September 4, 2022—23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ignatius of Loyola, the future founder of the Jesuit Order, was on the way to fame and fortune as a soldier. He wanted to fight passionately for what he believed in, until the day his leg was shattered by a cannonball. During his long period of convalescence, he only had two books to read: a life of Christ and the lives of the saints. He discovered that when he thought about being a soldier and the fame that could result, he felt excited, but as soon as he stopped thinking about worldly things, he felt empty and unfulfilled. On the other hand, when he thought about the life of Christ and the saints, not only did he felt happy, but when he stopped, there was a joy and purpose that remained in his heart. This became the basis for his teaching on discernment of spirits.

To follow Jesus is very demanding, but what remains is meaning and happiness in this life and eternal life. To follow the devil and give into our desires of pleasure and selfishness seem very easy and attractive but lead to slavery to sin and misery. Jesus warned the crowds in the Gospel this Sunday that to follow Him is not going to be easy. He said, you must come to Him, hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even your own life. Later He said, you must renounce all your possessions. Jesus is using hyperbole, obvious exaggeration, to make His point; He wants us to love one another but the meaning of these words is that we must love Him before all others, even our closest relatives. Likewise, we must love Him above all our possessions.

We lose a little of the sting of His words concerning the Cross because the Cross has become the sign of our redemption and the greatest act of love in human history. Those listening to Him, saw actual crucifixions in their time and the words that a disciple must carry his own cross would seem especially severe.

Following Christ means conversion: turning away from sin and growing in virtue. Have you tried to work on correcting some fault in your life? Many people haven’t because it is so difficult to get rid of certain sins or bad habits and then replace them with virtues or good habits. For example, many people break the 2nd Commandment by taking the Lord’s Name in vain. They use it casually as a curse word or simply an exclamation of surprise. We should only use the name of God or Jesus when praying or speaking about God in a reverent way. How do you change this bad habit? First, you must be conscious of the fault and when you catch yourself speaking in that way, follow it, at least in your heart, with the opposite phrase, such as, “Blessed be God, blessed be His holy Name”. If you work on it, you can change, but even a little thing like that is not easy. It you are dealing with addictive habits of things life alcohol, marijuana or pornography, you have a much more difficult task before you. Also, long standing ways of thinking are tough to change, such as, thinking we have no value and are unlovable or we can’t accomplish anything worthwhile or that we have been such sinners that God can’t forgive us. These are false, but they can affect a person’s entire life. The truth is that you are a child of God, who loves you better than the best of fathers. He wants your trust and repentance and gives you a dignity that no accomplishment in this world can equal. To change false ideas about ourselves is most difficult, but it can be done with prayer and effort. Nothing is impossible for God.

The Second Reading of St. Paul to Philemon, is the shortest of St. Paul’s letters. He wrote to a Christian convert named Philemon about a runaway slave of his named Onesimus. Paul met Onesimus in jail and through St. Paul words and example converted to Christianity. Roman law gave absolute power over the fate of a slave who ran away from his master. Now it was time to send Onesimus back to his master and so Paul wrote a letter to help Philemon see that he should not treat his runaway slave with cruelty but as a brother, a fellow Christian.

St. Paul made a pun with his name. Onesimus means “useful”. Paul wrote: “**I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.**” This was a real test of faith for Philemon. Would he revert to the ways of pagans and the culture around him, or would he now act as a Christian with love and mercy? We don’t know what happened when Onesimus returned, but we do know from historical records that there was a freed slave who later became a bishop named Onesimus.