

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

This is a hard teaching. The Lord bids every Christian to count the cost – to count the cost of discipleship. Before you build a tower you plan it. You ensure that you have enough materials to complete it. Before a king goes to war he inventories his troops to ensure that he can conquer the enemy, and not be forced to surrender.

These are the metaphors that the Lord uses to teach the Christian, to teach you, O Christian, to count the cost of discipleship. The Lord did not come to bring peace, but a sword. And following the Lord, that sword divides friends and family. Indeed, the Lord teaches, our love for Him must make our relationship with our closest family and friends seem like hatred. It is a hard teaching. But it is the Word of the Lord.

Whoever does not take up his cross and follow Christ cannot be his disciple. That means we must be ready to hold fast to the One True Faith even unto death. So it is that we publicly take vows at our confirmation. The Pastor asks: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even unto death?” To which the confirmand responds: “I do, by the grace of God.”

And as if that weren't clear enough, the second question follows: “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?” To which the confirmand responds: “I do, by the grace of God.” Right now Christians aren't put to death for their faith in our country. Right now.

But that time may come. And we must all be ready for that time. For such times have come in the past. And if this preacher did not prepare you for such a time, if this preacher soft-pedaled or tried to explain away the Lord's clear Words and warning, he would be derelict of his duty, derelict of his Office.

St. Cyprian was a third century Christian, Bishop of Carthage in north Africa, who was a pagan rhetorician converted to Christianity in the Year of our Lord 246. Only two years after his conversion, he was elected Bishop of Carthage, having abounded in Christian knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures from Tertullian's writings, penned some 75 years earlier.

The Decian persecution of the Church began two years after Cyprian's election as Bishop. Decius decreed that everyone in the Roman Empire had to make sacrifices to pagan gods for the wellbeing of the emperor, and as a loyalty oath to the emperor. They were also forced to keep an icon of Decius in their homes, and to burn incense to it, under penalty of death.

Rather than do so, Cyprian fled. He led the congregations entrusted to his care by letter. Untold thousands of Christians were executed or died in prison for refusing to make the pagan sacrifices, including Fabian, the Bishop of Rome. Cyprian returned two years later to find many lapsed Christians and many *libellatici*, those who had paid for certificates stating that they had made sacrifices to pagan gods, but in fact had not, a money-making work around by the emperor akin to indulgences. Then in the Year of our Lord 252, the plague broke out in Carthage.

The Novation schism, over the readmission of the lapsed, and a schism regarding re-baptizing the schismatics arose. Africa held that they must be re-baptized, Rome held that they should not be, causing a significant rift between the Roman Bishop Stephen and Cyprian. The rift was cut short by the Valerian persecution of 257, which prevented Christians from assembling or entering underground burial places, and also exiled all Christian clergy from the empire.

Cyprian would not flee Carthage, and was arrested. The tradition of the Church is that when he learned of his death sentence, he responded “Thanks be to God!” He was martyred by beheading on September 14, 258. And the Diocletian Persecution would soon follow, the most severe of the Christian persecutions in history, would last until Constantine.

According to the tradition of the Church, God gave Cyprian the faith to take up his cross and follow Christ. He counted the cost, he planned for the battle. The cost was his life. He is counted by the Church as a Christian martyr, one who died for the confession that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Son of the Living God, the only God and Lord. To remain a disciple of Christ, he forsook all that he had, as the Lord had demanded of the multitude that would be His followers.

Each of us as Christians should consider the cost. We must be prepared to do the same. What is our confession of faith worth to us? Would we separate from friends and coworkers to remain steadfast in our confession and faith? From cousins and uncles and aunts and nieces and nephews? From sons and daughters? From father and mother? Another way to ask the question is – for what worldly relationship or possession would we forfeit our salvation?

The flesh rails at the question. But faith knows it could happen. We might be forced to choose. And our hesitation, our uneasiness to even consider it, reveals our fallenness. But that you be forgiven, that you be saved, the Lord forsook all that He had. He humbled Himself, giving up the heavenly glory that is rightly His, and taking on Flesh. And that Flesh He suffered to be torn, bruised, blasphemed and crucified. He went to war against the whole fallen world and against the devil and all false religions. He counted the cost. The cost was His life. And that, His life, was payment sufficient for the sins of the world.

In mercy, in love, by the power of His Spirit, He works faith in you, faith that appropriates Christ, faith that brings to you the fruits of His cross and empty tomb. He gives you faith that grows ever stronger as you receive His Gifts, His Gifts of Word and Sacrament, His Gifts of the Mysteries that bring the Divine to you. And He strengthens your faith, that you may with clear conscience and true intent answer “I do, by the grace of God.” And by His grace, if that time should come, God grant that you do as you have vowed.

The martyrs find a special place in heaven, as St. John testifies. They are in the eternal bliss and protection of the heavenly chancel, sheltered and kept under the Holy Altar. The Apocalypse measures the time till the end by the number of martyrs – when that number is complete, the Lord will return. Faith prays by the Spirit with the Bride, making the prayer of the Apocalypse your prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” And He comes – His Body and His Blood your Saving Banquet, to strengthen and preserve you steadfast in faith until He comes again.

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