



Allocutio



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Allocutio: Follow Christ and expect to suffer

Let us be clear. It is not going to be a case that if you follow Christ you may suffer; rather if you follow Christ you will suffer.

This became clear to Our Lady when she presented Christ in the Temple. Old Simeon who had become a friend to the Holy Spirit, took her Son in his arms and blessed God and said what seemed to be some complimentary remarks about Jesus before speaking of Jesus as a sign of contradiction and before he said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your own heart too?" And how it did? We could give many examples but all we need do is think of her at the foot of the Cross.

And what was she suffering? Her own Son who meant so much to her being put to an awful death. She knew his goodness so she felt the depth of the injustice even more. She who was faithful to Israel and its traditions suffered the rejection of her Son by the elders of Israel. And his friends had let him down too. What a sense of loneliness.

Why should it be any different for us who are not as close to Jesus as she is? As Our Lord himself said, "If the world hates me know that it will hate you too?" So let's be clear. Follow Christ and you agree to suffer. You will suffer with him and for him and because of him.

St. Ignatius, in his Spiritual Exercises, writes about Christ the Eternal King saying, "My will is to conquer the world and every enemy. Therefore all those who want to come to me will have to labour with me, so that by following me in my suffering, they may also follow me into glory".

That suffering can come in many forms. If someone knows you have faith and that you pray and that you belong to Our Lord's Church you have every possibility that you will be taunted or jeered just as you have that someone might respect your faith. I have met so many people who are belittled because of their faith. It is not easy. But never forget others are helped by your faith as may those who first taunted you.

Sometimes the opposition comes from people who are just ignorant. Their ideas of God, of faith or of the Church are inaccurate. So you have to struggle to explain and then depending on their sincerity or not they might now have cause to think. But part of your suffering is that sometimes you don't have ready answers. But you know there are answers because the Church has been around a long time and you can bet this has come up before.

Sometimes you can come across less sincere people who are cynical or out for a laugh and they are really mocking you and your faith. They are probably too immature to look at the issues with adult eyes. Best not get involved with them as it will be a waste of time and energy. Life will cause them to look deeper someday. You just pray for them.

Then you can meet those who have become prejudiced or very bitterly anti-faith or anti-Church because of their bad experiences. Arguments will not win with them. What will touch them is friendship and kindness over a long period of time such that they are caused to wonder. It may not change their outlook totally but may cause them to realise that life isn't all black and white and they may become more open to a better side of religion than their earlier experiences led them to.



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Then you have what is often the real reason why people have problems with religion. The moral challenges of Christianity and its values? This is not just to do with sex or marriage. Christianity challenges us to respect each person no matter what. Some people would rubbish others with no qualm of conscience. Others adopt attitudes like: dishonesty is right once you get away with it; finders keepers, losers weepers; whatever gives the most pleasure, whatever gives me happiness at any cost. The person who stands for strict honesty or sacrifice for others grates on such people.

Then you have that most subtle of temptations that even penetrates the Church. I put it this way: If it isn't perfect, if it has flaws, it must be dismissed. A well-known trait of many a person with an addiction is that they can also be perfectionists. They hate things not being just right. And I think that to drink or otherwise use hallucagenics can be to escape the world of reality. This is a flawed world and the humans in it lead the way. Our Lord was very in touch with reality when he said that we were to forgive our brother seventy seven times each day. But we have to live with some who would pick on your flaws. To listen to people who are critical of the flaws of Christians is one of the biggest challenges for us to cope with. What we have to say is (as in fact we do at the beginning of every Mass) "But so am I a sinner." You don't solve the problem of sin by running away from the Church but by getting more involved in its programmes for counteracting sin: prayer, sacraments, penances, etc.

In fact let us put out there the average Christian standing in the midst of us all. What will you see? A sinner, a flawed person, but someone who is working on themselves so that the image and life of Christ grows more and more in them despite their shortcomings. Authentic Christians do not believe but are highly suspicious of the "holier than thou" mentality.

These are just some of the realities. But let me come to one last that is very real. In actual fact the biggest cause of suffering for any one who tries to follow Christ will be themselves and that nature we carry which has been wounded by sin. If there is anything that can cause us discouragement it is our own inner selfishness and pride grating against the Word of God we hear from Jesus. The battle with self is going to be the worst. The challenge to persevere in prayer, in being faithful, of not giving in to discouragement, of doing the little acts of charity and making sacrifices and of keep going despite our constant sins and failures will be the biggest battle of all.

But thankfully we have a kind and patient and encouraging God who forgives us time and time again and encourages us to take up his daily cross and to persevere. Let us thank him for his fidelity to us and for his constancy when we let him down and betray him.

Amen.

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