

**TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - SEPTEMBER 9, 2007 - NATIONAL SHRINE OF  
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The words of Jesus that we have just heard may be shocking to our ears: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” If this is the cost of discipleship, who will be willing to pay it, especially in a society and culture that so prizes family life? But even back in the ancient world, the words were sufficiently shocking that St. Matthew, in his Gospel, tones them down: If anyone loves family more than me, he is not worthy of me...”

But even if one agrees that Matthew correctly interprets the words of Jesus, perhaps it is worth pausing over them for a moment. Jesus is concerned that people recognize what may be called for if they are to follow after Jesus, if they are to be Christians. What is this going to cost? Think like the building contractor: Do I have enough money to finish a tower? Or like a king: Do I have enough troops for this war? Well, he asks anyone who wants to follow him: Am I willing to place even my most sacred relationships and obligations into second place in my affections? Am I willing to lose them, to sacrifice them? If it comes to a choice between love of Christ and love of spouse or child or parent, which will I choose? Where does one’s ultimate fidelity lie?

We may say, and hope, that such choices will never be required of us, and if they never are, then we are fortunate. But Christian history has many examples of moments in which, in order to be faithful to Christ men and women put family, friends, tribe, ethnic group, nation in second place. We can think of martyrs who paid with their lives, or of other more silent witnesses to Christ. But it is not just extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances that we should think of. These words of Jesus are addressed to us, too. In our everyday lives, do we place God and Christ above all else? Or are we always trimming our Christianity to fit with what others expect of us—others in our family, among our friends, in our workplace? Is it because we have made sure we are living a comfortable Christianity that we are made uncomfortable by such sharp words as those we hear today?

The Lord is not saying that these other objects of affection are wrong, that we should not love family, friends, nation. It is in fact a great blessing when family traditions, when ethnic community, when national loyalty coincide with and support our love of God and Christ. In the case of us Slovaks, this has been the case for centuries: our Slovak heritage being so closely tied to our Christian faith and Catholic fellowship. And we may be grateful for it. We may even pray that there will never come a day when we might have to choose between nation and God, between family and God.

The issue, however, is this: What do we love more? Whom do we love more? Family, country, friends? That is where the matter rests: Whom do we love more?