

23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (September 4, 2022)

Is Jesus serious? Does he really mean we can't claim to be his disciple unless we actually hate our parents, family, others... ourselves?? This may be another candidate for 'most misunderstood gospel passage'. When we hear 'hate', we think of really despising someone, wishing them harm, wanting nothing whatsoever to do with them. Jesus obviously does not mean 'hate' in that sense—after all, how often did he command us to 'love your neighbor as yourself', 'love one another as I have loved you', and even 'love your enemy'?

No—Jesus here uses the strong word 'hate' to underline the fact that God is and must be the first and foremost focus of our love, God who created and redeemed us in the first place. He means, as one author noted, that 'we cannot be half-hearted when it comes to loving God'. Once we have God as our absolutely first 'priority-of-love', then we will truly be able to love all others in the way Jesus commands. Bishop Barron, our new neighbor to the north in the Rochester-Winona Diocese, tells us that making God our first and only focus of worship brings about a harmony within ourselves from which 'proceeds a harmony with the things and people around us' and which then enables us to truly love others, make the gift of ourselves to others, as we should.

What does this kind of love look like in action? The saints give us wonderful examples, and one of our own contemporaries gives us an especially powerful and beautiful example of this kind of love; I speak of St. Teresa of Calcutta. She died 25 years ago tomorrow, September 5 (which is now her feast day on the Church's calendar as well), and she was canonized by Pope Francis in 2016. We have been reflecting recently on the importance of having and fostering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and Mother Teresa—St. Teresa—has much to teach us about what that looks like in the real world.

When we think of St. Teresa, we probably first think about her direct, hands-on personal service to the poorest of the poor, the most neglected and ignored, the most forgotten. But her desire, resolve and ability to do so came first and most importantly from her absolute love of Christ. She always offered a Holy Hour of prayer in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, a practice continued by the Missionaries of Charity (the order that she founded). She explained why: "...we find that through our daily Holy Hour, our love of Jesus becomes more intimate, our love for each other more understanding, and our love for the poor more compassionate.' In other words, her first 'priority-of-love' for Jesus, fostering that very personal relationship of loving familiarity with him, led directly and necessarily to her loving service of the poorest among us.

Does that kind of personal relationship with Jesus mean that St. Teresa never experienced any pain or suffering or frustration? Not at all! She wasn't exempt from such things in the least. In fact, for many years she experienced a great darkness and dryness in her spiritual and prayer life, even to the point of at times feeling abandoned by God that led to great suffering on her part which she kept to herself. Someone once asked Mother Teresa "Are you married?" Her answer: "Yes, and I find it sometimes very difficult to smile at Jesus because he can be very demanding." I think that response is both wonderful and reassuring—she reminds us of something else Jesus said in today's gospel: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my

disciple.” He never once promised an easy, comfortable, pain-free life for anyone; Jesus can indeed be ‘very demanding’! But love by its very definition is demanding; it calls us to make the gift of ourselves to another for the sake of the other and regardless of the cost or benefit (or lack thereof!) to ourselves, and regardless of whether the other even knows or appreciates what we have done. Jesus himself is the ultimate example of that kind of love; a thoughtful and prayerful gaze on the crucifix will remind us of that saving truth.

So was St. Teresa so high above us in her life of both prayer and service that we cannot hope to follow her example? Not at all. No, we are not all called to join the Missionaries of Charity, but we are all called to love and our first love is and must be God. Prayer is and has to be at the heart of our relationship with God, and St. Teresa has some wonderfully practical advice on prayer; for example: *’You can pray while you work. Work doesn’t stop prayers and prayer doesn’t stop work. It requires only that small raising of the mind to him: I love you God, I trust you, I believe in you, I need you now. Small things like that...are wonderful prayers.’*

The more we remember Jesus and speak to him in such a genuine, intimate and personal way, the stronger will be our personal relationship with him...and thus the more will we be open to where he wants to take us and to do what he asks of us. That’s one very important way that St. Teresa was able to do the amazing work of love she did and that her Missionaries of Charity continue to do around the world. St. Teresa, please pray for all of us that we will pray and love as Jesus wants of us as you did so faithfully and generously in your life in this world.