As we strive to follow the will of God, one of the things that will often happen is suffering as we do just that. And it's not to say that we should ever seek out suffering, but so often there is a cost when we listen to our conscience and do what we hear God telling us to do. People we think we can trust betray us. Others ostracize us or label us as we face a world that is so often hostile to God. But when we look back, what a person will find is that as Jesus changed the world through His trust in the Father to the end, so can we change this world when we live out our faith by putting God as the true center of our lives.

It's been said that some saints would have seemed absolutely ordinary had they not lived in extraordinary times, and Blessed Zdenka Schelingova was just such a one, a good sister who was forced to greatness by the circumstances of her life.

Born into a large Slovakian family in 1916, she was one of 10 children and from an early age learned a sense of responsibility and sacrifice from her parents and a deep practical faith. At the age of 13, when the Sisters of Charity of the Holy Cross came to her parish, she began to discern a call to the religious life. By the time she was 15, she had asked for permission

from her mom to join the community, and when she was 18 years old, she made her first vows taking the name “Zdenka.”

She studied nursing and radiology before entering the Sisters of Charity of the Holy Cross. She then began to work in the radiology department of the hospital where her community served. For 15 years, she lived a life poured out for Christ and his people, saying, “In my hospital service, I go from the altar of God to the altar of my work.” The sisters remembered her as a person who lived continually in God’s presence. She once wrote: “I want to do God’s will without paying attention to myself, my comfort, or my rest.” She would demonstrate love and compassion to everyone, especially sick hospital patients.

It was in these years of ordinary faithfulness that prepared her for the trial that was to come. When the Communists took over from the Nazis in 1948, the situation for the Church in Slovakia went from bad to worse. The Catholic Church was deprived of all rights and many clergy were persecuted. Religious orders were disbanded. Priests fled the country. Those who helped them flee were convicted of treason. To protect the community. Sr. Zdenka’s provincial superior asked the sisters not to resist

the restrictions imposed on them by the Communist government. Always obedient, Sr. Zdenka did as she was told - until one day, when compliance would cost a man's life. At that point, her years of faithfulness bore fruit in heroism.

A condemned priest was brought to the hospital where she worked, accused of being a Vatican spy. Hearing that he was bound for Siberia and death, Sr. Zdenka slipped sleeping pills into the tea of the guard on duty and smuggled the priest to safety, guided by contacts of hers who would help him over the border into Austria. Immediately afterward, she went to the chapel, knelt before the Blessed Sacrament, and prayed, "Jesus, I offer my life for his. Save him!"

A few days later she attempted to smuggle 3 priests and 3 seminarians out of the country and was caught, sentenced and thrown into prison. She was interrogated and suffered greatly, including being tortured by the police. The torture she underwent left her body mutilated from the continual kicks by the police.

She would be transferred from one prison to another, but the most difficult thing for her was being away from the Blessed Sacrament. The abuse had caused a malignant tumor to develop in her right breast.

It became clear that her health was declining rapidly, so rather than allow her to die in prison and seem a martyr to the people, officials released her.

But her suffering did not end when she left prison. She had learned that her fellow sisters saw her attempts to save the lives of priests as acts of disobedience; the sisters had been ordered to not resist, and Sr. Zdenka had been seen as a renegade. Unsure of what welcome she would receive; she made her way to the hospital she had worked at in Bratislava. She asked to be allowed in and was told that the superior feared what the police would say if they consorted with a convict. Her motherhouse said the same, and soon Sr. Zdenka, who had offered her whole life to Christ, was now homeless and dying, abandoned because she loved God completely and been faithful to his laws above the laws of her religious order and the regime of her country.

She finally found a home with a friend, Apolonia. It was only a week after this that she was taken to a hospital where she died at the age of 38. But just before her death, she looked to Apolonia and said, “Forgiveness is the greatest thing in life.”

She was later pardoned by the authorities in 1970, declared innocent with the government saying the facts were manipulated. She was declared a martyr by the Church, beatified by Saint John Paul in 2003.

What she understood was that while she loved this world, her life, and her religious community, there was a higher calling she had - namely following God, and that included a radical trust in Him and prioritizing His law above all else. And this week our Gospel hits us with a question: what is our top priority in life?

The mother and father image in the Gospel along with the son and daughter is meant to shock us. Of course we love our families; Jesus loved Mary and Joseph deeply. But God comes first. It’s what led many saints like Aquinas and Francis of Assisi to not give in when their parents didn’t approve of their vocations. So, the starting point for us as Christians is

asking, “do I really believe Jesus is not just my friend or a teacher, but my redeemer?” Sometimes, if we are honest, we may find we love ourselves, our careers, or winning the approval of others and being liked by people more than God. So, we need to ask ourselves: Do you put your trust in Him? Do you make time to listen to Him, discerning what His will is for you and what He is calling you to do? Do you trust in God to help your conscience be formed, so that even if family or friends or the world tells you something, you can truly know right from wrong? Will you follow God even when it’s hard to do and you have to say “yes” to something or “no” to something even if will be costly or make you look like someone who isn’t “with the times” or cause you to be ostracized? Bob knew his final destination is the kingdom of Heaven, and when we do, we’ll follow Him.

How this is done though is of course not easy, as Blessed Zdenka’s story reminds us.“ Whoever does not take up His cross and follow after me is not worthy of me” says our Lord. We don’t as Christians seek out suffering for the sake of suffering; at times though, through suffering, we may change for the better, such as the sacrifices for practicing or learning things that are difficult but make us better. When we offer our sufferings to God and sacrifice ourselves for Him and for others, we establish the habit of doing

these things. As the habit develops, it becomes virtuous. By establishing the virtue of offering our sufferings to God with joy, we replace the vices of complaining, despair, and persistent avoidance because we come to see that our sufferings are opportunities to imitate Christ. We see this in the things we sometimes suffer in life. For instance, there is suffering in saying “no” to things that we know aren’t spiritually good for us. There is also suffering in changing our lives for the better; think of a parent for instance who before children would go out a lot and then all of a sudden “grows up” and is now focused on their family and children. When we are trying to grow spiritually and as people, it’s easy to give up when the going gets tough. But when we keep at it, what we’ll find is the pain led so such incredible gain; the actions of love we do to make this world a better place. As one preacher put it, the cross is not given to us to destroy us, and it’s not given to us to test us. Rather it is given to us so that the power of God can be manifested in our weaknesses. God’s love has incredible power to transform, so may it transform us.

And lastly, Jesus speaks of hospitality; of giving a cup of cold water to someone. In the Biblical world that might be the difference between life and death. But being a Christian means true hospitality; not just having a dinner

party. Each of us has the power to change others for the better; be it a parent helping their child find their confidence and self-esteem; an adult-child caring for an aging parent; or people serving others. Sr. Zdenka helped others in need, but she also became a teacher in how her suffering the physical and mental anguish of even being rejected by other sisters, but she not only helped people in need like the priest she was getting to safety, but she was teaching others about what ultimately mattered, namely following God. So, who is God calling us to help, to listen to?

In our lives we have many loves, and surely Sr. Zdenka loved her family, loved her religious community, and of course her life. But she figured something out: namely we don't love creation more than the creator. She had the right order, understanding what was the Supreme Good in life. She listened to God. She followed her conscience, because her soul was focused solely on God and His will. It's why she took to hear the words Jesus told us last week to fear no one. Fear could have easily taken over her soul, but she was focused on a higher place and knew despite all she went through she was not alone. And in doing God's will, she helped to change the world.

As we turn to the Eucharist, we are again reminded of how much God loves us but also challenged - to welcome Jesus under our roof, not just part of our soul but on everything under that roof - and to truly receive Him by listening to Him and where He calls us to go and what He calls us to do. At times that will be a difficult journey, but as we heard last week, we need not be afraid. And at times we may be tempted to quit the journey when the going gets tough. But when we truly love the Lord with our whole heart, mind and soul, and are detached from the things of the world - even the best of things that we care about deeply - we can with Him do such incredible things to bring faith, hope and love into this world. When we gaze upon the crucifix, we see how much God is in love with us. May we live our lives striving to return that love through our words and actions, making our faith a way of life that holds nothing back.