Sometimes over the course of our lives, we all have to reflect on the fact with our choice to be a Catholic and follow Jesus comes a cost; namely the cost of discipleship. It's one thing to come to Mass, to say some prayers, to live out our faith in private. But if we are really seized by Jesus, there's a cost there when we are looking at His teachings, and applying them to how we live. It is costly to keep Jesus first. It's costly to challenge others with these teachings. And it's costly to look at our lives and realize that there needs to be changes made at times to how we live. But, this is the path to sainthood, and following Jesus, what a difference we can make in this world.

Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo, who lived in Madagascar in the 19th century and whose feast day was August 21, was born to a prominent family where at the time Christianity was illegal. Along with most of the Malagasy people, she practiced a sort of ancestor worship religion. When she was 13 however, the queen who had outlawed Christianity died and foreign missionaries began to preach publicly again. That same year, Victoire was enrolled in a school run by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. Their witness and instruction transformed her and she decided to be baptized at the age of 15.

Her family had stood alongside the persecuting queen. When Victoire told them of her decision to enter the Catholic Church, they were appalled. The pulled her out of Catholic school and sent her to a Protestant one instead, but her faith remained strong. Finally, citing her baptism as a betrayal of her race, they swore that if she went through with it, they wouldn't bury her with her family - the most profound act of rejection possible in her culture. But she was unmoved, declaring to her unsympathetic family that the missionaries would bury her with them. She was received into the Church and not kicked out of her family home, though tensions remained high.

Her heart was fixed on Christ, and she wanted to become a sister. But the Sisters of Saint Joseph pointed out that if she were to enter, her powerful family could make life intolerable for all Catholics in the country. She prayed and ultimately submitted, allowing her parents to arrange her marriage to the son of her uncle the prime minister.

Unfortunately her husband was a cruel man, and an alcoholic; eventually her own father urged her to divorce him. But she stayed with him, even though she had a right to leave for her own safety. For a time, she lived a

life of quiet joy and faith, interspersed with conflicts with her husband and her family of origin. But only a few years after her marriage, Protestantism became the official religion of Madagascar and persecutions began - subtle for most of the Catholics, but overt for her. Her uncle criticized her and threatened her day and night. Her family had slaves throw stones at her and once set an assassin on her. Her husband demanded that she leave her faith in submission to him. But still, she loved well and prayed hard, spending hours a day in prayer despite her many duties at court, and remained firm in her Catholic faith.

In 1883, the persecution of Catholics became more severe during the Franco-Hova War. All foreign missionaries were expelled from Madagascar; as they left, the priests entrusted the country's Catholics to Victorie, who was just the woman for the job. When the government locked the churches, she presented herself before the queen and the prime minister to object. When they stationed soldiers outside the churches to bar entry for prayer, Victoire calmly approached the armed men, saying, "If you must have blood, begin by shedding mind. Fear will not keep us from assembling for prayer." She stared them down, then led the assembled community into the church. Though the Eucharist was gone and there was

no Mass, still they prayed. Victoire explained, “I place before my mind the missionaries staying the Mass, and mentally attend all the Masses being said throughout the world.”

Victoire encouraged Madagascar’s Catholics, ensured that they had proper catechesis, and defended them in the face of government abuse. When the priests were readmitted three years later, they found a community of 21,000 Catholics on fire for their faith. Victoire acknowledged that she had she become a sister as she hoped, none of this would have been possible.

In 1888, her husband suffered a fall; when it became clear that his injuries were fatal, he asked for Baptism. She baptized him herself and saw the fruit of years of sacrifice as he died at peace with God. She spent the next 6 years of her life praying, serving, loving, but also refusing to compromise in matters of faith. Though she had no children, she became a spiritual mother to the Catholics of Madagascar. She worked with prisoners, lepers, and the abandoned poor. When the uncle who had persecuted her fell out of favor with the court, she cared for him too. Finally, at the age of 46, she went peacefully home to Christ.

She used her privilege to speak truth to those in power, fearless of the consequences she might face.

This week, we get a very challenging Gospel. As He is now into His ministry, Jesus has a group of people following Him. They have seen the miracles and heard Him preach, and something is very intriguing about this young rabbi. The crowds are growing and He's making a name for himself. Needless to say if Jesus were running for office his campaign manager probably would not have given him these words to say today to attract people to follow Him. He turns and says to the crowds, ***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. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."*** Not something you'd generally use these days to inspire people to come and follow you. Jesus here isn't telling us to literally hate family to follow Him, or to hate our lives. We see how important Mary and Joseph are to Him as He is patient and grows up in the home and is always loving; we see how family matters as well to Jesus as He cures the mother-in-law of Peter and visits her at her home. His point is that grace, while a free gift from God, cannot be cheap - meaning discipleship has a cost. He

uses this example of family as family ties and loyalty meant everything to people in His culture. His point is that if you say you love God, that love has to be central to everything in your life. And I think this gives us two challenges, namely how central is God in our lives, and how do we help others, especially in our families, to do the same thing?

With respect to the first question, it's worth thinking how much are we with God? The answer seems obvious, for we are all here this morning (evening) at Mass. But think to the rich young man. He's with Jesus too, he likes the message, he's followed the commandments. But then he goes away sad when Jesus says come sell what you have and follow me. He's not called to just be pretty good - he's called to great. To take it to the next level, not stay on the JV team. This is where we are called to go too.

To do this, we have to make God the ultimate good, not the many other things like a job, schooling, sports, or even our family. With God front and center we come to see if we are truly happy and living our lives as we should. All of this is so hard. And this is where we need to keep pushing ourselves. No coach says to a player "you are perfect." So in our case we keep asking ourselves where is my primary focus, and sometimes when we

are honest about it on a given day it may be wealth, power, pleasure, honor, the prideful self. Sitting with our conscience, we are able to pray and meditate so we can become the people we want to become, perfected into saints. With that too comes sacrifice - taking up our cross - meaning that it can entail suffering. From what Blessed Victoire endured to the daily suffering that comes with serving others, helping our families, and trying to grow in holiness by changing our choices, it's a daily commitment we make to be people of faith, hope and love.

And, coupled with that, we help others in our family to do the same by having the right perspective on our relationship. Again, Jesus does not literally mean we hate our families - but what He does mean is that we need to make sure they do not take the place of God in our lives, meaning cherish them - but God comes first. If we make family like gods, we put them in too central a position; Victoire would have remained a hidden Catholic, but because God was first, she preserved Catholicism in Madagascar. A parent who is too involved for instance can make a child live out hopes and dreams that aren't their own. With God front and center, a parent is willing to let their explore their own interests and pursue what God might be calling them to, but is also willing to teach them God's moral

law and realize they may face anger at times and be at peace with that. Other times an adult child needs to speak up to the truth when their parents or siblings when they might not want to hear it, such as when they stop going to Mass or are doing things that are harmful to their spiritual well being. This then continues into our engagement in the world as we try to evangelize, and there is such push back in our world, just like Blessed Victoire faced, in that people, and even governments including many in Europe that are stifling free speech in the name of “not offending” people, are reacting with hostility to God’s moral law. Again, we have to ask ourselves that question - do we want to be liked, or do we want to get people to heaven? If God is the center of my life, we can’t be afraid to go with Jesus to set the world on fire in the sense the fire needs to burn away the evil with the love of God, and it’s up to you and me to help people know what true love and true happiness in life are all about by doing the challenging things God directs us to do.

As Victoire’s relatives found out and as the powerful people in government found out, their power was fleeting and didn’t lead to happiness. Following Jesus does, but it’s costly. On our part, may we not make “Lord, You are the Center of My Life” not just a song we sing from time to time, but a true

way of life, fearing not taking up our crosses, fearing not suffering for the faith, fearing not being disliked or even hated by others, knowing that this is the cost of discipleship and in the process both we, and so many others, can one day become saints when we follow Jesus to Easter Sunday through Good Friday.