

We must love Jesus more than anything else

According to the Koran, converting to any other religion is punishable **by death. Some former Muslims who have converted to Christianity** **have** relatives who would consider it an honour to kill them for turning their back on Islam and taking up Christianity.

Islam is one of the more extreme religions for persecuting those who convert to other religions. Nevertheless, there are many religions who order their members to cut off all ties to relatives who convert out of the faith. While the head of the family will not physically murder the convert for leaving their religion, they often declare their children dead when they convert to Christianity. If they live in the same community, they will treat them like a common stranger when they meet them on the street. The love of father, mother, son, or daughter gets replaced by a cold emptiness in such families.

It is easy to see how Jesus' words in today's Gospel apply to people like this. Jesus said, "*If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple,*" (Luke 14:26-27). With these words, Jesus taught that we must be ready to turn our backs on our families in order to remain faithful to Him. He is saying that the love we have for our family members should look like hatred when compared to our love for God. Our love for God may even put our lives in danger.

When we look at the history of the Holy Christian Church, we see the blood of the martyrs spilled on almost every page. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of Hebrews to describe the martyrs with these words. *Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise*

again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated ... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth, (Heb. 11:35-38). These martyrs demonstrate their willingness to give up their lives rather than give up on Jesus.

Most of us do not have to worry about family members out to kill us because we are Christians. Nevertheless, there are times when our family ties cause friction with our Christian faith. There are times when our own family members, rather than respecting our beliefs, will attack them. They will tempt us to abandon the teachings of Christ in order to maintain peace in the family.

This goes straight to the First Commandment. *You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? Answer: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* Anyone or anything that we love more than we love God is an idol. That includes our father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even our own life.

Jesus also said, *“Whoever does not carry his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”* Our cross is the hardship we endure simply because we are faithful to God’s Word. It is the attack that the world mounts against us simply because we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

The world hates the children of God and will use all its resources against us. Sometimes our own family will turn against us. We must be ready to cut off ties to father and mother and wife and children and brothers and

sisters, rather than be unfaithful to Jesus. We must be ready to lose our lives rather than be unfaithful to Him.

Can you do that? Neither can I... I simply don't have the resources to conform to Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel. In fact, the parables that Jesus tells after these statements tell us that we don't have the resources to carry them out. Our attempt to surrender all in order to be faithful is like a man who starts a tower he can't finish or like a king with ten thousand men who is facing a king with twenty thousand. The world will overwhelm us if we try to carry our cross in our own power. We do not have the power in ourselves to deny our family or our life and follow Christ. We can't do it alone.

Fortunately, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of the book of Hebrews to say, "*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin,*" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus is our high priest who experienced the same attacks that we do and triumphed over them.

Did the world use Jesus' family to attack Him? In Mark's gospel we read, *Then [Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind,"* (Mark 3:20-21). Later on Jesus said, "*Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother,*" (Mark 3:34-35). Jesus Himself had to deny His own family in order to remain faithful.

Jesus Christ was also faithful to His cross. His cross was not just a metaphor, but the real thing. His death was not just persecution for being faithful. His death was the sacrifice that made us part of God's family. You see, when Jesus endured His cross, He was making sure that there

was one cross we would never have to endure – the cross we earned with our own sin. Jesus Christ endured the cross of our sin so that we don't have to. He took all our sins onto Himself and paid the debt for those sins. By His faithful suffering and death on the cross, He triumphed over sin, death, and the power of the devil.

We know that Jesus successfully defeated His foes because death was not able to hold Him. He demonstrated His triumph by rising from the dead and ascending into heaven. His resurrection and ascension contain the promise that He will return and raise us from the dead so that we might live with Him forever.

Jesus offers His triumph to all people through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. By faith, the Holy Spirit adopts us into God's family. He promises us that we shall always be together. He is always by our side. He will be always be with us while we live here on this earth, and, when our time here is over, we shall live forever with Him.

Evil has no conscience. It will attack us with all its resources. It will attack us through family and friends – even through our own body. Evil will even try to convince us that we are in the wrong when we remain faithful to Christ and His teachings. In spite of this, we need not fear, for the Holy Spirit works and sustains faith in us and works through us to give us the strength to remain faithful in spite of the world's persecution – even if it means we lose family and friends – even if it means death because of our faith.

It is only by the grace of God that we can be faithful to God even if the world threatens death or our family and friends ridicule us. By the grace

of God, the Holy Spirit will keep our faith strong. God will be with us here in time and we will be with Him forever in eternity.