

HOMILY for 23rd SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME - Year C

This Sunday's Gospel talks about building; as I reflect on it, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect, had designed a home for a client. Shortly after the home had been built, the client called Mr. Wright & said, "Mr. Wright, you know that home that you built for me? The roof is leaking & the basement is full of water. What shall I do?"

To which Mr. Wright replied, "Try to rise above it!"

Anyway, each religion picks a symbol and puts it at the center of its worship places to let the world know about its core beliefs. That religious symbol summarizes what the religion is all about. If we come in a Buddhist Temple, we'll find a huge statue of Buddha sitting in a prominent place. That statue tells all the visitors of the Temple that this religion is about imitating Buddha & finding time to sit in that meditating position like him to find peace. Meanwhile, if we make our way into a Jewish Synagogue, we'll see a Hanukkah menorah at the center of this worship place. This seven-branched candelabrum would be lit to commemorate the Hanukkah miracle, in which Judah Maccabee expelled the invading forces from the Temple of Jerusalem. Maccabee & his followers sought oil for the temple's menorah so that the sanctuary could be rededicated, but they found only enough oil for a single day. Miraculously, that tiny amount of oil burned for eight days until a new supply could be obtained. The Hanukkah menorah includes a candle for each day the oil burned plus a "servant candle" being used to light the others. That's what we'll find in a Jewish Synagogue & a Buddhist Temple.

But, if we enter a Christian Church, we'll always find a Cross in the front & center of this worship place. But, why does the Christian Church pick the Cross instead of a triumphant symbol like the resurrection of Jesus to stand for its beliefs? What is the significant spiritual meaning of the Cross? One of the reasons for the Christian Church to put the Cross at the center of its worship center is to remind the world about the ultimate love & sacrifice that its leader made for its followers. The Cross also opens the Gate of Heaven for the world & challenges its followers to make the same sacrifice for their neighbors. Another reason for the Cross to be at the center of the Christian life is pointed out in today's Gospel. Here's what Jesus said about it, "If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father & mother, his wife & his children, his brothers & sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. Anyone who does not take up his Cross & follow me cannot be my disciple."

Jesus evidently advises all of his disciples to take up their Crosses & follow in His footsteps. Those Crosses might come in different shapes & forms. One of those Crosses would be to leave behind our families, friends, & everyone who means a lot to us & embrace only Jesus. That's why some have wanted to come home to say goodbye to their families & ended up remaining there. They could not leave their loved ones and follow Jesus. Another Cross would be to give up all the worldly possessions & power & embrace Jesus instead. That's why a rich young man found it difficult to do that & turn away from Jesus in the end. I'm sure there're other Crosses that the disciples of Jesus would have to face every day on their journey with Him. Many would have to control their ways of life & adopt a new lifestyle of Jesus. They would have to sacrifice a life of pleasure & lawlessness & embrace the one of discipline & commandments. All the disciples of Jesus would need to follow in His footsteps & embrace a good prayer life. That's another Cross that they would need to carry every day. For Jesus was

often reported to find time & a place for Himself to pray despite his busy schedule. The followers of Jesus are also taught to love their neighbors, including their enemies. This Cross is indeed not easy for them to carry as they might have to deal with difficult people or, anyone who might be mean & nasty to them. I'm sure you can come up with other Crosses that the Christians have to face on their journey with Jesus.

The last part of today's Gospel wants us to pause & consider if we'll have enough strength to finish our journey of faith with Jesus. If not, we'll have to figure out another way to complete it. Or, we'll need to negotiate with Him to help us out somehow. We're given two examples for that – one is in peace time & another in war time. Both call us to think through the entire journey of faith & see how we can finish it as we have agreed to be the disciples of Jesus. Otherwise, we'd look absolutely foolish for abandoning Him halfway through that journey.

One of the main reasons for people to abandon their journey of faith with Jesus is because the Cross might be unexpected and too overwhelming for them to carry. They might face a tragedy in their lives & think that God has abandoned them. If you've ever had a loved one taken away from you suddenly, you'd know how heavy that Cross is. You would be angry with God & wonder why God would do that to you. You would feel lost & confused about that plan of God. You would question God's love & presence in your life. You would wonder why God would take that good person from your life while leaving many bad & mean people around you to enjoy their lives on earth. Here's how today's First Reading explains your bewilderment about that loss & Cross: "For what human knows about God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends? ...And scarce do we guess the things on earth, & what is within our grasp we find with difficulty; but when things are in Heaven, who can search them out? Or, who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom & sent the Holy Spirit from on high?" As you can see, no one can figure out God's plan & understand God's intentions. That's what makes unexpected tragedies in our lives more difficult to accept. That's what makes the Crosses of our life too heavy for us to carry at times. That's why some of us might not want to continue our journey of faith with Jesus any more.

My dear brothers & sisters, our lives are full of Crosses. Some of them are unexpected & quite heavy for us to carry all by ourselves. However, we're expected to carry them & follow Jesus if we want to be His disciples & enter Heaven someday. For the road to Heaven is paved with Crosses. If Jesus could complete His journey of the Cross & return to Heaven, we surely could do the same. All we need to do is ask Him to help us carry our Crosses & finish our faith journey with Him.