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The Easy Life?

By: Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio

Often Christians act surprised when they try to do good and things don't go according to plan. Sometimes it's small but irritating annoyances that get in the way, other times serious calamities.



The Bible says that "He shall wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away (Rev 21:1-5)." But this is a vision of the end of the story, of a new heavens and earth where God reigns unopposed. The problem is that we're still in the story, living in the old heaven and earth where there is yet plenty of opposition to the Lordship of Christ. Regarding our sojourn in this world, Paul says "we must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God." (Acts 14: 22)

Paul is speaking from experience here. The book of Acts recounts how he was run out of town, stoned nearly to death, beaten with rods, jailed, shipwrecked, and bitten by a poisonous snake. When he and his companions came into Macedonia, he says "our bodies had no rest but we were afflicted at every turn – fighting without and fear within" (2 Cor 7:6). Following Christ is evidently not a cake walk. God provides, but he does not necessarily provide comfort and convenience.

Why not? Because if we never experienced resistance, we'd never grow. After all, what do body-builders do? They expose their muscles to ever greater resistance, pushing against more and more weight. No pain, no gain. This is why James says "count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2) How kind of our heavenly Father to double as our personal trainer and add more weight to the bar from time to time.



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Now it is easy to see how we should expect trials to ensue when we are dealing with those outside the Church. But often the greatest trials come from dealing with those within. Paul and Barnabas saw things differently and so went their separate ways (Acts 15:39). And the Judaizing Christians were a constant thorn in the Paul's side.



Yet the Lord gives us the new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us (Jn 13: 34). The context of this command? Jesus had just washed the disciples' feet, and Judas had responded to this act of love by slipping out into the darkness to betray his master.

We are, then, to wash the feet, even of those who annoy us, or worse, betray us. This does not mean always agreeing with them or acquiescing to their wishes. But we are to love them, and lay our lives down for them.

Clearly, this is not natural. It is natural, rather, to love those who love us, agree with us, think like us. That's the point. We are no longer limited to what comes naturally. The death and resurrection of Christ has cast the fire of divine, supernatural love upon the earth. We have become "sharers in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4) and we know from John that the nature of God is love (1 Jn 4:8). It is now possible, though never easy, to love one another as he has loved us. Though often painful, the experience of such love produces something that the world is restlessly searching for but can never seem to find— fullness of joy (Jn 15:11) and the peace which passes all understanding (Col 3:15).

We are to love one another so that our joy might be full. But there is another reason. The world needs to know that Jesus is different from the many false prophets that constantly come and go. How will they know that he is truly the one sent from heaven? By the loving unity of his disciples (Jn 17:23).

So what does the world see when it looks upon those who call themselves his disciples? Not only are we divided between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. But even within churches, we find bickering between conservatives and liberals, traditionalists and progressives. Is there any wonder why there are many who are skeptical about the claim that Jesus died "to gather into one the scattered children of God?" (Jn 11:52).

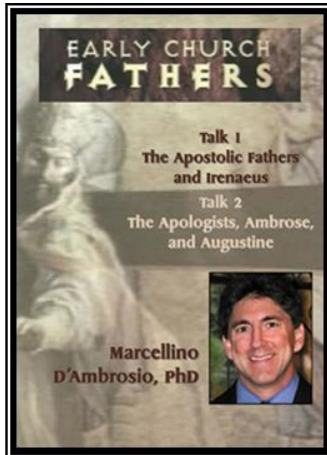
Only through many trials will Christian unity be attained and preserved. But it is not an optional extra. It was his last wish, his last prayer, his parting command.



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