

Not too long after I started at the seminary, I remember we went on a retreat, and we were asked to draw a picture showing how we felt at that moment. It was about a month into the program, and I remember drawing a stick figure at the base of a huge mountain about to start climbing, implying that the stick figure could not see the top of the mountain.

Seminary for me started 21 years ago this week, and having just finished college and having people my age now starting their careers, I was thinking this will take a while and may be a little challenging.

Indeed, that turned out to be accurate; for as my moral theology professor would remind us, when you say “yes” to priesthood you say “yes” to all that goes with it too; the academics; the prayer; the ongoing formation. And that continued after seminary. It’s been a great journey; to quote Archbishop Flynn who ordained me, “If I had 100 lives to live I’d live them all as a priest.” But as with any vocation, there come moments that can be quite challenging.

This is true for all of us. We can chose to escape or to avoid responsibility; and some do, living every day like Peter Pan. But even Peter had to face

Captain Hook. And for you and me, if we take our faith seriously, what we'll find is that it's costly. Society might not like us; even members of our family might not like us, because the Christian is different; we live in this world, focused on the next and as such do what we can to bring heaven - which is perfect love - into this world. Doing so is tough. But the call to discipleship is radical.

About 10 years ago, I preached at Christmas on the movie *The Scarlet and the Black*, where Msgr. Hugh O'Flaherty, played by Gregory Peck, is remembered for his courageous and ingenious ways of saving Jewish people from execution during World War II. Likewise, Pope Pius XII was remembered by the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, as follows: "Jews will always remember what the Catholic Church did for them by order of the Pope during the Second World War."

Nearly 70 other persons were recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations by the Jewish community" for all they did to save men, women, and children from persecution during World War II. Among the list is Elizabeth Hesselblad, the only other Swedish person to be canonized besides St. Bridget, who was canonized just a few years ago by Pope Francis.

Elizabeth was born on June 4, 1870 in Faglavik, Sweden, a very small village with a population of only 5,000.

Her parents, August and Cajsa, had Elizabeth baptized in the Lutheran denomination. Elizabeth was the fifth of her parents' 13 children — nine boys and four girls. Three children died at a very young age.

The family barely survived on the income generated by the grocery store they owned.

They were faithful and devout Lutherans attending services every Sunday. The Hesselblads were raised to love God and respect all life. They taught their children that God alone provided the ability to accomplish anything.

In 1878 Elizabeth nearly died from diphtheria and scarlet fever. She recovered, but became seriously ill again in 1882. This illness gave her stomach ulcers and internal hemorrhages, leaving her susceptible to recurrences for the rest of her life.

Rather than complaining, she wrote, "God gave me early on the grace to

understand that difficulties are sent to be conquered. With God's help, everything can be overcome, but, without His support, all effort is useless."

The family's situation made it necessary for Elizabeth to work, and after two years, she decided to go to America for a better life. On July 9, 1888, she arrived in New York and entered the Roosevelt Hospital; she first came in contact with Catholics while caring for workers injured on the building site of the future St. Patrick's Cathedral. When she was assigned to care for a nun in a convent, she became even more interested in Catholicism. After a powerful experience of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, she was received into the church on Aug. 15, 1902.

This was not her only exposure to Catholics.

One stormy night Elizabeth braved the elements to summon a priest for a dying Catholic who sought to confess his sins. The priest praised her, saying, "May God bless you, dear little sister, for your attention and zeal . . . you cannot yet understand what a marvelous service you render to so many people. . . . One day you will understand; you will find the way."

And so she set about trying to find the way after that. Elizabeth continued to search for a church where she would truly experience Christ. She attended a variety of denominations, but was especially intrigued by the practices of the Catholics, such as the way they frequently genuflected and made the Sign of the Cross. Why did they do all that? In time she'd come to see the exterior practices were signs of something far deeper in a person's soul - that of a relationship with Christ and His Church.

In 1894 Elizabeth took a vacation and returned to Sweden for the first time in six years. She came back to America, where she then met the Cisneros family, who were Catholic. In 1900 they all traveled to Sweden to visit Elizabeth's family. After Sweden they went to Brussels, and since the Cisneros family was Catholic and it was the Feast of Corpus Christi, Elizabeth accompanied them in the Corpus Christi procession at St. Gertrude Cathedral.

As the bishop drew near with the monstrance, Elizabeth stepped back since she did not want to offend her friends by remaining standing. She thought, "Before you alone, Lord, I kneel."

Yet when the monstrance was in front of her, she experienced a great peace and was permeated with the thought, "I am the One you seek," as she gazed on our Lord. She fell to her knees in her first adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

From that time, Elizabeth became closer and closer to the Catholic Church, despite her biggest hurdle, the Church's devotion to Mary.

Another obstacle was the sacrifice her dear friend, a daughter of the Cisneros, made when she joined a religious order. Elizabeth could not understand such a dedication causing a separation from the family.

Furthermore, the faults and failings of Catholics disappointed her. Slowly, all these issues were resolved as she learned more about Mary, the love of Jesus as a spouse, and the mercy of God.

Elizabeth began meeting with a Jesuit, Fr. J.G. Hagen, who eventually brought her into the Church at her insistence. When she begged for

entrance before she left for Europe, he was reluctant, but she responded adeptly, “My Father, forgive me, but I have fought darkness these twenty years; for many years I have studied the Catholic faith, and have prayed for a strong faith.”

Fr. Hagen subsequently received her into the Church on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1902. At the end of the year, Elizabeth went to Rome and visited the house of St. Bridget. In 1904, in Rome, Elizabeth dedicated herself to promoting the work of St. Bridget.

Echoing the warning of Jesus in our Gospel, when she went back home to visit family and told them of her conversion, her parents were distressed by the announcement that she was now a Catholic. Her distraught mother begged her to tell no one about her shameful news. But when you are in love as she was with God, you don't keep things secret. The rest of her life was devoted to this evangelization and work of God.

She applied to the Carmelite Convent in Rome and was accepted on a trial basis because of her poor health. Despite falling gravely ill, she did recover

and was allowed to stay. Her family urged her to return to Sweden, but she resisted their pleas.

She petitioned the Holy See to be able to make religious vows under the Rule of the Order which Bridget had founded. That order had a vital presence in Sweden prior to the Reformation, when the Protestants kicked them out. She received special permission for this from Pope Pius X in 1906.

On June 22, 1906, Elizabeth received the Brigittines' gray habit, making her vows to Fr. Hagen. In 1911, English postulants joined her in Rome and together they opened the first house. On March 4, 1920, Elizabeth became abbess of the Order of the Holy Savior. What's so neat though is what followed in Sweden and all of these Protestant countries.

Elizabeth returned to Sweden; while there, Elizabeth founded a home for elderly and ailing patients seeking assistance. For the first time in nearly 300 years, religious habits were seen in Sweden.

Elizabeth stopped in Switzerland on her way to Rome to establish a Brigittine convent and soon another was founded in England. In October 1928, when the Carmelites left Rome, Elizabeth and her sisters took over their house.

In 1935, another convent was opened in Vadstena, Sweden. In 1937, two nuns left to begin work in India.

Repeatedly to her sisters she said, "We must nourish a great love for God and our neighbors; a strong love, an ardent love, a love that burns away imperfections, a love that gently bears an act of impatience, or a bitter word, a love that lets an inadvertence or act of neglect pass without comment, a love that lends itself readily to an act of charity."

During World War II, this manifested itself as Elizabeth's courage and love for her neighbor led her to rescue Jews from persecution. For example, she saved 12 Jews in Rome by hiding them in a convent until the city was liberated in June of 1944 and she also assisted Italian Communist refugees and Germans and Poles.

Her devotion also led her to not be afraid to approach people who were of others faiths to talk to them about the Catholic faith; this was instrumental in the conversion of Eugenio Zolli, the chief rabbi of Rome, and a Baptist minister, Piero Chuminelli.

Summarizing her life, an article on "Catholic Online" notes: "She walked with God, clinging to the cross of Christ, who was her companion from the days of her youth. "For me," she said, "the way of the Cross has been the most beautiful of all because on this path I have met and known my Lord and Savior." Though there was suffering, her life brought so many to Jesus; she eternal life in 1957 at the age of 86.

So, you want to be a disciple? Well as her story shows, it's not easy. And so is the case with so many of the saints; Aquinas' family locking him in a tower for a year when he wanted to become a Dominican taking a vow of poverty; Francis standing up to his father who wanted him to focus on the family business and making a comfortable life for himself, giving him back the very clothes on his back to go off and serve God; or Catherine cutting her hair when her parents just wanted her to get married to a nice, wealthy

young man and she felt called to become a nun. And that's just at the start of the vocation. Just like Saint Elizabeth, the saints go through so much as they try to reform orders, help the poor, evangelize and do the work of God. But what they all share is an attitude of never giving up, because they see the bigger picture, and that is their lives revolve around Christ.

In this week's Gospel, we hear Jesus give a challenging message. Remember there are many more than just the 12; there are other followers. And perhaps they are expecting a "happy-clappy" kind of message. Not so much this week. "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Yikes.

Well, obviously Jesus is not saying we should somehow hate our families.

What He is doing here is affirming His divinity. He is not like some celebrity or prophet; rather He is the Messiah. God from God, Light from Light. And so as we often sing at Mass, "Lord, you are the center of my life," that is the point. God has to come first. It's what led the saints do sometimes have to stand up to their families; and for us, the point is if your family, or your job,

or your ambition and getting ahead; if any of these things are what you live for as the supreme good in your life, then we have a problem. As Augustine said, love God, and then love all else for the sake of God.

So what does this look like in action?

Well, as a starting point, we have an ongoing relationship with God. We come to Mass not just to fulfill an obligation, but to come to know God; to listen to Him; to ponder His message; and as Saint Elizabeth did seeing the monstrance and understanding Jesus' Real Presence with her at that moment, wanting to fall more deeply in love with God every day.

We then choose to live for God. And this means serving our families - it means loving them, and making sacrifices for them, from getting up in the middle of the night to help a fussy child, being patient with a rebellious youth, or helping an aging parent. But (and this is where we may be at odds with family) it also means lovingly challenging them. As we saw in our Church during the abuse scandal, silence and ignoring the problems were what led to such horrible things for people and a greater scandal. In families, sometimes there is abuse, but more often than not it's a person in

that family engaging in an inappropriate relationship, or becoming more selfish that's a problem; or sometimes it is a faith issue or lack thereof where a person converts to the Catholic faith that can lead a family to treat them coldly or even disown them. Families are sources of so many great things, but also are places where problems so often go unaddressed, especially as people age; for it's one thing to correct a 7 year old (and many parents even then can't use the word "no") but another to say to your parents I'm becoming a Catholic or to your adult child I love you, but you haven't been to Mass in years or the choices your making are hurting you and this family, let's talk. But for the person who puts God first, that is what we do.

We also have to be introspective with ourselves. We go into battle daily as Christians. The work never ends. So do we have enough to see the project through? God provides, but we have to keep going back to Him. We challenge ourselves to make sure we are doing what the saints like Elizabeth do - going out into the world to set it on fire with the love of God. Are we willing to engage others and talk about the faith even when it's challenging? Are we willing to love as Jesus does and sacrifice for our

families and for others? Are we willing to do the work of the disciple not just when it's convenient but when it's challenging?

And lastly, when God is at the center, it changes how we live. Saint Elizabeth lived her life in this radical love for others and saw people as all loved by Christ; we must remember as a Christian, God is calling us to this new view. Like the second reading, when Paul writes the owner of Onesimus, who is a slave, that he should see him differently as "a brother" we are told. How often do we look at someone and sum them up based on their appearance, their religious background, their politics, or where they come from. It's nothing new - for as the Gospels remind us the people perplexed as to how a great prophet could come from Nazareth; and as Elizabeth's parents show us, on the one hand they had a love of God but lived in a world where Catholics were seen as virtually non-Christian. So it goes in our world now more than ever. These biases that cloud our spiritual vision due to original sin need to be overcome the more we grow closer to God. But hopefully every time we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, and ponder "this is my Body, given up for you," He helps us to see one another with greater spiritual clarity.

It's easy and fun to be around someone who tells us things we want to hear. It's also easy for some to think that Christianity means singing some songs, hearing a message of prosperity and "you can do it." Jesus does love us; and we will always hear a message of love and mercy. And it's great to feel spiritually uplifted. But Jesus will also challenge us and tell us things that will make us uncomfortable, or tempted to change the channel. And sadly, how easy it can be to become a person who says they believe in God, but ultimately leads a life for themselves, that ultimately ends in emptiness for themselves, and a life that could have done so much to make this world a better place and to win souls for heaven as Saint Elizabeth did with hers. Hopefully we realize at the end of the day, the goal isn't to have people at our wake talking about how great we were with a joke or on the golf course, or what a great party we could throw, but rather who share stories about the impact we made on them to feel loved and cared for; to help them see God and come to know Him. Easy? No. But what good we can do when, like Saint Elizabeth, we say "before you alone Lord, I kneel." We kneel before this God who is love, and then arise and go forth with Him into the world and take up our cross. So let us, Christians, not be afraid to get to work knowing that sometimes you have to go through Calvary to get to heaven.