

At a retreat recently a group of eighth graders was getting a lesson in what peer pressure would be like in high school. The teachers role-played a situation in which one student was urging another to have sex or to try drugs. In the role play, the innocent student gave in. The teachers said, "That's what you're gonna face," and every eighth grader said, "Not me. I'd never give in like that. I can handle it."

They remind me of James and John in today's Gospel. Together with Peter these two apostles formed an inner circle with Jesus. They were together at the Transfiguration and in Gethsemane. They were special to Jesus. So on the road to Jerusalem, where the crucifixion weighs heavily on Jesus' mind, they pipe up this song about glory. Jesus, thinking of his death, asks them, "Can you accept my baptism, can you drink my cup? Can you suffer like I'm going to suffer?" And they say, "Sure, no problem." Like eighth graders on retreat: "We can handle it."

We waltz into every stage of life completely naive. You can tell engaged couples, "There will be suffering ahead." And they say, "We can handle it." You can tell new parents, "That baby will grow into a child who will break your heart." And they say, "We can handle it." You can tell your friends, "If you bring that sick person into your home, you'll have problems. If you have sex outside of marriage you risk disease. If you get pregnant you'll be tempted to have an abortion." And they'll say, "Not us, we can handle it."

When we baptize you we tell you, "Christianity is hard." We use symbols to warn you: the cross of Jesus' suffering, waters that put to death an old way of life to create something new. Baptism by immersion is not popular in the Catholic Church, but the Church recommends it as the preferred means of baptism for this reason. It brings you into the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it warns you that Christianity is hard.

Perhaps even Jesus was naive. Born in Bethlehem he accepted a life of misunderstanding, persecution, and violent death. He shows us that facing down temptation requires two things: commitment to a cause and acceptance of suffering. Then we can boast that Christianity is something we can handle.