

21st Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *Do not disdain the discipline*
August 24-25, 2013 Cathedral of Saint Paul
Readings: Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30

For years and years, the word discipline had a very negative connotation in my own mind. It was associated with the use of my middle name. For some as yet unknown reason, parents figured out a way to convey that we were in trouble by the use of our middle names. It took me years before I wrote or spoke my middle name with pride! In all seriousness, the issue of discipline is treated squarely in our second reading from Hebrews, providing food for thought, and not just for parents vis-à-vis their children.

A disciplined person is one who is able to keep to a set routine and schedule, thereby maximizing the time available for progress in both the sacred and secular realm. We need discipline in our prayer life, work life, home life—all around us. We waste a tremendous amount of time, even while admitting that we have a need for some down time, time away from activity. Hopefully, the summer provided some of that time for you and your family.

As we now look to the end of summer on the horizon, it is an opportune time to re-evaluate, re-group and re-ignite all that may have suffered from any lack of discipline on our parts this summer. The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to strengthen our drooping hands and weak knees. But how do we do this?

I once saw a T-Shirt at the State Fair that made me both chuckle and shake my head. *Hard Work pays off later...Laziness pays off right now.* While humorous, it does betray the sense that somehow *hard work* is at most something that we tolerate. In reality, we shun hard work as often as we embrace it, and we spend more time worrying about it, and this accomplishes absolutely nothing. A disciplined life brings with it the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

If we run from discipline, whether in its form as punishment from a legitimate authority, or in its meaning as an ordered and productive life, we are really running from the Lord. Discipline is God's gift to us to keep our lives centered on His Will for us. We do not disdain it because its purpose is to keep us closer to Him. The peaceful fruit of righteousness comes from knowing that at the end of the day, we have put in a solid effort in work, home or school and that this gives glory to God. If our children do not value hard work early on, it will make for painful lessons later.

Teenagers and even adults can often fall into the trap of saying, "I can't help it," "This is the way I am." It is dangerous to lock oneself into this type of defeatist attitude. Spiritual discipline challenges us to change, to track progress and to keep us focused on what is truly important. After all, the root meaning of the word is the same as the word *disciple*, meaning student.

In the Catholic faith we call this *Asceticism* (askesis, askein), which taken in its literal sense means a *polishing*, a *smoothing* or *refining*. The Greeks used the word to designate the exercises of the athletes, whereby the powers dormant in the body were developed and the body itself was trained to its full natural beauty. The end for which these gymnastic exercises were undertaken was the laurel-wreath bestowed on the victor in the public games.

Now the life of the Christian is, as Christ assures us, a struggle for the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 11:12). Jesus used the image of a narrow gate in the Gospel, for this certainly is not an easy journey. Partly as a preparation for the upcoming Second Vatican Council, Bl. Pope John XXIII wrote an encyclical on the need for the practice of interior and exterior penance.

The *interior* penance to which he referred was primarily “the detestation, that is, of sin, and the determination to make amends for it.” The first step is to rid ourselves both of our attachment to sin and love of sin, which admittedly is quite difficult to do. The Holy Father also maintained:

“...the faithful must also be encouraged to do outward acts of penance, both to keep their bodies under the strict control of reason and faith and to make amends for their own and other people’s sins.¹

Asceticism is spoken of both in terms of exterior and interior mortification: exterior mortification is the mortification of sensuality and the senses; interior mortification consists in the purification of our memory, imagination, intellect, will and the mastering of the passions. This interior penance takes consistent effort over a long period of time, and we often become impatient.

There are also everyday means: giving up a desert or skipping a meal, leaving the table a little hungry, going without air conditioning tonight, to name but a few! It also means setting aside a determined prayer time and accepting crosses without complaint.

In the end, when we embrace the discipline of the Lord, we are actually clearing the path towards happiness and fulfillment, not shutting it off. We are freeing ourselves to be more receptive to His love and Grace, making straight the paths for our feet to lead us to the loving arms of our Father.

¹ *Paenitentiam Agere*, paragraph #28 and 29, promulgated on July 1, 1962.