

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023 A

One of the most characteristic devotions of Lent is the Stations of the Cross – snapshots, if you will, of 14 moments in the last hours of the life of Jesus, rich food for reflection on the love and mercy of God.

Over the years of praying the Stations, I have been inspired by the sequence of the 4th, 5th, and 6th Stations ... *three consecutive encounters of Jesus, carrying the Cross, with those who support Him. His mother* offers her presence, compassion, and love – her heart pierced with a sword, as Simeon had long ago foretold, and understanding fully the cost of her words to Gabriel over 30 years before – “Let it be done according to your word.” Veronica cannot remove the Cross, but she humanizes the One Who carries it for a moment, wiping away the stinging sweat and blood from His face. And between these two women, there is Simon of Cyrene, a passerby, a visitor from a Roman colony with a Jewish community some 800 miles away. It would have taken him several weeks to walk this far, maybe his only visit to Jerusalem for the Passover. Dragged at random from the crowd, he becomes tainted by association with this criminal Jesus, and so is prohibited from sharing the Passover ritual. *We can easily imagine Simon annoyed, angry, embarrassed, humiliated.* Of all the hundreds of people in this crowd, *why me?* What happened after this moment, we do not know ... did he stay to watch the crucifixion, remain until Jesus died? Or did he flee the scene as soon as possible? History does not record this. But we DO know that a generation later, his sons Alexander and Rufus are recognized names in the Church at Rome. Somehow, somewhere, Simon came to know just who that condemned man really was.

The intervening years are lost to us; *but we can definitely say that Simon of Cyrene was the first to literally take up the Cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.* He helped the Lord bear this burden, the means of the world’s redemption, lending his strength, even if reluctantly, on the way of the Cross. Jesus had told Peter to get behind him, as a rebuke for his worldly way of thinking that cannot factor in the Cross in any positive sense; *but Simon is behind him in a different way, as a co-worker in the mystery of salvation.* What must it have been like for Simon just days later to hear the rumors: this Jesus was alive

again, and his followers claimed He was God Who died in the flesh and rose from death to conquer death ... and to know he had carried that Cross and followed Him.

The Fifth Station teaches us a further lesson as well. Not only did Simon help Jesus, but *Jesus let Simon do so*. While this journey with the Cross was His mission from the Father, *He joined others to Himself in carrying it out*. And it remains so to this day ... we are called to help one another bear the burdens that can become the means of redemption and new life, touched by the mystery of Christ's presence and grace. Sometimes, no doubt, we will feel like Simon ... chosen at random to help another who might be a stranger to us ... perhaps annoyed, embarrassed, reluctant. Like Mary, we can show compassion and love; like Veronica, we can humanize another's sufferings by a gesture of kindness; and like Simon, we can do the labor of taking up the Cross and following in the footsteps that lead through Calvary to an empty tomb and victory over fear, suffering, and even death. The paradox Jesus spoke to the disciples also challenges us and every generation of His followers: *“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” – a life we trust Simon indeed found, following step by step behind Jesus*.