

## **The Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time September 4, 2022**

John and Willa were married in a ceremony one April in a Catholic Church. Though John's parents were Catholic, they never had him or his brothers baptized. He respected Willa's desire to be married in a Catholic Church though he wasn't sure he was ready to become Catholic himself.

Over the years, he went with Willa to Mass and agreed to have their children baptized. He enjoyed the music and the preaching at the parish they attended and, eventually, he decided it was time for him to go ahead and get baptized so that he would have something else to share with his wife and to be a good example to his children.

When he met with the deacon at the parish, however, he was surprised to find out that he would have to meet him every Sunday over the next two years. John told the deacon, "I didn't think it would be that much work to become Catholic. Do you think you could just give me a few books to read? Do we really have to meet every Sunday? I mean, there might be Sundays when I'd want to do something else besides go to church."

The deacon patiently replied, "Well, John, if this is something you really want to do, it's going to take some commitment from you. Becoming Catholic is more than just reading a few books. It means understanding who Jesus is and building a relationship with Him through prayer. There's a lot to learn but there's also a lot of personal growth involved. All that comes with time. What we hope is that, when you're baptized and receive the other sacraments, you'll have a real appreciation for what it all means and know what living the gospel will demand of you."

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“Okay,” John replied. “I’m already coming to Mass every Sunday with the family. And this is important to me. I want to do it right. So, sure, you can count on me.”

John wanted to become Catholic, but wanted the easiest path possible to do it. The deacon helped him to realize that joining the Church would require real sacrifice on his part. Once John knew what he was committing to, he could say “yes” to it, even though he knew it would be a challenge.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is leading a large crowd. They are following Him to Jerusalem, where He will suffer and die. The people who are with Him are all there for different reasons. Some, like the apostles, know Jesus personally and love Him. They have left everything behind to follow Him. Other people are suffering with diseases and other afflictions. They are there because Jesus is their only hope of being cured. Still others want to learn more about God and are looking to Jesus for answers. Then there are those who are there out of curiosity. They hope that Jesus will perform some miracle that will thrill and entertain them.

When Jesus turns to them, He wants to make it clear just what they’re getting into. He wants them to know what is waiting for them at the end of the road when they get to Jerusalem. Like the deacon who was preparing John to become Catholic, he wants to spell out to them just what the commitment entails. Otherwise, they risk being like the contractor who isn’t able to finish building a tower or the king who discovers that he doesn’t have a big enough army to defeat his rival.

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To get their attention, He says something striking, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." So, does He really want us to HATE our family and even our lives? Of course, Jesus wants us to love everyone. What He is saying is that God has to have priority in our lives, even above our families. He comes first, and any other commitments we may have come second.

When we give ourselves to Jesus and give Him the first place in our lives, it is very likely that some people will not be pleased. Those people might be our parents. They might be our spouses. They might be our children. It could be that they think we've gone off the deep end. In Jesus' day, that was certainly the case, and for many families today it may still be the case.

It does not mean that we turn our backs on our families. In fact, it means that we love them more. We share with them how Jesus has changed us and why following Him is so important to us. If they love us, they will understand. And we may also win them over and get them to start coming back to Church and living their faith. In the worst-case scenario, our family might not want to see us anymore. We can still pray for them and let them know that we will always be there for them.

The ironic thing is that, when we give Jesus priority in our lives, we become better parents, children, and siblings. When John decided to become Catholic, he was doing it to be closer to his wife and to be a better example to his children. Men and women typically discover that, when they spend more time in prayer, they have more patience with each other and with their children. Families that go to Mass together every Sunday forge a

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deep, spiritual bond that carries them through the joys and challenges of life. A home that has Jesus in it also has peace.

Like the crowds that followed Jesus, there are many reasons why we have gathered here today for Mass. Some of us have had a life-changing encounter with the Risen Lord and are here to celebrate that. Some of us carry painful physical and spiritual wounds and we are looking to Jesus for comfort and healing. Others of us are here out of a sense of obligation or because someone brought us here. Whatever brings you here today, know that God loves you and is glad that you're here. He can work with you no matter where you are in your faith journey.

But there is one thing we must always be clear about. If we are going to follow Jesus, it is going to cost us something. For John in today's story, it cost him the commitment to spend time every Sunday studying the faith. For some of us, it will mean rejection from family and friends. In today's world, there are some places where being a Christian can cost you your life. The greater our love is, the greater our capacity to sacrifice will be. Jesus showed us such love on the cross. He holds out His cross to us, and invites us to embrace it. It is the tool He will use to heal us and bring us to everlasting life.