THE FAITH PROFESSED

This Gospel text stops me in my tracks. In this quote from John, I realize my distance from true conversion, opening my fragile heart to the reality and grace of God. Sometimes, I set a trap for myself focusing on my sin, brokenness, and failure, rather than basking in the glory, love, and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. The Gospel on the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time provides ministers of the Eucharist guidance toward what we are truly seeking: intimacy, communion, and forgiveness in Christ the Lord. Indeed, the Spirit gives a life of wild growth and immense imagining, unhinging all of the traps we set. Some of us fall short in believing in such a mystery. The challenge throughout our summer months of the Gospel readings is to live more honestly the faith we profess.

Last year, as I prayed one of the prayers of the Mass that the priest prays inaudibly, I had an experience that has formed my faith and conscience ever since. Just prior to receiving Communion, I felt deeply connected to God as I focused on the following text:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
who, by the will of the Father
and the work of the Holy Spirit,
through your Death gave life to the world,
free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood,
from all my sins and from every evil;
keep me always faithful to your commandments,
and never let me be parted from you.

As I stood at the altar with great intention, my heart opened. The words of the prayer filled my soul and it seemed as



The prayers of the Mass invite us to allow ourselves to be open to the grace Christ offers.

though my newly inflated soul fell into the lap of Jesus. For a moment, I was enveloped in Jesus alone as I felt absorbed in love. I felt in every pore, in every breath, in every place in my heart, that I belonged there and did not need to be anywhere else.

Ever since that experience, I have been deeply drawn into the prayers that priests whisper to God alone during the Eucharist. I have spoken under my breath those written texts for more than thirty-five years. In the early years of priesthood, it

did not make sense to me to pray these prayers inaudibly before the assembly.

I realize that these prayers provide a deep awareness of humility for me. Whispering them into the heart of God might be the only truth I pray all day. I have really no place to hide if my heart lands in the secret place of Christ in the Eucharist. If I ignore these prayers, perhaps I am only hiding from myself and the divine grace to convert all that is still hidden, all that is in need of conversion or change within my life.

As a priest, even the Mass can be a place of hiding. People's complaints, awkward conversations, and the rush to replace ministers who did not show up, all become sores that I carry down the aisle to begin Eucharist. Even liturgical garments can easily turn into protective armor from what God is doing in my life, since I can easily hide behind a role. The ritual, as a repetition of words, can become a shield against the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The ritual can be done quite apart from my heart, or any priest's heart. It can be easy for the mind to wander into matters other than the prayers of the Mass. I can easily focus on my inconsistencies in life. So often within the Mass, I ignore that the love that is being offered is for me as well as the assembled.

EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

On that day, in the secret whispers of those prayers, I realized throughout my entire body how arrogant I am as God's servant. Perhaps I have never allowed Jesus to capture me, to find a home within me, to sip tea with my sin and heartache. When I sipped from the Cup of Salvation, I understood so deeply I need Christ. In my well-defended life, I was opened to realize that the Cup is never empty or diminished by my hardness, sin, or failure. Jesus and I are one in this moment.

That moment at Mass was a deep and profound experience of conversion. I heard Jesus say to me that he hears my whispers, my cries to him, my need for something more in my life. In those hidden texts, I experienced Jesus' voice that he will not be hidden to me, that he desires to love me and that is no secret. He promised me that his ear is in my heart and that he will always catch me in the freefall.

The Christian life is not easy to live or even to witness in our day. One obstacle to living out this mystery is that we sometimes think it is up to us to put faith into practice. We cannot live such a vital reality on our own. The ways in which we serve God come from grace and wisdom, from the very initiative of love. We experience our need for God on the harsh ground of our stubbornness, obstinacy, and our desire to always be correct. We experience passion for God when even what we have learned in our studies in graduate school, or from years of common prayer, seems dusty.

Often, the Christian life is not lived with vitality, wonder, and abandon. Liturgical ministers and priests may stumble over how to live the fully converted life, the full awareness of God's love for us, because it is easy not to allow ourselves to be fully alive in the Paschal Mystery. The rich source of connection to others that God's mercy provides can be ignored. While forming parishioners in the faith, parish staff and liturgical ministers can forget to nurture their faith. We can be so busy tending to God's people that we miss Jesus Christ in our lives.

BECOMING OPEN TO THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

As pastoral musicians, liturgists, and priests, our role is to avail ourselves to the mystery of Jesus Christ that we celebrate in the Eucharist. In my years of pastoral ministry, I see how we can stumble over proclaiming authentic Church teaching while hiding from the forgiveness, love, and mercy that Jesus has for us. When we have an authentic encounter with Christ Jesus, other people will be drawn more deeply into the Breaking of the Bread and the sharing of our lives in Christ.

A common awareness is needed of how Jesus Christ is working, forgiving, and acting within our lives and the lives of our people. This is where we need open dialogue, honest conversations, and faith-filled sharing. I regret not having deeper conversations with the next generation of priests, because I still have more to offer since God is still converting my heart into something that is beautiful and life-giving for the Church. I desire to listen to those who will be in leadership in the years to come. Every generation of priests needs to understand that the Holy Spirit is active, engaging, and transforming. The Holy Spirit is at work, especially in these years of transition, in this era of complex questions about the future of the Catholic Church.

The sayings and teachings of Jesus are quite difficult if we believe that we need to absorb them and live them all in one time and in only one generation. My experience of leading people at the Eucharist for all of these years reveals to me that God is never finished with us, there is more to come, there are new horizons that open to us when we move closer to living the mystery we celebrate. The best part is that we do not live any of this on our own, but in the gracious gift of Jesus' love for his people.

Our legacy in this generation is to surrender to the love God has for us. This is a far-reaching mystery that is well beyond the work of any generation of liturgical ministers. This is our greatest risk, to move into the direction of the Spirit, who gives life, hope, and meaning now and in the generations to come. We are called to risk our reputations, our assignments, and our egos for the glory that rises up within our lives. This is called faith. When we let go of our pride, our rigidity, and our negative behaviors, we can find within us the love that our souls desire, the words that are Spirit and life. ♦

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