

The Gospel readings these past Sundays form a thematic trilogy. Two Sundays ago, the Lord told us to strive to enter the narrow door. Being narrow, it involves not only great effort, but also bending down low. So, in last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus taught us of the absolute necessity of the virtue of humility. But one thing more is needed. The narrow gate will not allow us to bring in any extra baggage. So, this Sunday, the Lord tells us: "Every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:33). And to make sure we are admitted, we have to show the distinctive sign of membership, namely, the cross: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow after me cannot be my disciple." (Lk 14:27).

Being a Christian involves two basic movements: come and go. At all times, Jesus invites us: "Come to me! Follow me!" And after following him, he will send us on a mission: "Go, and proclaim the Good News!" In both movements, our reply should be "yes" so that God's plan will be realized. God initiates the call, but we have the last word: "Yes!"

"Yes" is a word that is so easy to pronounce. But, in the Gospel this Sunday, Jesus advises us against being too hasty in our response. It would be totally embarrassing if we quickly say yes now, and later on we change our mind. This is why Jesus gave the two parables about prudence and foresight. A man planning to build a tower must calculate carefully if he has enough money and resources to finish the project. The king marching forward to wage battle with another king must also make sure he has enough men to win the battle. In both cases, careful study, planning and preparation are essentially needed.

When one decides to buy a house, he should not immediately sign the contract. Instead, he has first to evaluate his capacity to pay the down payment and the monthly mortgage for the next thirty years. The same is true with the decision to follow Jesus. We must beforehand have an honest assessment of our capacity and willingness to pay the cost of discipleship.

In the first place, to say "yes" to Jesus means deliberately putting him as the center and the top priority of our life. This is what the Lord meant when he said: "If any one comes to me without hating his father or mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). Discipleship requires putting Jesus over and above our family, job, money, career, and even our life. A classic example of this are the sisters Venus and Serena Williams. They loved each other, but at one time they had to 'hate' each other. It was at the 2001 US Open Tennis Championship. At that moment on the court, they 'hated' each other, recognizing that the sister

stands in the way to the prestigious US Open trophy. As Christians, are we willing to “hate” our loved one who obstructs us from attaining the trophy of eternal glory that Jesus offers?

Secondly, following Jesus requires that we bear our cross patiently. The cross is the key that opens the narrow door to God’s kingdom. Nowadays, many people reject the cross. They abhor sacrifice and sufferings, and would rather run after money, comfort and luxury. When big profit is before our eyes, will the virtue of honesty still be appealing to us? As the saying goes, “when money talks, the truth is silent.”

And finally, following Jesus demands total freedom from the things of this world. Life is a long and arduous journey to our eternal home. Carrying humungous loads on the road will surely slow us down and distract us from our goal. That is why Jesus insisted: “Every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions, you cannot be my disciple.” But is it possible for us to let go of the things we hold so dear, things that we acquired through honest sweat and toil? It is never easy. That is why our cabinets are filled up with lots of personal things that we do not use anymore, and yet we are unwilling to let go due to “sentimental” reasons.

In essence, these three conditions are an invitation for us to authentic love and worship of God by rejecting the three common forms of idolatry. The first idolatry is love of creatures. Jesus reminds us to love God more than our family and any human being. The second idolatry is love of money and material things. The Lord demands renunciation of these things. And the third is love of self, giving in to the temptations of comfort, luxury and pleasure. Jesus invites us instead to take up our cross and follow the way of self-sacrificial love.

The U.S. Marine Corps undergo the most rigorous training and discipline. This is to prepare them for the demands and dangers in the battlefield. They are inspired and guided by their motto, “Semper Fidelis” (Always Faithful). As Christians, we are the Marine Corps of Jesus – brave, determined and faithful until the end – “semper fidelis”. Our “yes” to Jesus ultimately means we are willing to pay the price of following him – even at the cost of our own life. A song by the Charismatic Renewal Movement beautifully expresses this: “I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back. The cross before me, the world behind me; no turning back, no turning back.”