

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Words from Jesus in today’s Gospel. These words are probably not easy for us to hear. They seem too challenging, too difficult. Not at all what we expect or desire from our loving God. And yet, Jesus says it anyway. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” In other words, Jesus is telling us that being a Christian is not easy, is not always pleasant and fun, and it does always come at a cost. We can see this in the life our Lord Himself lived, a life that led to His arrest, His passion, and His crucifixion and death. So, if we wish to be a true follower of Christ, then we must accept the fact that our lives, too, will have struggles, sorrows, hardships, inconveniences and crosses. There’s no way around it.

That’s okay though. Because each and every one of us has been called by God to live this life as a pilgrimage. Not as a vacation or a sight-seeing trip, but a pilgrimage, a journey of great significance for one’s spiritual life, a journey with the ultimate goal of bringing one closer to God. In the case of our lives, the ultimate goal is not simply coming closer to God but being fully united to Him.

And again, this pilgrimage, this journey is not easy. Pilgrimages are never meant to be easy, but rather, they necessitate the pilgrim making many sacrifices and enduring various trials and pains, in order to reach the intended destination.

I was reminded of this reality last week when I joined a group of young people on our own pilgrimage. It was a small group from Cincinnati, and they asked me to join them as their chaplain. So, we, left the comforts of home to make our way to Madrid, Spain, where we joined around 2 million other people, for World Youth Day. The chaperones in our group, myself included, stressed to the young people that this was not a vacation. It was meant to be a pilgrimage. So, we would have to follow the words of our Lord in today’s Gospel, deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Him on the path that He had already walked.

And the path we walked, the pilgrimage we traveled, definitely had its share of crosses, obstacles and inconveniences. For example, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict, was set to arrive on Thursday evening and go along a planned route to greet the pilgrims gathered there. In order to have even a chance of seeing him in person, and not just on a giant screen, we knew we had to go early. So we did. And we managed to find what was probably the last open spot along the barricades. So, we quickly claimed the area for ourselves and proceeded to wait.

For five hours. In the intense heat, with temperatures hovering in the upper 90’s. And still tired due to a lack of sleep throughout the previous 8 days. And of course, as the time for the Holy Father’s arrival drew closer, the number of other pilgrims increased and the space we had claimed for ourselves continued to shrink, as everyone seemed to push forward to get that much closer to the Pope. And as if the heat, and the crowds weren’t enough, I had the additional cross of having 2 swollen ankles, making the wait even more difficult and painful. But there was a Scripture verse running through my mind, one that became a battle cry for some on our pilgrimage. It comes from Romans 8:18: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

As I repeated this to myself for about the tenth time, it finally happened. Pope Benedict XVI was approaching. And as he passed within feet of where we were standing, the struggles and the pain disappeared for a moment. I forgot about the suffering as the Lord provided this moment of grace and consolation to us who had been waiting for so long.

This was not the only time the Lord graced us in this way during our pilgrimage. The culmination of the WYD experience is always the Vigil with the Holy Father on Saturday night followed by the closing Mass with him on Sunday morning. So, again, we braved the heat and the crowded metros to find our assigned section in an open field. We walked for a couple of hours just to get into the field and found a very small spot among the other 2 million pilgrims to try to sit, and hopefully, eventually, sleep. After enduring the heat for a few hours, it was time for the vigil to begin. The bright sun and 100 degree temperatures quickly gave way, though, to a big storm that was rolling through. Strong winds and pouring rain quickly came upon us, turning the ground where we would sleep into mud, soaking the meager sheets we were to sleep on, and drenching the clothes we were wearing; yes, the same clothes we would be sleeping in.

Due to the storm, the vigil was put on hold for a while, and the Holy Father cut his remarks short. None of this was enough to dampen the spirits of the pilgrims though. For God provided yet another consolation, this time by giving us His own presence among us. As the Blessed Sacrament was carried out and placed on the altar for Adoration, a hush fell over the 2 million pilgrims. And these same pilgrims, young and old alike, fell to their knees, in the wetness and the mud, to offer their worship and adoration to the Lord who had called them on this pilgrimage. We knew, without a doubt, that the Lord was with us on our pilgrimage. This grace and consolation then continued throughout a mostly sleepless night into the closing Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict the next morning. Again, the glories that were revealed were so great that the sufferings and sacrifices were all worth it.

And this is what the pilgrimage of our life is like. In the midst of the sufferings, the sacrifices and the crosses, our Lord provides us with these moments of grace and consolation to encourage us to continue the journey. Even Jesus had people like Veronica and Simon of Cyrene provide Him some consolation as He carried His cross to Calvary. So, the Lord gives us these to make it a little easier to bear our own burdens and crosses, for they remind us that He is there with us, helping us to shoulder our crosses, just as He shouldered His 2,000 years ago. So, today, Jesus is calling to us to embrace and live out the challenging life of a Christian disciple. He Himself has already created the path we must walk. And He gives us the grace and assistance we need to be able to say yes as we hear His call in our hearts, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”