

21<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 23, 2009)

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“This saying is hard; who can accept it?” This question, coming from many of Jesus’ disciples, is actually a very logical one. They had just heard him speak about the importance of eating his flesh and drinking his blood so as to have eternal life. We have the advantage of a history of faith and belief in the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Christ that goes back to apostolic times, but his disciples had never before heard anything like it—no wonder they said ‘this saying is hard’! But those disciples then faced a very important decision: what do they do now? Do they stay with Jesus, or do they leave him? Notice, by the way, what Jesus did not say: he did not say to those who were leaving him “Wait; come back! You misunderstood me; I didn’t really mean that you are supposed to eat my Body and drink my Blood; I was just using a figure of speech!” No—Jesus meant precisely what he said; those disciples knew what he meant, and then came their questions. In fact, St. John tells us plainly that many of Jesus’ disciples left him—they couldn’t accept what he was teaching, and so they no longer followed him. Jesus then challenged his apostles: “Do you also want to leave?” It is reminiscent of the choice that Joshua put to his fellow Israelites in the first reading: “If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve”.

Honesty compels us to admit that we may sometimes find ourselves in the position of those disciples: we hear or read one of those lines in the gospel that seems impossible to follow. “You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”; “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”; “If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.” And so we also might say “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” It’s easy to say “God is love” and that we want to love our neighbor when thinking only in the abstract. But to live out the challenges of the gospel in specific situations where temptations are strong or when some particular person has hurt us in a particular way is a whole other story, isn’t it? Or consider some of the hot-button topics our own time--birth control, abortion, euthanasia, various issues involving sexual morality among many others—the Church’s teachings on such issues is firm and clear, and is based on the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Christ and the whole of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, but those teachings are certainly not universally accepted. Many are those who by their words and actions seem to respond by saying “This saying is hard; who can accept it?”

How do we respond if and when we come to one of those gospel challenges or Church teachings that seem too hard to follow? Maybe the first thing to do is make sure we really know what our faith teaches us. I say this because there is so much misinformation about our faith; there are so many stereotypes and old myths that just never seem to die. Our second reading today, from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, provides a good example of this. Many people hear Paul’s words “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands” and immediately assume that he must have hated women or considered them second-class at best. Nothing could be farther from the truth. First of all, it’s crucial that we do not fixate on one short phrase and ignore the rest of what Paul said. Our reading begins with him urging all his readers to “be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.” And for those husbands who think they really like that ‘subordination’ language: guys, I have some news for you. It is most assuredly not a one-way street, and Paul makes that crystal clear when he writes: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her.” How did Christ love the church? He died for the church; he handed himself over and sacrificed himself completely for her. Husbands, you may not ever be called to literally die for your wives...but are you willing to say ‘no’ to your own wishes, demands, expectations in order to say ‘yes’ to the one you promised yourself to on your wedding day? In other words, are you willing to be ‘subordinate’ to your wives? In his letter on the dignity and vocation of woman in 1988, Pope John Paul II made it clear that this ‘subordination’ or subjection is indeed mutual—it is a two-way street. See what I mean? We need to know what our faith, Scriptures, and teachings of

the Church really are in order to make a truly informed decision about how we will respond when those questions and challenges come up.

Let's assume that we truly know what Jesus teaches us through his word and his Church regarding any particular doctrine or moral teaching and that we still are thinking: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" We still need to make a decision; Jesus puts the question to us: "Do you want to leave?" What do we choose? How do we choose? There are certainly many different voices out there competing for our attention and our favor—media of all kinds and persuasions; those who hold that opinion polls determine right and wrong, truth and falsehood; philosophies that tell us we should give in to our feelings and temptations since truth is what we think it should be or what we want it to be.

If I may make a suggestion: why not choose to accept and follow what the Church—founded and given to us by Christ himself—teaches and proposes to us? For one thing, the Church has been around for about 2000 years now, surviving countless challenges and threats in ways that have to be considered humanly impossible. Not bad credentials in itself, I'd say... That survival and its continued progress can only be attributed to the fact that Jesus is true to his promise to protect the Church from the gates of hell and also his promise that the Holy Spirit would lead the Church to all truth. Through the scriptures and the teachings of the apostles carried on and developed through the centuries by the saints and so many others, Jesus has given the Church a faith that is true, reliable, and dedicated to our salvation; remember how Jesus said that he is indeed 'the way, the truth and the life.'

Please note: I am not saying that we should accept the teachings of the Church because pope and bishops (the primary teachers in the Church) are perfect themselves. Obviously they are not, and they will be the first to admit it—they share our frail, sinful nature and are prone to temptation and moral failure no less than any of the rest of us. But the Church is so much more than just the visible institution and hierarchy; it certainly and necessarily includes that, but it is more—it is the Body of Christ, indeed the Bride of Christ with Jesus as her head. Again, Jesus gave us the Church to be his presence and the preacher and teacher of his truth and love on this earth, and he has promised divine protection for the Church so that she would not teach error or falsehood. That's why we can bank on the reliability of that teaching; it truly makes sense to do so.

That is why I preach and teach as I do in this pulpit and elsewhere. I try to base my words on what Jesus and his Church teach; I do so because I am firmly convinced those teachings are true and are worthy of acceptance. I readily admit that there are some elements of those teachings that have been hard to understand or accept over the course of my life. But I have grown in my awareness of the fact that maybe...just maybe...the Church has more wisdom over the course of her history going back to Jesus himself than I do over the course of my 54 years. Jesus knows infinitely more than I or any of the rest of us do (he is the Son of God, after all), and so why in the world would we not accept his words and truth?

We may well continue to struggle with certain elements of our faith and the teachings of the Church; we may well repeat those words: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Don't be afraid of the questions you may have; don't be afraid to struggle with those difficulties—engage those struggles, ask the hard questions, do your homework and learn all you can about a particular teaching. And above all: **pray**. Pray for the Holy Spirit's wisdom and direction and knowledge; remember that faith is a gift of God that we are called to nurture just as the gardener tends the flowers to which God first gives the growth. The more we pray for God's help and wisdom and the more put forth our good effort, the more we will joyfully and genuinely embrace the truth Jesus teaches, the truth that Jesus is. And then, with grateful and genuine conviction, we will be able to echo Peter's response to Jesus' question about leaving him: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

