

“TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME” - BEING MORE FAITHFUL TO
JESUS CHRIST

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Being able to read the two perspectives on the theme in this response to the writers Deirdre Brower Latz and Ruben Fernandez was significant, for the integrality in the development of the theme of both. Although from a completely different context (the United Kingdom and Costa Rica (Mesoamerica) and thousands of miles apart there was a delicate concern to emphasize the importance of re-signifying the value of *taking up the cross and following, and being more faithful to Jesus Christ*.

It is necessary for us to assume, from the very beginning, that the cross and discipleship are inseparable. One cannot accept one without the other. Cross is discipleship and discipleship is cross. No matter what context we are in, we need to assume in a full and complete way that if we want the values of the Kingdom of God to be implanted in this society, we must, once and for all, commit ourselves to paying the price of taking up our cross. Naturally, we need to do it in a practical way. One cannot conceive the idea of a decision made in the impetus of an emotional state of mind. It is a decision of faith with absolute rationality. This following of Christ implies the responsibility of prioritizing the Kingdom's precepts in one's own life. The writer of Matthew 5, when presenting the beatitudes, makes clear such values as: Poverty of spirit (which does not mean material poverty), mourning with those who mourn, meekness, hunger and thirst for justice (so necessary in all global contexts that we live), mercy, purity of heart (in the simplest way, mind fit to look at others without judgments), peacemakers, suffering of persecution (here we need to understand this word persecution - it is because of justice). Our world is so hostile towards the proposal of a Christocentric discipleship that we are almost without a true practice of a transforming gospel in this world.

Cross in the Brazilian Context

Before we can reflect on the reality of a context like the Brazilian, it is necessary to define what does it mean "to take the cross". For this, Josemar Bessa, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, emphasize with unequivocal clarity what a cross really is. He states that cross is compassion with Christ, suffering with Christ. See in a more ampler way his thought.

“The cross is neither a misfortune nor a heavy destiny; is the suffering that results from the exclusive union with Christ. The cross is not casual suffering but necessary suffering. The cross is not suffering related to the natural existence, but to the fact that we belong to Christ. The cross is not only suffering, but suffering and rejection - rejection in the strict sense, rejection for the sake of Jesus Christ, and not in consequence of any other attitude or confession. A Christianity that was no longer taking discipleship seriously, which had turned the Gospel into the consolation of cheap grace and for which natural existence and Christian existence were inseparably mixed, such Christianity had to regard the cross as a daily misery, a tribulation, and anguish of our natural life. It has been forgotten that the cross always means also rejection, that the reproach of suffering is inherent to the cross. To be rejected in suffering, despised and abandoned by human beings, as the Psalmist laments so much, is the essential characteristic of the suffering of the cross that is no longer comprehensible to a Christianity incapable of distinguishing between civil existence and Christian existence. The cross is compassion with Christ, suffering with Christ. Only unity with Christ, as it is in discipleship, is, indeed, under the cross.”

One can understand that "taking the cross" within our cultures is much more than seeing people being oppressed by any political, contextual or governmental aspect. Deirdre Brower Latz makes it clear, quoting Kosuke Koyama when he says: “The message of the cross comes to us and shakes our spirituality and mentality.”¹ This is exactly how we can impact our society with a message of the cross that can transform our own life as well as our environment. For our reflection in this article it should be clarified that both Latz and

¹ *Kosuke Koyama, No Handre on the Cross: An Asia Meditation on the Crucified Mind. Eugene Orego, Wipf and Stock. 2010,8.*

Fernández were very fortunate in their approaches on the contexts where they are inserted. Of course, historical aspects, such as the arrival of the first Christians in Latin American soil, was a reference for the development of the same throughout the continent. Fernandez emphasizes, *“The cross in the conquest of Mesoamerica”* stating that *the conquerors had the Bible and we the land. And they said to us: Close your eyes and pray. And when we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. Fernandez borrows these words from Archbishop Desmond Tutu who referred in this way to the conquest of Africa, and that is valid for Mesoamerica.*”² And without fear of erring it can be stated for all Latin America, and, why not say it, for Brazil which does not have a more encouraging history than that of our brothers in the continent in which we are inserted.

Let's make a brief evaluation about the reality of the giant Brazil, immersed in the Latin American continent, with all its own idiosyncrasies and models inherited from the first settlers.

“The evangelical history in our country began, in fact, in the 16th century, just over 500 years ago, on the occasion of the arrival of French Huguenots in Rio de Janeiro to found Antarctica France. However, in a short time, this initial project ended, buried under the blood of martyrs. The second attempt came in the 17th century with the reformed Dutch Christians, who did a fine job in the Northeast of Brazil just over 350 years ago, including among the Indians, but were suffocated to death by the Portuguese, who, in addition to the obvious political interests (they wanted to re-colonize the region), reproduced Roman Catholic persecution in Brazilian lands, which had also happened in Rio de Janeiro in the previous century (as in the case of the execution of the Huguenot theologian Jacques Le Balleur).

It was only in the 19th century, with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family that the doors began to open to the Gospel in Brazil. Precisely for this reason, the history of the Brazilian evangelicalism is considered to having its beginning, in fact, in the 19th century, despite the antecedents of the 16th and 17th centuries.”³

² Galeano, Eduardo. *Ser como ellos y otros artículos*, p. 27. Viewed on the 21 of September 2017 from: <https://lahistoriadeldiablo.wordpress.com/2016/02/03/eduardo-galeano-ser-como-ellos-descargar-texto>

³ <http://cpadnews.com.br/conteudo-exclusivo/14160/evangelicos:-ha-202-anos-no-brasil.html>

In the same historical review of CPAD News he states that the first Protestants to arrive in Brazil were Anglicans from around 1810 to 1819 and held services in Rio de Janeiro. Soon, in 1836 the Methodists arrived. In 1836 the Lutherans. The Congregationalists arrived in 1855, who were considered the founders of the Sunday School in Brazil. The Presbyterians contributed in Rio de Janeiro in 1859 and the first Baptist missionaries in 1881. In 1910 the first Pentecostals began to arrive.

The same writer says that the first national census took place in 1872 and that at this time we were not even counted. Including an estimate that at that time we were an average of 50,000 evangelical Christians. It was only in the second census that the evangelicals were included. But to make some more emphatic conclusions about the role of the cross over a nation we still need to see some statistics from the Brazilian Institute of Statistics (IBGE) in its Statistical Yearbook.

“...in 1890, we were 143,743 (1% of the population); in 1940, we were 1,074,857 (2.6%), representing a growth of 648% in 50 years; in 1950, we were 1,741,430 (3.4%), an increase of 62%; in 1960, 2,824,775 (4%), an increase of 62.2%; in 1970, 4,814,728 (5.2%), an increase of 70.5%; in 1980, 7,885,846 (6.6%), an increase of 63.8%; in 1991, 13,189,284 (9%), an increase of 67.3%; and in 2000, 26,184,941 (15.45%), which meant a growth of 98.5%. Now we are 22.2%, with growth of 61%. At this rate, in 2030 or, the latest, in 2040, evangelicals will be the majority in Brazil”.

It is clear that the Nazarenes should be highlighted in this historical context. We arrived in Brazil exactly on October 13, 1958. Our founder Dr. Earl E. Mosteller welcomed several missionaries who led the founding of the new missionary movement that came with the responsibility of preaching biblical holiness. Our statistics are impressive. From 12 Nazarenes in a service in 1958, today we are almost 190,305, not counting the children. In

the latter years we can point to the numeric growth that makes us stand out among the Brazilian evangelical movement. Let's look at the percentages of growth:

“In 2005 we were 60,138 members; in 2006, we were 69,087; in 2007 there were 79,816; in 2008 we moved to 88,438; In 2009 we were 100,678; 2010 we jumped to 105,855; in 2011 we reached 113,939; in 2012 our membership reached the house of 116,434; in 2013 we went to 125,047; in 2014 we were 135,299; in 2015 we went to 149,835; in 2016 we reached 152,448.”⁴

Just for the purpose of evaluation, our percentage of numerical growth in the last ten years was 115%. This is substantial growth for a denomination that has not yet been considered by IBGE in its annual surveys.

The discipleship of the crucified is to take up the cross day by day

Matthew was very fortunate in stating: Jesus said to all: " If anyone wants to accompany me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Both Fernandez and Brower Latz make clear that the true call to discipleship does imply taking the cross. Some highlights are made by saying that we need self-denial, loyalty, malleability, faithfulness. Fernandez then works with the idea of “a deep desire to transform his whole life.” This is a change that is called conversion, in Greek *metanoia* or repentance. This implied: 1) A radical change in the way we think and act. 2) A decision to leave the kingdom of darkness and to come into the community of the King. 3) A desire to assimilate from Jesus a new outlook in life. 4) An honest commitment to live this new life.”⁵

It is precisely from this perspective that we believe it is necessary to appreciate our task of living a life proposal that truly corroborates the faith we announce. For the cross to

⁴ *Decadal Report, Church of the Nazarene – Document sent by the offices of the South America Region.*

⁵ *Fernandez, Ruben. Discipulado em el caminho a la cruz.*

be the foundation, the basis, and the core of more comprehensive discipleship, a conversion is needed that goes beyond a choreographic act, more than a raising of hands in our congregational services. Surely the church will need to revise its ministerial praxis so that every Christian who is enrolled in its membership assumes, once converted, the responsibility of living in such a way that his surroundings and beyond may notice that something happened in the life of this new Christian. There was a radical change of mind and deed that came out of the empire of darkness and was transported to the kingdom of the Son of His love, to assimilate from Jesus a new way of life and a great commitment to live in this new decision that he took. It is precisely at this point that we believe it is necessary to highlight the words of Luke 9:23 which say, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” “Daily take up his cross and follow me.” Yes, daily, that is, a commitment to understand that taking this cross daily means accepting in an irreparable way the affliction, the pain, the shame, and even persecution if necessary for the sake of Christ and his Gospel.

What happens is that we live in a time when the Christian forgets his responsibility for having accepted his conversion to Jesus Christ. This implies a radicality of daily living in the likeness of Christ. And to live this way is to pay the price of true discipleship. That is not limited to the number of people who are enrolled as members in our congregations (which in itself is not wrong) but rather disciples making disciples who do not waste even a minute to live in a way worthy of the calling he received. (Ephesians 4:1).

Conclusion

Surely this subject of taking up the cross from day to day should be more exhaustively studied so that we could more and more deeply understand the true meaning. But it is important to say here that if we want to make disciples like Christ in our contexts we will

need more than didactic material, more than projects, more than trips, more than good congregational programs, more than excellent liturgies, more than meetings, we will need a reassessment of how we are producing the fruit of the Spirit - love.

It is urgent that as a church we live the transforming gospel to the point of transforming our society. The world urgently needs mature Christians who live the gospel applied to all areas of their lives. The fruit of the Spirit Paul makes known to the Galatians needs to be manifested - love for the family, for the community, for the poor, for the lost, for those who are in need of lodging, for the homeless, for the refugee, for those living on the margins of society, to God's creation. Only then will we demonstrate that we take up the cross day by day and follow Jesus (Luke 9:24). When love is present in our lives we will have: "... joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

We reaffirm that, against these things, there is no law anywhere in the world. Only then can we TAKE THE CROSS AND FOLLOW TO BE MORE FAITHFUL TO CHRIST. But let us not forget that this must be *EVERY DAY*.