

Growing in Discipleship (Maturing in Christ)

(Show CD on Mother Teresa)

Two months ago, an article appeared in the Times Magazine about Mother Teresa. These involved letters written by Mother Teresa where she revealed that there was a long period in her life when she was no longer experiencing Jesus in her life. However, she remained faithful to the ministry for the poor, the abandoned, the marginalized to which she was called.

Just like Mother Teresa, in our community life, we cannot help but feel lost, dry and confused at times. There is a tug of war between Christ's call and the pull of the world. We want to be faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, following our Lord entails some pain and suffering. Sometimes we are at crossroads, "Should I go to the household or watch the final episode of American Idol? Heroes? Desperate Housewives? We encounter rejection or even suspicion. Sometimes we may even come to a point of compromises and yet we are fully aware of the conditions of discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24).

Following Jesus ought to be our way of life. But the way is narrow and difficult. And the question we wrestle with each day of our life is: How can I live the life God destined for me?

In St. Paul's encounter with our Lord on his way to Damascus, a clear voice revealed to him the folly of listening to his human ways. When he was blinded, Christ told him to go into the city and there will be told what God had destined him to do.

In our daily life, are we still listening to that inner voice that comes from God? Do we spend those quiet moments where we can listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit? Do we pray for the grace to obey His leading? Do we have the expectant faith that God will always work for our good and in the end help us to be victorious in Him?

If it is our desire to become faithful and committed followers of Jesus, it is good for us to understand what was in His mind, how Jesus would like us to live as His sons and daughters. Upon reflection, we were led to the questions He asked during His life on earth. Jesus asks questions, and by meditating on them, He calls us to a relationship. He does not expect an immediate answer from us. He leads us to a reflection that leads to our transformation.

The questions of Jesus can open our minds to receive God's wisdom. As we ponder the mind of Jesus, as St. Paul urges, even put on the mind of Christ, we begin to live wisely.

Question #1: "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mt 20:32; Mark 10:36; Luke 18:41). This is the most frequently asked of Jesus' questions and also the most beautiful one. In Matthew's account (20:32), the mother of James and John approaches Jesus and bows down in homage before Him. "What do you wish?" Jesus asks her. In Mark's version (10:35), James and John themselves approach Jesus and say boldly, "Teacher, we want you to place us to sit by Your side in heaven. They want to be in control, to dominate, to be God. But Jesus says that position is "not Mine to give."

In the next scene, Jesus hears a blind beggar Bartimaeus call out to Him, "Jesus Son of David, have pity on me." Against the protests of His disciples, Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" "I want to see," Bartimaeus says. "Go your way; your faith has saved you," Jesus answers.

The blind beggar Bartimaeus wins Jesus over and gets what he wants. The blind beggar shows us our proper disposition before Christ and His question. We too need to come before God in our brokenness, helplessness, blindness and poverty.

This question reveals to us the very nature of God, humble, loving and generous, a God who longs to serve humanity specially in our brokenness, poverty and blindness. This question requires some reflection from us, not a hasty response. Do we want to sit beside God in heaven in powerful domination over others, like the selfish male disciples? Do we want eternal

life as if it is our rightful inheritance, as if we deserve it, as if we are the great, worthy elite? Or do we recognize our nothingness, our complete dependence on God, our need for Him and simply want to be with Him. If we come before God as the broken beggars, we can trust Christ will restore our vision and see God.

Daily, do we ask God to bless our spouses and children? Do we ask to accomplish His will in us today, or do we dictate to God our Agenda? As we plan our activities – CLP, MER, SWR, HER, do we ask God what His plans are, how he would like us to conduct these, who we should invite, etc?

2. Questions #2: “But who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20; Matthew 16:15)

Jesus asked this question with love, respect and hope. The apostles have witnessed His miraculous healings, His liberating exorcisms, His dynamic preaching and His warm presence. They know He is out of the ordinary. At one point they saw Him calm a violent storm at sea, and literally silence the wind. “Who is this that even wind and sea obey?” they asked in wonder and disbelief.

Today, Jesus turns to each one of us and ask the same question. “Who do you say that I am?” As we face Jesus, we can imagine the gentle eyes of Jesus looking at us, smiling with His usual loving kindness, hoping for our faith and loving affirmation.

When Peter speaks and says, “You are the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus tells him not to tell this to anyone. Because Peter, like all the disciples and devout Jews expects the Messiah to be a military leader who will seize control of Jerusalem, overthrow the Roman empire and restore Israel to sovereign power. In their minds the Messiah was part Napoleon Bonaparte, part Fidel Castro and part George Bush.

Our response to Jesus will depend on the kind of personal relationship with Him at this time. How much time do we spend with Him? Listening to Him? Do we answer like Peter, declaring

that Jesus is the Son of God who suffered and died for atonement for all our sins? Do we still keep Jesus in the box, and open it on Sundays, during household meetings?

If Jesus is our Lord and God, then why do we still stray away from Him? Why is it easy for us not to do His will?

3. Question#3 “What are you thinking in your heart?” (Luke 5:22) While Jesus was teaching in a crowded house, some people lover a stretcher bearing a paralyzed man through the straw roof right down in front of Jesus. When Jesus sees the faith of the man’s friends, He says to Him, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus sees how loved the paralyzed man is. But the scribes and Pharisees are appalled and ask themselves,” Who is this who speaks such blasphemies? Who but God can forgive sins?” Jesus saw their resentment and knows what they were thinking. Instead at yelling at them, he asks, “What are you thinking in your heart?” They were too embarrassed to reply to Jesus. But Jesus is unperturbed. “That you may know that the Son of God has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher and go home.” The crowds are astonished, but the religious leaders are furious. They do not care that a sick person has been healed. They only know that their egos are bruised and their political authority is threatened.

What about us? We all have sinful, jealous and violent hearts. God invites us to open our hearts to Him, to expose the darkness so that Jesus can disarm our hearts to become gentle and humble like Him. We grow in discipleship when we allow God to transform our hearts, to be forgiving, to become more compassionate and love everyone including the poor and marginalized.

We serve God best when we serve with pure hearts. In the Sermon in the Mount, the only beatitude that allows us to see God face to face is; “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Sometimes we wonder why God does not answer our prayers. Let us ask ourselves, what is our intention, are our intention pure?

4. Question #4 “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?” (Luke 6:33-34)

Jesus expects us to resist evil and do good, but not merely to do good to those who are good to us. Rather he wants us to do good even to those who do evil to us. He expects good deeds toward everyone everywhere, whether or not people do good deeds toward us.

The 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is divided into three parables, “The Ten Virgins,” “The Talents”, “The Last Judgment”. Evidently, this chapter of Matthew reminds us of three things: first, that the Lord Jesus will come again at the end of time; second, that we shall give an accounting of the lives to the Lord when He comes again on the Last Day; and third, that the Lord will judge us according to our deeds.

But what seems to be striking about the three parables that constitute the 25th chapter of Matthew is that those who are condemned in all three parables are not explicitly described as wicked, immoral, sinful people. The five virgins in the first parable are simply foolish. The third servant in the parable today, who went off after being entrusted with one talent by his master and dug a hole on the ground where he buried the talent, was simply lazy and afraid of his master. And the parable of the Last Judgment does not paint the condemned as a gang of notorious people. In the third parable, it is very clear that the focus is not on the bad deeds committed but on the good deeds omitted.

As regards the parable today, we may ask, “What immoral thing did the third servant do to deserve the punishment he got from his master? Is burying his talent under the ground for safekeeping sinful? What wicked deed did he do to be so severely penalized?” The answers are clear. The third servant did nothing immoral. No, burying his talent under the ground for safekeeping is not sinful. He did nothing evil. But the problem is that he also did nothing good. For fear of his master, the third servant failed to do the good he is supposed to do: invest the talent entrusted to him. The message relative to the final judgment is clear: we shall be judged not only based on the evil

we do but also equally, if not more heavily, on the basis of the good we fail, or worse, refuse to do.

As far as sin is concerned, there are two kinds. One is the sin of commission where we actually do something evil. The other is the sin of omission where we omit doing the good we are supposed to do. Thus, in the final analysis, salvation is not merely a matter of avoiding evil. It is also very much a matter of doing good.

5. Question #5: “Who touched Me?” (Luke 8:45; Mark 5:30)

There was a woman who was hemorrhaging for 12 years. Doctors had been no help, in fact they made her condition even worse. She spent all her money on remedies to no avail. As a result she was declared uncleaned by society, an outcast. The woman finds the opportunity to touch the hem of Jesus cloak and experiences healing. Jesus feels the power and asked “Who touched Me?” Jesus tells the woman “Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.”

Jesus desires a personal relationship with each one of us, with every human being who ever lived. He wants to save each one of us individually with His personal touch so that we might live with Him intimately in peace forever. In asking, “Who touched me?”, He wants to know who is close to Him, who wants Him, who is being healed by Him.

This question leads us to ask some of our own: Have I ever touched Jesus? Do I want to touch Jesus with the same determination as the hemorrhagic woman? Dare I touch Jesus, risk having Him find out? Do I want Jesus to know that I touched Him?

When we received the Blessed Eucharist, we not only touched Jesus, we receive Jesus, and this is the best time for us to talk to Him, to ask Him for healing. He makes available to us the grace to remain strong and steadfast against sin.

6. Question #6: “How many loaves do you have?” (Matthew 15:34; Mark 6:38, 8:5)

Once after the disciples returned from a mission to proclaim God’s reign, they discovered that a large crowd had followed

them. The Gospels say that Jesus looked upon the people and felt compassion for them. "His heart was moved with pity for them." Mark writes, "because they were like a sheep without a shepherd."

"Give them some food yourselves," Jesus tells the disciples. But the disciples answered it will take 200 days' wages worth of food to give them. "How many loaves do you have?" "Five loaves and two fish," was the reply. Jesus asked them to sit in groups of hundreds and fifties. Then, taking the 5 loaves and 2 fish, He looked up to heaven, said blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to His disciples for distribution.

Today we live in a world of hunger, where up to 50,000 people mostly women and children die of starvation everyday. Over 800 M people are malnourished at all times, while over 2 B people live in total destitution without clean water, electricity, health care or balanced diet.

In a cemetery in England, stands a grave with the inscription: SHE DIED FOR WANT OF THINGS. Alongside that marker is another which reads: HE DIED TRYING TO GIVE THEM TO HER.

How have we grown in generosity? Where are our hearts? Have we allowed Jesus to take control of our finances? Are we faithful to our tithes to Gawad Kalinga, to our Parishes?

7. Question #7: Will you lay down your life for Me? John 13:38
An eight year old boy agreed to donate blood to his younger sister dying of leukemia, who needed blood transfusion in order to live. After the transfusion, the little girl became better and when the doctor came to check on them and see how the children were doing, the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon now until I die?"

Jesus invites us all to that kind of great love: to lay down our loves for Him and for one another. On July 30, 1941, when a prisoner escaped from Auschwitz, the Nazi guards picked ten prisoners at random to be locked up and starved to death as punishment, to deter further escape attempts. One of these begged to be spared in the hope that one day he might see his

wife and children again. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Catholic priest stepped forward and volunteered to take that prisoner's place. The guards agreed and Kolbe was locked in the cell with the other poor men. After most of the others died, Kolbe was injected with carbolic acid and died on August 14, 1941. He followed Jesus in laying down his life for others.

Will you lay down your life for me? Let us go beyond our fears, worries, despair and low expectations, so that we can hear the love in this question, we may receive the grace to enter that "greater love" that Jesus demonstrated on the cross.

8. Question #8: Do you also want to leave? John 6:67

At one point, after a heated confrontation with the Pharisees, many of Jesus disciples have had enough. They realize the hardness of His teachings and feared the consequences of staying with Him, so many left. Jesus turns to the remaining original 12 disciples and asks, "Do you also want to leave?" Of course we knew Peter's response, "Lord to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life."

As we listen to this question, we hear the pain in Jesus' voice, the sadness, His wounded heart, His desire for friendship and His love for us. It is one of the most touching, heartbreaking and haunting questions of His life. We have many reasons for leaving Jesus and His Gospel. Let's face it, practicing faith while living in our culture of doubt is difficult. How can we promote nonviolence when our world's concept of bringing peace is through wars, nuclear weapons, abortion, etc.

We all have relatives and friends who turned and walked away from Jesus. In fact at some point we ourselves must have walked away from Jesus. How many times have we said, "I give up. I am stepping down. This is just too much for me."

But the astonishing promise of the Gospel is that no matter how many disciples walk away from Jesus, no matter how tempted we are to abandon the project, no matter how many times we have rejected God, no matter how unfaithful we are, GOD never leaves us. Jesus never gives up on us. Jesus never walks away from us.

This question invites us to reflect how we can stay close to Jesus, through a regular intimate relationship with Jesus that can only come through daily meditation. Let us feel His loving presence, accept His resurrection gift of peace, open our hearts to the truth of His Gospel and serve Him in the poor and the needy, we are transformed and fall in love with Jesus. We cannot leave Him, instead we ask for the grace to remain faithful to Him for the rest of our lives.

9. Question #9: Could you not keep watch with Me for one hour? (Mark 14:37; Matthew 26:40) Why are you sleeping? (Luke 22:46) After the Last Supper, Jesus leads the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He takes Peter, James and John and goes off to pray. "My soul is sorrowful even to death," He tells them. "Remain here and keep watch." When Jesus returns, He finds them sound asleep. "Why are you sleeping?" "Can you not keep watch for one hour?" "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:32-28).

This call to keep watch with Christ is one of the Gospel's most urgent commands. "Why are you sleeping?" Jesus asks us. Like the disciples we are tired-tired of life, tired of struggling, tired of confrontation, tired of being overworked and underpaid, tired of health problems and family divisions, tired of worrying about the future, of resentment and misunderstanding, tired of fear and failure, of war, violence and poverty.

Biblically speaking, sleep represents more than the important physical need for rest. Spiritually speaking, we are sound asleep. We have grown lazy, comfortable and lethargic. We no longer see the need for prayer, the presence of God, the needs of the poor, the demands of justice and peace, the reality of death. We are just too tired for all of that. We prefer to take the attitude of "Wake me when it's over!"

Jesus warned His disciples that they need to pray in order to survive the impending crisis. The apostles did not follow His example of struggling in prayer, they gave in to sleep. They missed their chance to be strengthened in prayer. We know what

happened next, when the mob came to arrest Jesus, their first reaction was to strike out with the sword, When Jesus did not permit them to fight on His behalf, they were bewildered and fled. Even when our spirit is willing, we will not be strong enough to withstand fear unless we pray.

If we were to wake up to the reality of our world and see its 35 wars, tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, executions, widespread starvation, injustice and ongoing destruction of the earth, we would realize that Christ is crucified everyday. The whole world has become Gethsemane and our brother Jesus is in agony all over again, praying that God's will for peace and justice become reality, that we wake up and join His work to disarm and transform the world.

Why do we fail to keep watch with Christ in Gethsemane, or to seek justice and make peace, or to announce God's reign, or to love and serve everyone? Our community is so blessed to have 7 pillars, where we can truly put our faith into action. Jesus will keep shaking us awake until we come to our senses and join Him as He confronts the raging evil in our world.

10. Question #10: Simon, son of John do you love Me more than these? Do you love Me? Do you love Me? (John 21:15-17)

The conclusion of John's Gospel offers the most intimate, touching, beautiful question of all. Throughout our lives, we look to heaven and ask God, "Do you love me?" Here God turns the question on us and asks, not once but three times, if we love God.

Sitting by the charcoal fire after that intimate breakfast by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turns to Peter, addressing him by his prediscipleship name, Simon, and asks him point blank, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know I love You." Jesus accepts his answer, though and commissions him saying "Feed My lambs."

A second time Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Tend my sheep," Jesus tells him.

Finally, Jesus asks a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” “Lord, You know everything,” Peter answers, “You know that I love You.” “Feed My sheep,” Jesus commands.

In this intimate exchange, the risen Jesus gives Peter three opportunities to reconcile with Him, reversing his three statements of denial with three expressions of agape love and fidelity. It is an act of forgiveness and reconciliation on Jesus’ part and it exemplifies the new life in God’s realm of Resurrection.

This climactic exchange reveals a vulnerable Jesus in need of love and affirmation. He wants to know if Peter, and by extension, all of us---loves Him. Jesus does not come as a proud, tough, arrogant, dominating person. Instead, He is open, humble, needy. He reveals God’s desire for our love.

Our growing in discipleship (our spiritual life) is not just a vertical relationship among all of us, “down here” and God “up there,” but a horizontal relationship among us all, a relationship of agape love toward every human being treating each other as our very sister or brother. Like Peter, we begin to feed and tend one another, caring for one another, meet one another’s needs, guide one another to peaceful pastures, and defend the weak and helpless from the forces of violence and death.

Just as Jesus called Peter to follow Him on the way of the cross, so too Jesus will call us to walk in His footsteps and lay down our lives with unconditional, sacrificial, nonviolent love for the poor and oppressed.

“If you want to follow Me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus says, “Whoever does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” Let us examine our selves on the basis of the following questions. First, am I a disciple of Jesus? If I am then I should not only obey Jesus; I must follow Him by carrying my cross. Second, what is my cross and how do I carry it? Third, do I carry my cross each day or just for a day or two?

Many times, the heaviest cross we have to bear is not what we need to embrace but what we must let go of. In following Jesus, in becoming more like Him, many tend to think only in terms of what they have to do. But there is also so much that we need to undo in order to truly and fully carry our cross each day. We have to undo our pride, our inordinate attachments, our selfish motives, our illicit relationships, our doubts, our indifference, our self-sufficiency, our greed, our sins, etc. We need to undo our selves and allow the grace of God to re-invent us from deep within. We must die to our selves so that we may be a new creation in Christ. The challenge is just too difficult. It requires more than just serious thought.

Sometimes we choose the cross we want to carry? What kind of cross are you carrying? Is your cross, made of metal steel, that your heart has hardened so much you have closed and shut yourself completely? Is your cross, made of plastic that you changed your mind so easily? Is your cross, made of glass, shinny crystal glass that still breaks when pain comes? For a while, I was carrying a crystal glass cross that breaks every time I get hurt in service. Through prayers, Jesus strengthened me assuring me there is no pain that He could not cover.

The cross that Jesus commands you and me to carry is simply His wooden cross of submissive obedience to the will of God, even when His will includes suffering and hardship and things we don't want to do. It is a willingness to totally, absolutely, irrevocably, and finally yield our lives to Him because we want what He wants more than what we want.

The cross is not just a symbol of love. The cross is our daily decision to deny ourselves, our rights, our wants, our dreams, our plans our goals and live out our commitment to His will, His way, His Word and His Wisdom. The cross is our decision to live for Jesus.

Let us not forget that resurrection followed crucifixion. You and I need to remember that when Jesus commands us to deny ourselves to take up our cross and follow Him, He leads us not only to the cross but also to the crown. Let us not be so

preoccupied with the cross that we overlook the resurrection and the glory and the power and the crown to come. But in order to get the glory and the crown, we must first go through the cross.

Jesus challenges you and me, even as He did Peter and Paul and John, to keep our focus daily on the cross of His will if we wan to be His disciples. And as you focus on the cross, don't take your eyes off of Christ.

We must pray and discern well. Following Jesus is not simply a matter of one's personal efforts. It is always greatly a matter of God's grace. Grace makes the demands of Christian discipleship bearable with inner peace and quiet joy. Grace enlightens an otherwise dark journey in faith. Grace empowers an otherwise weak resolve. Grace transforms sinners into saints. It is ultimately grace, not our efforts, that configures us to Jesus whom we follow. Prayer opens us to grace.

I would like to share this bible verse that gives me strength to pursue His work with even greater passion and zeal.

In John14:12-14 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."

God continues to call each one of us. He wants us in our littleness to say YES to Him. He depends on each one of us in whatever situation and capacity we are. Let us become His hands, His arms, His Body in bringing more men and women in His most loving embrace

My Lord, I am Your disciple and my ultimate joy is to become like You. Help me to carry my cross each day with so much love and humility. Hear my prayer and let my cry come unto You. Amen.

**Nborja
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