As we say “yes” to follow God, one of the things that we will all face are challenges that go with that. It may seem easy at first, but like Jeremiah in the first reading who laments being “duped” by the Lord, to Jesus reminding his apostles that following Him entails taking up our cross, what we remember is that while much may be asked of us, Jesus has done so much for us as well. On our part, what we need to do is truly ponder the depth of that love by knowing God more deeply over the course of our lives and remember that we don’t seek out suffering for sufferings sake, but that through the suffering we endure, sometimes a lot of good can come from that as well.

As a young man, Servant of God Takashi Nagai, who was one of the victims of the Atomic Bomb dropped on Nagasaki was a seeker.

He was raised in the Confucian and Shinto traditions of his ancestors, born in 1908. His father was a western-educated doctor. In his teens, he doubted the existence of anything beyond what could be empirically observed, but his mother’s death left him in no doubt as to the reality of the human soul and its existence even after death. He read Blaise Pascal and was convinced that he should try prayer, simply as an experiment.

He entered college in 1928, and ss a young medical student he decided to look for a Catholic family to board with while he continued his studies in Nagasaki, where he also played for his college basketball team. In the heart of Catholic Japan, where “Hidden Christians” had survived unnoticed for 250 years, he found the Moriyama’s, a family descended from generations of Japanese Christians. Christianity had been allowed for quite some time by that point, but he was intrigued by the stories of the martyrs who shed their blood and ordinary Christians who kept the faith going for so long; as such he wanted to know more about it. From the moment they met him, the couple and their daughter Midori began to pray for Takahi’s conversion. After some time, they invited him to join them for midnight Mass. Surrounded by 5,000 Japanese Christians singing joyfully and praying in absolute silence, Takashi was struck by a profound sense of divine presence. He later said of that evening, “There was a living Someone present in the Urakami Cathedral.”

But that flash of insight wasn’t quite enough for him yet. He continued to search, even when sent to serve as an army medic in Manchuria, which Japan invaded. During that year, he read the little catechism Midori had

sent him and then returned to Nagasaki to study scripture and liturgy, all the while contemplating the contrast between the misery he'd seen in the field and the joy and grace he saw in Midori, with whom he was falling in love. But none of it convinced him finally until he returned to Pascal and read his words, "There is sufficient light for those who want to see, and sufficient darkness for those who don't." This brought him enough clarity to accept the Gospel (and his own limitations). He was baptized and then married Midori two months later, and she was instrumental in his conversion praying for him and setting an example for him of how the Christian lives.

Despite the known risks of exposure to radiation, as a young radiologist he threw himself into his work. Both he and Midori saw his efforts as an act of charity, even of worship. Takashi understood that only God could truly heal his patients and that medicine was inseparable from prayer. "In the end," he said, "it is not the doctor who cures the patient, but God's good will. Once that is understood, medical diagnosis gives rise to prayer." For Takashi, medicine was inseparable from prayer, even when his work was less diagnostic. He was at the leading edge of radiology research, and he labored to give glory to God.

When the Nagais' oldest son was 2 and their daughter a newborn, Takashi was shipped out to serve as a doctor in the Sino-Japanese War. During his 3-year absence, his father and daughter both died. After Takashi's return, the couple had 2 more daughters but lost one shortly after birth. Takashi split his time between his young family and the hospital, though life was often interrupted by air raids during World War II, which began 6 months after his return. And then came his diagnosis: chronic leukemia, brought on by his work in radiology. He was given 3 years to live.

When Takashi told his wife of his illness, she took some time to weep before the crucifix in their home, then composed herself and said to her husband, "We said before we were married…that if our lives are spent for the glory of God, then life and death are beautiful." Her peaceful resignation strengthened him to accept the death that awaited him with her by his side.

However, there are no certainties in life, especially not during war. And on August 9th, 1945, the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki hit only a few hundred yards from the hospital where Takashi was working. Many of his students were killed, and all his research was destroyed. Takashi

rushed into the street, leading the effort to pull people from the rubble and nurse the wounded. When those helping him began succumbing to despair and to the lethargy brought on by their exposure to radiation, Takashi rallied them by making a Japanese flag using a bedsheet painted with his own blood.

It was two days before he could go looking for his wife. When he arrived home, he found it destroyed. He found her remains, and he could tell that she had been holding the Rosary that she had prayed so fervently for his conversion. He was grateful she had died praying. Their two living children thankfully had been evacuated to the country and were unharmed, but Takashi's condition deteriorated rapidly. When his pastor urged him to take better of his health, Takashi responded, "Thank you, Father, but if it's for the glory of God, living and dying are just the same." He had learned this detachment from his wife. But he still hoped to delay the day his children were orphaned. So, when he found himself close to death a few months after the bombing, Takashi prayed to Saint Maximilian Kolbe, whom he had known when Fr. Kolbe lived in Nagasaki, though he had not yet heard of Fr. Kolbe's heroic death. Soon his cancer was in remission.

In the months after the bombing, Takashi spoke to a devastated nation about peace, and about the need to forgive. He called upon Nagasaki's Christians in particular to offer their suffering to the Lord as sacrificial victims. When his illness made it impossible for him to leave his bed, he continued his research on radiation poisoning while spending as much time as possible with his children. He also began to write works of poetry, essays and novels that were devoured by the Japanese people. He wrote and spoke of mercy and forgiveness, which is incredible when one would think he could have been overcome with anger or hate when he found the remains of his wife. His fame brought him visits from the emperor, a cardinal sent by the pope, and even Helen Keller, all of whom visited him in the tiny hermitage where he lived with his children, built on the wreckage of his bombed-out home.

You can read his whole story in the book "A Song for Nagasaki: The Story of Takashi Nagai: Scientist, Convert and Survivor of the Atomic Bomb" from Ignatius Press.

His story is one of seeking and listening to the voice of God and then going on the mission. And neither of these are easy things, but no one said being a Christian was easy.

For one, the part of coming to know who God is, this is life-long. The Christian way of life is about being on a journey with Jesus and, like Takashi, not knowing where we are going, but trusting. Remember last week, Jesus gave Peter authority, and we had Peter's confession of faith as he declares that Jesus is the Christ. But this week Peter seems to lapse in his understanding a bit; this business about Christ having to suffer he doesn't understand, saying "hey that will never happen." Perhaps Peter thought that the authority Jesus gave him caused him to know it all; but Peter shows that he didn't quite fully understand. And this is true for all of us - we are never at a point where we fully understand everything, but like Servant of God Takashi, are we willing to have the humility to go on the journey and to continually seek? Because if we think we have it all figured out, we risk letting our ego cause us to get it all wrong - much like Peter. This is where we get introspective; where we listen to our conscience and ask ourselves how we are doing in our vocation such as being a parent or spouse (or priest!); do you learn more about your spouse and kids and

yourself and help one another truly grow? It's where we pray daily and listen to God. And it's where we read, much like Takashi did, studying the faith as he did when he read Blaise Pascal (a good man who got a little off base late in his life when he embraced Jansenism but still had many good things to teach about the Catholic faith) or the catechism. There are so many ways our faith can grow from online apps to study groups here at Saint Joes such as the upcoming one on Fulton Sheen or just spending time with kids and doing faith formation with them. The faith is about always learning.

But with that, it is about going too. Just as we don't want to get too big for our britches and be a know-it-all, we also don't want to shortchange ourselves. God called us for a mission - and you can't discern your life forever. I remember I had a lot of second thoughts about going to seminary, but after prayer 25 years ago this week started my journey as tough as it was at the time to start that new chapter moving out of my parents' home. What we need to keep in mind is that the journey will of course not always be easy, but are we willing to take a page from Takashi but also Jesus? In the second reading Paul exhorts us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. This is where God is truly the center of our lives; where God's will meet our

will, where His mind meets ours, and His purpose meets our own. When that happens there will be challenges because we are no longer saying, “it’s my will” but rather “It’s your will, God” and like Takashi we go on the mission. It can be easy to be conformed to the age and escape from the world and worship things like money, power, sensualism, the false gods if you will - but when you look at Takashi’s story, you have a man who was always seeking and listening but doing things for God’s glory despite the suffering. He wanted to help people and combat illness and cancer, which is why he studied radiology despite the risks of working with radiation; he lived as man of hope being a light in a dark world. He understood what it meant to deny oneself, take up ones cross and follow the Lord. We do this too when we persevere - from doing the hard work that comes with our vocations in life like parenting and marriage, to speaking about the faith to living it out. The journey may be very difficult at times, but with us always is Jesus, and when we follow Him and strive to make Him know, there will be challenges and difficulties, but from them, much like on Easter, there will also come so much good as we bring others closer to Him and help people find the true happiness which they seek.

No matter where we are at in life, God is always speaking to our minds and our hearts, and when we listen to Him and follow Him, what amazing places we will go and what amazing things we will do. So may we listen to His will and come to know Him by trusting in the Church, and remember always that as we do, yes, we save our lives by losing them - losing the old self, the old way of life that worships something other God but find that the new life leads to joy and happiness to what eye has not seen and ear has not heard.