

I've shared with you before that I struggle with Lyme Disease- chronic Lyme Disease- and it's not easy. Always fatigued, brain fog all the time, always feeling like you know what. And every time I see a deer, who are the primary carriers for those dreaded ticks- I have less than perfectly Franciscan feelings toward them, if you know what I mean.

I've been to several infectious disease specialists, including the "best" in the country, and they all basically said that it was all in my head and/or that it's a function of getting old, and of working too hard and of too much stress.

But one neurologist I went to had a different way of relating to me. After all the tests and after a long, honest conversation, he said to me, in an almost apologetic way, that there is something within me that is making me feel the way that I do, and that there is no guaranteed or permanent cure, and that I have to accept it and deal with it the best way that I can and not let it prevent me from living my life and doing what I need to do.

Essentially, take up your cross- accept that there is this suffering in your life and do the best that you can to deal with it and look forward instead of always looking back.

I practically fell off my chair. I could not have heard anything better- he believed me and he took me seriously- he didn't think I was making all this up. I thanked him profusely, which sounds odd to do to someone who is telling me to take up my cross. But you know as well as I do that the cross is part of everyone's life. So do something about it- allow it to make you happy and holy and what else could you want?

*"Take up your cross..."*

The people who first heard this strange notion of taking up your cross had a very good idea of what the cross was. It was not a religious symbol- yet- it was a means of torture and

punishment and control over the people, and it's no coincidence that the Romans crucified people on hills so that you could not ignore what was going on. And more to the point of making sure the people saw what the price was of getting in the way of what the Romans were doing.

And because the Romans forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant a shameful, tortuous death- the poor soul who had to carry his cross had everything taken away from him, including his dignity- really he was being denied his very self.

And so what Jesus is saying is that we have to take up our own cross, no matter how difficult it will be. And that means, in the spiritual sense, that, as followers of Jesus, as people who try to live in the world as Jesus did, we willingly take on the consequences of proclaiming and living the Gospel. This is not in the least to say that the Christian life is a drudgery and is full of difficulties- not at all- there is much joy and peace and satisfaction in living an authentic Christian life. But it is not easy.

And in a more prosaic sense, taking up one's cross means giving up our own sense of control over everything, giving up our need to be the one in charge all the time, and instead to allow God to be the center of our life- the one who will give us eternal life, that new and abundant life that is ours for the taking here and now as well as in the next world; the one who will give us the strength to carry the cross; the one who gives us the grace to be loving and compassionate to everyone we encounter, to help them carry their own cross.

And so, when we deny ourselves and take up our crosses, we are not losing our lives or our identities, we are gaining an even better life because we will be living for God, and even

better, then God's life will be ours, fully and completely. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we too die to self and we too rise to new life- Jesus' triumph on the cross becomes our triumph as well.

And that happens not in a dramatic way, like a crucifixion or a resurrection. It happens little by little, bit by bit, and maybe that's because that all we can bear.

So for me, carrying the cross every day means being at peace with every frustration at not being able to do something; it means being at peace with every embarrassment that washes over me when my brain doesn't work; it means seeing that this suffering does not mean that God doesn't love me or does not care for me; rather it means that He knows what He is doing and He has blessed me in so many ways and that in all this I can find my happiness and my peace, and I have. Not perfectly, but I'm getting there.

It goes without saying that God does not allow us to be burdened with a cross without the grace and the strength to carry it. Will we stumble and fall? Yes, of course we will- on the road to Calvary, Jesus Himself stumbled and fell three times. But each time, you get up and clean yourself off and you look forward. The goal- the prize, the end, whatever you want to call it- is always there. And we will get there, little by little, bit by bit.