

## Commentary to the 21 Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Oh, poor us, poor us,” they moaned. “This is all so hard,” they complained. “We are questioned for our beliefs, and we are often outright persecuted for our faith. Oh, poor us, poor us. We go to the market place and can’t buy the best meat because it was part of a pagan sacrifice. Oh, poor us, poor us. Our parents and grandparents were so excited by this new faith, this Christianity, but we are not all that excited. We put up with it though, just in case it is right. But it is such a struggle to be Christians. Oh, poor us, poor us.”

The people doing the complaining were those to whom today’s second reading was addressed. These were Christians of Hebrew background living throughout the Roman Empire. Their fellow Jews had ostracized them. The pagan Romans were sporadically persecuting them. The original apostles were all dead, most of them killed by the Romans. And it seemed that each new leader of a Church in this or that city, particularly in Rome, were given a death sentence by being made bishop. Eleven of the original twelve were martyred. Ignatius from the second largest city in the Empire, Antioch, had been fed to the beasts in the Colosseum. The first thirty-one Bishops of Rome, the first thirty-one popes, were put to death. Now there were rumors that Christians would be persecuted throughout the empire. The people to whom the Letter to the Hebrews was addressed also complained that they couldn’t join in with the festivals of the people of their country. They were told that they couldn’t be Christians and live like pagans. So these Hebrews complained.

“Knock it off,” says the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. “Shore up your drooping arms and firm up your knocking knees.” Their body language showed how they felt. “Stop moping around,” Hebrews says. “Instead, trust in God. If you are called to be a witness to God with your life, it will unite you closer to Him than you could ever imagine.” Only a relative few would become martyrs in that way. Most of them were called to give witness to Christ by the way they lived their lives.



So, would this living of the Christian life be easy? No, nothing worthwhile is easy. Everything of value has its price. In today's Gospel, Jesus called the price the narrow gate. The narrow gate is not the popular gate, but it is the only one that leads to God. Many people choose the wide gate, the way that everyone seems to be going. These are the people who justify their immorality with the "everyone's doing it," mentality. Many people think that they can ignore God throughout their lives, that they can avoid sacrificing for others, that they can live in their selfishness. Simply put, they choose to live like pagans. They assume that God will not reject them when their lives come to an end, but they forget, they have already rejected God. They are not on the inside of the Banquet Hall because they have chosen to be outside the Kingdom of God.

We cannot be the people of the wide gate. We have been given the call, the grace, to enter into God's presence. But the way to get there is not easy. The gate is narrow. It demands sacrifice. It demands saying "No" to our own lower instincts. It demands saying, "No", to the popular but immoral crowd.

It is sad how we recognize the work necessary for the physical necessities of life, but we refuse to recognize the work that is necessary to attain the reason why we were created. We think that the goal of our lives, union with God, should be easy. We recognize the hard work that is necessary for a person to become a lawyer or a doctor. We know that there is no easy button to push in med school or law school. We know that even the most intelligent of our young people have to work extremely hard to receive an academic scholarship. Even in the area of sports we recognize that what might appear easy on the football field during an NFL game on Sunday is the result of months of work in the classroom, in the weight room and on the practice field. What we see on the athletic field is a culmination of lives of hard work. We tell our young athletes, "No pain, no gain." But we think that the maxim only applies to athletes, or scholars. It's deepest application is to Christianity.

We need to embrace our Christianity with enthusiasm. We need to stop complaining about our sacrifices and look to the Cross of Jesus Christ. The book of the cross is the wisdom of the Christian.

We are Catholics. We are Christians in Christianity's purest form. We have purpose and meaning and beauty in our lives. We have Jesus Christ. And He has us. Our arms cannot be drooping. They need to be raised high in praising the One who calls us. Our knees should not be knocking. They need to be high stepping, marching through that narrow gate to our God.

Then, when it comes time for the final Banquet of the Lord, when our lives come to an end, we will find ourselves inside, united to Jesus at the feast of Love that is the Eternal Union with God

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