

[Readings: Num. 21:4b-9; Ps. 78; Phil. 2:6-11; John 3:13-17]

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to go against the grain, take a stand that was unpopular among your friends, family and peers? The youthful college student evangelizer Charlie Kirk did that for most of his brief adult life. This week, it cost him that brief life.

Not everyone welcomes the Good News, especially if it means having to change some regular patterns of thinking in their lives. If it means changing what prejudices and hatreds they learned growing up. It means ongoing conversion.

We might call this the Nicodemus experience – breaking from the pack to follow a teacher who brings faith to life for you. Cherish and honor your own “inner Nicodemus,” especially when it comes time to take an unpopular stand for the sake of your Catholic faith.

Teachers should know more than their students. I think most of us hope that the people who are training us in any capacity have more expertise than those whom they are teaching. But we’ve probably all taken courses in which we found out that we knew more than our teachers, or we’ve held jobs in which we had more experience and talent than our supervisors did.

Nicodemus has such a credibility gap. He’s a teacher of the people, a member of the Sanhedrin. Yet after hearing Jesus, Nicodemus realizes he’s discovered a teacher who knows more than he does. And when Jesus tells him that the way to all truth includes being “born again,” Nicodemus misunderstands him, imagining an impossible second physical birth. Returning to the womb to be reborn.

Nicodemus should not have been so uncomprehending. Judaism itself expected a second birth from those attracted to its teachings. The fact that Nicodemus questions this image implies that he's not been doing HIS homework.

Yet there's something redeemable about Nicodemus. He keeps coming back to Jesus even under cover of darkness, afraid to be recognized and known as a disciple. He may be ignorant, but at least he knows that he does not know -- which puts him far ahead of the unthinking mobs in the streets. And far ahead most of the Pharisees, Sadducees and elders in the Temple.

Jesus tells him that second birth means that he has to start over, from scratch, a new beginning, and Nicodemus is prepared to try. This puts him head and shoulders above the multitudes who listen to Jesus politely for an afternoon, chalk up the experience as amusing or interesting, even entertaining and return to their usual routines.

Those who stay, like Nicodemus, will have their ignorance challenged, their understanding broadened. They'll learn that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. They'll come to know that Jesus doesn't come to judge and condemn the world, but to rescue it.

Those who hang around for the long haul will come to experience the sign at the center of great mystery: the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ. They will come to appreciate that a second birth is also a form of death to the old way of seeing and believing and behaving. The Holy Cross changes everything. It makes the strange specter of death into an ally toward fuller, more abundant life.

Two of the most freeing experiences in my priesthood have happened in the last twenty years of my life. The first, was when I realized that I was not God. Took me twenty years to learn that. I am not God. I am not Super Priest or Super Pastor. God is God and I am just Fr. Nick. The second, was learning that I didn't know everything. That led me to say to my staff and to my parishioners, "I glory in my imperfection." That doesn't mean that ignorance is bliss. It means that you and I are still learning.

Like Nicodemus, we are still students of life and students of faith. We don't have all the answers. We cannot do everything ourselves. And there is a great freedom in that.

On this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we are invited to ask ourselves, "Why did Jesus Christ do it? Why did He suffer the indescribable trauma of being scourged, having a crown of thorns smashed onto His head, and suffering the most humiliating and painful form of death – crucifixion? The answer comes from today's Gospel: John 3:16-17: *"For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him."* The death of Jesus Christ on the Cross freed us from our sins.

That's what Jesus Christ learned on the Cross. That's what we learn when we unite ourselves and the crosses life throws our way, to the Holy Cross of the Crucified Christ. When we move from grumbling and complaining to letting go of our ego and letting go of our desire to be in control. It is both thrilling and terrifying! AMEN!