

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

8-26-18

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Why do so "many disciples," as St John puts it, decide to stop following our Lord after his explanation of the Eucharist as the "living bread,"?

At the same time, why do the twelve disciples stay with him? The question touches one of the great mysteries of our existence: human freedom.

Somehow, in the depths of the human heart, God leaves us free to accept or reject the gift of faith. No one can manufacture faith in God, it is a gift that always begins with Him, it comes from God: It says that in the gospel today....."no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father." But the choice to accept or reject that gift, to follow Jesus or turn one's back on him, remains with each individual: "Do you also want to leave?" Jesus Christ is the Lord of life, but he refuses to impose his rule on hearts that want to "stop accompanying him" and return to their former way of life. God gives us the gift of life, but he leaves us free to manage it as we wish, either in communion with him, or not. Try to imagine how Jesus spoke the words "Do you also want to leave?" Try to picture his

expression as he looked into the faces of his chosen Twelve. He cared so deeply about them; he had handpicked them to be his closest companions. He had opened up his heart to them, and now, as other followers said, "no thanks," giving up on him, he looked to the Twelve with a tinge of sadness, perhaps apprehension. Would they abandon him too? How near God draws to us in Jesus Christ! He humbles himself, makes himself weak, almost powerless in the face of our freedom. He does this because he doesn't want mindless robots or heartless slaves; he wants friends, forever. We see this basic and fundamental fact of Christianity in the ways Jesus has been depicted our art over the years. In every period of Church history, Jesus is most frequently portrayed in one of two ways. First, as a little baby in the arms of his Mother, Mary. This isn't just an artistic symbol; this really is how God came into the world, as a helpless little baby. But what a strange way to depict the all-powerful Creator of the universe! And yet, from the perspective of our Christian faith, it makes perfect sense. God doesn't want to intimidate us into following him. He wants to win over our friendship. So he doesn't show up amid fire and thunder; rather, he smiles at us with the irresistible charm of a child. In pre-Christian times, pagan temples were designed to give the exact opposite impression. In these temples you would be breathless, tense, fearful, and thoroughly intimidated. Paganism had no concept of the true God, the God who wants friends,

not robots. The second way that Christian artists have most often depicted Christ is on the cross. There, as he suffers and dies, we see not the weakness of a wimpy divinity, but the unconquerable mercy of the God who wanted to prove beyond any doubt that his love for us truly is personal, determined, and forgiving. This is a God who really cares about us, and cares about how we respond to his invitations. In our Gospel today, the twelve disciples find themselves in a moment of crisis.. but it isn't a crisis to Jesus, it is an invitation... an invitation from a God that would reveal who his friends really are. An invitation whose RSVP can only come from a well-developed faith! When faith grows in the heart of a Christian, a lot of other virtues start growing too: wisdom, courage, humility, hope, and Christ-like love. If we want to grow in these virtues, our faith has to become more conscious, more mature. But how can we help that to happen?

The same way that Peter and the other Apostles did. This moment of crisis occurred after they had been living and traveling with Jesus for two years.

During that time they had gotten to know Jesus in a personal way. The Lord was not distant or abstract; the Lord was their companion, leader,

and friend; they had a personal relationship with him. And so, when the moment of crisis came, the moment in which their faith was challenged, they were ready to respond. Even when they couldn't see the whole picture themselves, they believed that Jesus could, and they knew that Jesus, the good shepherd, the "Holy One of God," their friend, would guide them well. My brothers and sisters, today, just like that day in our gospel, we are being called to that same friendship. And the choice to accept or reject that call, to walk humbly with God to follow his son or turn one's back on him, remains with each individual: This is the moment when we can rise to a new level of spiritual maturity, personally, as a country and as the world! The greatest and most important thing in our lives is our friendship with Jesus Christ, who, in his infinite and merciful love, gave us the Catholic Church so that we could come to know him and love him through the scriptures and the sacraments. This relationship with Jesus, mediated by the Church, is the most important thing in the life of anyone, whether he is a Catholic or not, for "all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body" (CCC 846). The sins of anyone of us can never alter this truth. God will never give up on us, but unless we have a real relationship with him, unless we form that friendship with Christ, we could end up giving up on him. And there is no greater tragedy in life than that. There is nowhere else to go to have our sins absolved (John 20). There is nowhere

else to go to eat the body of Christ; there is nowhere else to go and drink his blood. There is only one place for us to nourish our friendship with Christ and get to know him better, and that is through this great Catholic faith he left to us, his friends. We must continue to nourish that friendship and our faith through a conscious life of prayer, fasting and sacramental life.

And so today, when you receive the bread of life, know that our Lord is asking for your friendship just as he asked the twelve disciples in our Gospel today. Let us respond to his invitation as true friends