

## 9. Denying oneself to follow Christ

When James and John say that they can drink the cup of Christ, it is like they have made religious profession, it is like they have bound themselves forever with their wives in marriage, it is like they have promised during the Easter Vigil, like every Christian, to be faithful to their baptism until death, and to renounce all that is opposed to our belonging to Christ. These are true and serious commitments, are free, and in fact Jesus takes them seriously, he accepts their “solemn profession”: “We can!” – “My cup you will drink!” (Mt 20:22–23).

Peter does the same: “I will lay down my life for you!” (Jn 13:37); “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Mt 26:35).

But then they will continue to fall, they will all flee, will deny him. We could say: what a disaster! But we know that we would also have to say “what a disaster” about ourselves especially, about our profession, or, for one who is married, about his marriage, or, for one who is ordained, about his priesthood. What a disaster are our commitments, our promises, our vows! I know of a bishop who, at the moment of asking the ordinands, “Do you promise to obey your bishop?”, interrupted himself and said loudly: “It’s pointless to ask it, since you never obey!”

It is true, we are often little worthy of trust in the commitments we take on. Each of us knows it about himself, even if externally maybe everybody thinks of us as models of fidelity. And yet, and this is what I want to emphasize, even if Jesus knows all this better than we do, even before we experience our slips and falls, Jesus takes our commitments, our promises, and professions seriously. In the face of the “We can!” of James and John, he does not shake his head laughing as if he stood before two irresponsible children. He takes them seriously: “My cup you will drink!”

But we must immediately understand something indispensable for living out every commitment, every promise and vow. There is a moment when we say, “I can do it!” or “I want to do it!”, when, that is, we say “Yes” and Christ receives our “Yes” and He makes us a promise: “My cup you will drink!”, that is: “Fine, I receive your commitment to give your life for me and with me, even to death!” But after this moment normally one does not die suddenly, like so many young martyrs or saints whom the Lord took immediately with himself. After this moment Jesus tells us, or repeats in a stronger and clearer way, the last words that he said to Peter in the Gospel of John: “Follow me!” (Jn 21:19).

All the commitments, the promises, the vows – Jesus ratifies them fundamentally and essentially with these words: “Follow me!” For that reason, it is in the light of these words that we must understand and live out all our commitments, promises, and vows. All is for the sake of following Jesus, and it is only following Jesus that we fulfill our vows, that we live out a fidelity, that we recover it when it goes slack. The Lord grants us always to be able to lift ourselves back up from every slip or fall. But it is pointless to get back up if we do not start following again. One does not get back up in order to stand still: you get back up to walk. We have made a vow, we are committed, with baptism, with religious profession, with matrimony or ordination, we have committed ourselves, devoted ourselves, to walking behind Christ,

following Christ. To follow Christ is the whole direction of our life, the only path of our fidelity, the only way to arrive at the end, at the goal for which we live.

It is only by following Christ that we can pass from our interests, closed in on ourselves, to the beauty and happiness of pursuing always the interests of Christ, as St. Paul and the whole New Testament recommend to us.

St. Benedict does not employ the term “follow” many times in reference to Christ, but the few times are quite significant.

The most intense expression is found in chapter 4 of the Rule, on the instruments of good works. After having listed the ten commandments and the golden rule of not doing to others what one does not want others to do to oneself (Rb 4:1–9), it seems like he wants to start a new section of instruments, passing, so to say, from the Old to the New Testament, and he writes: “*Abnegare semetipsum sibi, ut sequitur Christum*” (4:10). It is not enough to translate this only with, “Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ,” because St. Benedict reinforces the denial of self by saying “*semetipsum sibi*,” that is “renouncing oneself to oneself.” He asks us really to follow Christ with our whole “I.” He asks us to renounce every interest of our own to let ourselves be defined only by the interests of Christ. The point is not the annihilation of one’s own “I,” one’s own person, as if we were tossing ourselves into a fire that consumes and destroys us completely. Jesus is not a consuming fire: Jesus is the Way to follow, for he is the way that leads us to the fulfillment of all that we are; Christ is the Truth to embrace, for he is also the complete truth of ourselves; Christ is the Life of our life: only with Him can we truly live, so alive that we live eternally (cf. Jn 14:6).

Benedict will take this understanding back up and express it most deeply when, at the end of the Rule, he will ask the monks “to prefer absolutely nothing to Christ, so that he may lead us all together to eternal life” (RB 72:11–12).