

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – September 16, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 830 words

The relationship between faith and works of which St. James speaks this week in the second reading is a very important one for us to reflect upon. On the one hand, he makes it clear that faith is meant to be expressed in some way: it is not a merely private and personal affair. In other words, our life must be coherent with the faith we hold. On the other hand, in expressing that faith through works, we must beware of certain excesses or misunderstandings that it is possible to hold.

The failure to live one's life in a way that is coherent with one's faith need not be seen as the special province of a select few; no, we all struggle with it in some way. Yes, there are those more visible examples, one of which would be those politicians who publicly support morally problematic things while maintaining that they are somehow "personally opposed" to them. Such cases are a serious failure of expressing one's faith through works. Rather than focus on outlying examples, though, we should consider how this failure could affect us.

And that of course has to do with our daily struggle with sin and temptation. We are often tempted to do things that are contrary to the tenets of our faith. The living out of our faith through works is thus intimately connected with our personal process of conversion. It is connected with the work of grace, which transforms us, bringing out our better selves and helping to "retire", as it were, the fallen man or woman that we begin as in life. Thus we ask the Lord to increase our faith and help us to live it more steadily and consistently.

There are excesses and misunderstandings of which we must be aware, also. Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) warned about what he called the "heresy of action"; it could also be called the "heresy of busy-ness".¹ It is the almost-feverish focus on doing good works, disconnected from a proper interiority. What I mean by that is that it does not lead to our sanctification. Let's call it "resume building faith": I will do as much as I can, and even wear myself out doing it – but apart from this impressive resume, I might not have much else to show for it in the end.

No, the expression of our faith through works must be firmly rooted in our interior life, which is to say, in our life with Christ – our personal relationship with him. It should flow from prayer and lead back to it. In this way, we also avoid the risk of living the faith as a cold list of commandments. When we reflect on our faith in prayer – asking the Lord to increase it and helps us to live it out better – we easily start to see the areas where we need to act, and we sense also the guidance of the Lord in choosing the particular works for that action.

So much for excesses; I will conclude with a misunderstanding. As we reflect, the question arises: but what about those who are unable to go out and do good works? What about the sick and homebound? What about those who are confined to bed-rest? And in reflecting on such situations, there emerges an answer that applies to us all – that is, even to those who are able to go out and do the works of faith in an external way. And that has to do with taking up the cross, about which our Lord spoke in the gospel. Suffering with him is a work of faith.

Whenever there is a decree granting an indulgence, it lists the particular works and prayers one must complete – visiting a shrine, praying for the Holy Father's intentions, and so forth – to gain that indulgence. And it also indicates how an incapacitated person may obtain it: by uniting themselves spiritually to the works being performed; by doing them only insofar as one is able; and by offering one's suffering to the Lord. Suffering with Jesus is an important work of faith and one that must not be overlooked.

Indeed, the challenge of accepting and embracing the crosses of life may bring us back to that struggle that I mentioned in the beginning: the struggle of living our faith consistently and

¹ See his 1950 Letter to Clergy, *Menti nostrae*.

coherently. We so often are tempted to avoid and eschew the cross when it comes to find us. But when we accept it, offering our sufferings to the Lord – even doing so for specific intentions – we complete an important work of faith that also sanctifies us, making us more like Christ. Suffering for the Church is an important act of faith at this time in history.

We can end with a brief prayer: Lord, increase our faith. Help us to live it out. Let that living-out flow from our relationship with you. Help us to take up our crosses and follow you. Lord, increase our faith. Amen.