

“Isn’t that sweet” the lady in front of me at the counter of the drugstore stated as she pointed to a milk chocolate cross with a small yellow flower made of sugar at its center. “Yes, if you’re a milk-chocolate fan I suspect it is,” I responded. Then I added, “However, God never intended the cross to be consumed as a treat. The cross is anything but sweet.” (I don’t think the woman wanted to go any further in a discussion of the theology of the cross. She quickly paid for her purchases and exited the building.)

Holy Week brings us face-to-face with the cross. As Christians through baptism we are immersed into the mystery of the cross. In the act of receiving Holy Communion at Mass we sacramentally consume it. But what does it mean to “consume” the cross?

First of all the cross is a stark reality as a means of criminal execution. Scaffolds with cross beams with the dying or dead criminals pinned to them were found on the outskirts of major cities as imperial warnings to those who would break the law or threaten the might of the Roman Emperor. People of Jesus’ day would not have worn it embroidered on the back pockets of denim jeans if such apparel was available; had it as a bumper-sticker for their vehicle; worn it as an elaborate piece of jewelry; much less made it into a confectionary treat. The cross cannot escape its connection with suffering and death. Christianity is the religion of the cross, but not one of masochistic suffering or self-torment.

Following the example of Jesus, embracing the cross is the free choice by a believer between acquiescing to suffering imposed by an oppressor or other outside source and the suffering that is the consequence of choosing a personal relationship with Jesus in faith, of listening to, and shaping one’s life by his Gospel, of choosing to stand in solidarity with as Jesus did and, as Pope Francis so often reminds us, those who are found at the periphery of

society—the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the unborn, the elderly, the racially and sexually discriminated , the abandoned.

The cross is much more than some annoyance: the family member, work colleague, friend who always manages to turn every conversation into a platform for them to espouse their particular partisan political views; the crotchety committee member who always derails meetings; the dull, routine task. This is to confuse the merely irksome with the truly profound nature of God’s call to faithfulness.

Jesus’ decision not to flee from the cross entailed a clear-sighted commitment to a goal that would necessarily involve suffering and self-denial. As we follow Jesus, we too may find ourselves presented with opportunities for rejecting cowardice. We too may find ourselves forced to distinguish and choose between the sham of suffering of our self-absorption and the real suffering that results from our sincere concern and love for another.

When we choose to “consume” the cross we are not endorsing suffering. Nor are we trifling. We are responding with radical openness to God’s call—a call to a new life, a call to participate in a new order, not a “sweet treat” of passing momentary fulfillment, “cheap grace” but an eating and drinking that unites us with the One who came to give life, and that life abundantly (Jn. 10:10).