

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

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The topic is the cost of discipleship. We will come to the cost in a moment, but first we must deal with discipleship. The discipleship in question concerns the lesson to be learned from the mystery of Jesus. It is upon this mystery and its lesson for discipleship that we must now briefly reflect.

Every man's faith in the mystery of Jesus is tinged with elements that are drawn from his own temperament. The temperament of the present writer inclines toward the dark and the melancholy. Perhaps that is because his experience in life has been punctuated regularly by moments of hazard. That being the case, what I have to say about the mystery of Christ may not be acceptable to readers of a different temperament. They may have to transpose what I say into a different key more suited to their own temperament. But hopefully the melody will be the same.

Writing on the subject of "Today's Priest and His Faith" (*Servants of the Lord*, p. 47), Karl Rahner has this to say: "We are not giving good advice from the shore to men struggling for their lives in the raging torrent. We are in the torrent too and as interested in not drowning as they." This remark draws our attention to the life-situation of men in general and of the priest in particular.

Every man learns from his experience to recognize his power and his limits, his ability to swim in the waters of his life and the likelihood of his drowning. In business-life, for instance, one learns all the tricks of staying ahead of the competition. One also learns the hazards that can bring ruin and bankruptcy. In political life a man experiences the fascination of power and control, but equally well he learns the fragile character of success and popular acclaim. In domestic and family life husbands and wives discover how easily the sweet victory of love can be overtaken by estrangement and dislike. Even the achievements of intellectual

and artistic life are apt to have their day. In the intellectual life one falls behind in the race for knowledge and in the artistic life one's imagination grows cold. Finally, and at the most intimate level, physical strength, health and beauty are only with difficulty maintained. Thus do we all learn from life the lesson of our power and of our limits. We might say that everyman acquires the art of swimming in the stream but he also learns that it is easy to drown.

As priests we are in the torrent too. True, we are not so immediately caught up in the life of business or politics or the domestic scene. But we are not therefore insulated from the experience of success and failure, of power and limits, of swimming and drowning in the currents of the life to which we are called. We are never free from the common experience of men. We are in the torrent too.

Is there then, no difference? For if not, then anyone might be promoted to ordination in the morning. There is a difference. But it is not that we as priests are better swimmers in our waters than the average layman is in his. Frequently we are not nearly as good as they. It is not that the priest is a better swimmer, but that he has come to terms with drowning. The priest has come to understand that in Christ one can afford to drown in the flood. Not that the priest is against swimming but that he is not altogether unwilling to drown. At least, if he has been a true disciple of Christ, that will be the case. He will know that drowning can be done in Christ and that it does not destroy. One sinks in the waters of life but one does not rest on a bottom. One falls down through the waters—but not out of the world—but down and through and out to the other side, to the world of resurrection and ascension, so that at some point in the journey descent and drowning become surfacing and ascension. The priest knows about all this.

Such is the mystery of the human condition as it breaks out and is revealed in the humanity of our Savior. This is what the faithful servant receives and in turn delivers—we can afford to drown, in Christ. To put the matter more bluntly, it is not so much the 'facts of life' and how to handle them that the disciple learns from Jesus but the fact of death and how to integrate it with life. The lesson is of supreme importance for love and life.

Isn't it true that the fear of drowning can paralyze a swimmer, that panic about losing can cause a gambler to plunge and lose, that anxiety about every shape and form of 'going under' causes us to tighten our grip on life and thereby to throttle it? Paradoxically, it is by being the friend of losing, drowning, and dying that the true disciple can better release the energies of men for love and life. The death of Jesus saves us from the refusal to die and sets us free for the conquest of life and love.

So much for the lesson that has to be learned. Now we come to the learning of it and to the price that must be paid. The point that we wish to make here is simply that the priest learns by teaching, that he becomes a disciple in the act of being an apostle to others. More precisely, he learns how one can afford to drown in Christ by being himself dragged under in his apostolate.

Most teachers learn by teaching. Ideally one ought first to master the lesson and then teach it. In practice it is only in the act of repeated failures in teaching that the teacher finds out how much there is that he has yet to learn and begins to master the lesson. The cost of learning is to flounder in teaching.

In a similar fashion the cost of discipleship is to flounder as an apostle. The priest learns about drowning in Christ by doing that very thing as an apostle. Ideally discipleship should precede successful apostleship. In practice discipleship follows upon failure in apostleship.

All unawares, we begin as apostles by rejecting the message. In the spirit of the first Adam we reject the limitations and the dependencies of our creaturehood in favor of instant success to be achieved by technique. Our rejection shows itself in the pursuit of invulnerability in ministry, in the determination not to be wounded, in the will to be beyond hazard, in the will to be ourselves a strong 'power for good' rather than a weak instrument of God's power. Our rejection of creaturely limitation in apostleship has its physical counterpart and expression in the unwillingness to die. That's where we begin apostleship. Only when our powerlessness is made evident in our failure to win over the hearts of men do we become true disciples. Then it is that we begin to learn as Jesus did by the things he suffered that our contribution to the salvation of men does not take the shape of

being a smashing success but in receiving our impotence and failure with a good heart. We save, not so much by our lessons in swimming through the waters of life--that is rather the job of butcher, baker, candlestick-maker, lawyer, doctor, psychologist, sociologist—not by giving lessons in swimming but by displaying decency in drowning. We become disciples at last.

The above approach to the subject of the cost of discipleship was taken with a view to meeting more directly some of the temptations experienced today in priestly ministry. For one, we live in a success-oriented world. The businessman in the marketplace succeeds by dint of sharp practice. The politician in the forum wins out by intrigue. Even the domestic hearth, the place of tenderness, has lately become the scene of a ruthless assault on the unborn. It seems as if no one any longer wants to drown in the face of life's problems. There simply has to be a way out, Drowning is unthinkable. The priest is tempted to think along the same lines in regard to his apostleship. He too must succeed. It simply cannot be that the gospel be rejected. If necessary the gospel must be tailored to suit the times. We cannot drown.

Put in another way, our great need today in the ministry is for courage, what Rollo May describes as the "virtue of maturity" (*Man's Search for Himself*, p. 223). Our tendency is to lament our first fervor and its loss, to become saddened by our dwindling energy, our depleted strength. But perhaps the first fervor, the initial energy, the original strength of ours was rather in the nature of a 'power trip'. We were not really true disciples then. We didn't believe in drowning, and only on that premise did we move ahead. But now we begin to see!

A final consideration has to do with today's constant insistence on love as the summing up of the Gospel and the heart of discipleship. As if it were perfectly clear to all what is implied in the love that is in Christ. If Christ only commanded us to love then we would be still very much in the dark as to what this might mean. We need to do more than echo his command to love. We need to reflect earnestly on what he did in order to come to see that what he had most in mind was that we should keep a place in our hearts for drowning. Did he not himself get caught in the waters?