

I received my graduate degree in liturgical studies from St. John's University in Collegeville, MN. My professors were incredibly bright. My education was top notch. But I was also educated in another way. The students at that graduate school came from all over the United States, Canada, and from a host of other nations. Their perspective and their experience of Church and the world made me look at my faith and the Universal Church in a different light. I also received a cultural education from those students who used colloquialisms and expressions which were sometimes perplexing and amusing.

When I was heading to class one morning, a priest friend from Australia told me I should probably put on a jumper since it was cold outside. "A jumper," I asked. "Yes," he said. Like I'm wearing. "Oh, a sweater," I stated. And I thought, "how did he get jumper from a sweater?"

My priest friend from Canada also had his share of unique expressions. One day, he talked about the "hydro" being out in our dorm. I assumed we had no water and was surprised to learn that it was the electricity which was out. When we grabbed a beer on Saturday nights, he told me to be sure I didn't develop a "Molson muscle". That turned out to be a beer belly. He also forgot his wallet one evening when we went to dinner and apologized that he only had a "Loonie" and a "Toonie" on him. I didn't understand the reference to a crazy person and a cartoon. With that he pulled from his pocket a Canadian \$1 and \$2 coin.

Even the local Minnesotans spoke what seemed like “Martian” at times. At the first lunch I went to in the school dining hall, I was told to try the hotdish. “Hotdish,” I wondered. All the plates were behind the serving counter in the cafeteria. “How was I supposed to get one from there and why should it be hot,” I wondered. I was informed that hotdish was “casserole” – more than likely leftovers with a tater-tot base. (To be honest, it was pretty good.) Minnesotans often talked about going to the cities, which I thought was a quick trip to the neighboring towns of Waite Park, St. Joe, or St. Cloud next to the university. But they were referring to the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. As I caught on to the local vernacular I found myself even saying “uff da” when exasperated.

To understand my Minnesotan, Canadian, and international friends, I needed to have a handle on their language.

To comprehend what Jesus is saying in today’s gospel, we must understand his language and the expressions that were used in his culture. The word “hate” which Jesus uses in today’s gospel when speaking of how to treat our parents, spouses, and children doesn’t literally mean to despise them or wish them harm. Rather the word infers that God must be the priority. Everything else - parents, spouses, and children - come second. The idea is that when God is first in our lives, we will do an even better job of loving parents, spouses, and children.

The theme of putting God first has been the main topic of the gospel for the last several Sundays. Jesus keeps returning to that subject because we don’t quite get it yet. And so here we are in church, at Mass, on another Sunday – doing our level best to

make God first. God is to be first before family. He is first in our suffering or while we carry our crosses, helping us through those trying times and helping us to not despair. He is more important than success at work or financial security because he is the source of all we have and are. We only have possessions or the ability to work because God has first graced us with those gifts.

Secondly, Jesus instructs us in today's gospel that our pursuit of faith and our practice of religion are lifelong endeavors. For some, participating in the sacraments is only a cultural tradition. To that end, this is what some folks say at times. "I'm baptizing my baby because grandma thinks it's a good idea." "Despite my indifference to the faith, I'll have my children receive their First Holy Communion because I don't want them to be embarrassed when their peers go through that ritual." "I'm going to be Confirmed because that means a big party from my parents and signals the end of any kind of religious education and formation." Practicing our faith and receiving the sacraments is something we are called to do throughout our lives. Because they sustain us each day while also preparing us for the Kingdom of God that is to come.

To illustrate his point, Jesus uses the image of a king who plans for battle before he engages in war. And even when fighting, battles are rarely linear. Great military leaders continue to pivot and re-strategize based on how the battle is going. And those battles sometimes last for generations.

Jesus uses another example – that of building a tower. How many of us can relate to that example as we renovate our homes or a facility? The success of our building projects depends on

how we plan, how we budget, how we stay on top of a project manager, how we evaluate and change some things based on how the construction unfolds. Often, the success of such projects depends on our ability to adapt, refocus, and follow through.

It always makes me sad when I hear someone leaving the Church or giving up the faith because some event didn't go as they imagined it should or because they experienced a roadblock along the way. Faith is lifelong, preparing us for eternal life. It can never be measured by how easily things went. It can only be measured by how faithful we are and how devoted we remain.

That's what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel. Faithfulness, devotedness, persistence – even when we doubt, struggle, or tussle with someone at Church – these are the hallmarks of a genuine and deep rooted faith.

On the day of our baptism, we are signed with the cross. As we begin every prayer, from Grace Before Meals to a burial ritual at the cemetery, we begin with the Sign of the Cross. As faithful Catholics, the sign we constantly make over our bodies time and again is the Sign of Cross. It is a sign of dedication and sacrifice. To the uninitiated, the cross may seem to indicate defeat. But looked at through the lens of faith, it shows what is possible – new life and resurrection with Christ as we remain faithful and united with him in all things.

Today and in a particular way this gospel challenges us to once again recommit ourselves to Christ. We recommit ourselves to working on and nurturing our faith for the rest of our lives. We recommit ourselves to living out that faith even when we are

challenged or when things don't work out as we hoped for or imagined in Church. The one constant in our lives is Christ. Faith in Christ is the one thing that holds us steady and constant – as we place ourselves under the grace and care of Christ and make him first in all things. With God's grace, may we do just that on this 7th of September 2025 and always.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.