

"Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me" (Mark 8:34)

Homily for the 24th Sunday Year B

In **Mark 8:34**, Jesus says: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* This command encapsulates the call to discipleship in its most radical form. To understand it fully, we need to explore both its literal and spiritual meanings, and how it applies to our daily lives.

1. Understanding "Take Up Your Cross"

At the time of Jesus, crucifixion was a brutal form of Roman execution reserved for the worst criminals. To "take up one's cross" literally meant carrying the instrument of one's execution to the place of death. By using this metaphor, Jesus calls His followers to embrace suffering and self-denial as part of their journey of discipleship.

The Fathers of the Church and saints provide rich reflections on this profound statement:

St. John Chrysostom explains:

"To take up your cross means bearing every difficulty and trial with patience, trusting in God's will."

Chrysostom emphasizes that this teaching calls us to embrace the crosses that come in life—whether they are sickness, suffering, or persecution—with patience, seeing them as opportunities to grow in holiness.

St. Augustine highlights the importance of self-denial in this process:

"He who does not take up his cross and follow the Lord, loves himself rather than Christ. This is the first and greatest sin, to prefer oneself to God."

For Augustine, self-denial is the key to following Christ. Taking up the cross means dying to our selfish desires and preferences so that we can put God first in our lives.

2. How to Follow This Difficult Message

Jesus' message of taking up the cross is challenging because it goes against our natural inclination for comfort and ease. Here are a few ways we can follow this difficult teaching:

A. Embrace Suffering with Trust in God Suffering is an inevitable part of life, but Jesus teaches us that suffering has a purpose when united with His sacrifice. **St. Therese of Lisieux**, a doctor of the Church, said:

"Suffering is the very best gift He has to give us. He gives it only to His chosen friends." While suffering is never easy, seeing it as a gift that unites us more closely to Jesus can transform our pain into a path to holiness.

B. Deny Yourself for the Good of Others Self-denial is not only about resisting sin but also about putting others before ourselves. **St. Paul** echoes this call in **Philippians 2:3-4**, urging believers to consider others as more important than themselves. When we let go of selfishness, we live more like Christ, who gave Himself for us.

C. Daily Commitment to Discipleship Taking up the cross is not a one-time event but a daily commitment. **St. Francis de Sales** teaches:

“Each day we must take up the small crosses of our daily duties, offering them to God with love.”
We can follow this difficult teaching by faithfully fulfilling our responsibilities, whether they are in our families, workplaces, or communities, as acts of love and devotion.

3. Why is it Important?

Taking up the cross is essential for several reasons:

A. It Leads to True Discipleship Jesus’ call to take up the cross is not optional—it’s a requirement for all who wish to follow Him. **St. Ignatius of Antioch** wrote on his way to martyrdom: *“Let me be food for the beasts, that by them I may be able to reach God. I am the wheat of God, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”* This radical statement reflects the early Christian belief that true discipleship means embracing even death if necessary to follow Christ.

B. It Transforms Us into Christ’s Image Carrying our crosses transforms us, making us more like Christ. As we deny ourselves and embrace suffering, we become more united to His life and mission. **St. Paul** speaks of this in **Romans 8:17**, saying that we are *“heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.”*

C. It Leads to Eternal Life Jesus tells us that in losing our life, we find it. The cross is the way to eternal life. **St. Thomas Aquinas** explains: *“The Cross is the royal road that leads to heaven. It was by His Passion that Christ opened the gates of eternal life, and it is by carrying our own crosses that we follow Him to that final destination.”*

The cross may seem like a burden, but it is the path to eternal joy with God.

The Power of the Cross

Jesus’ call to take up the cross is a powerful invitation to share in His redemptive work. While it involves sacrifice, suffering, and self-denial, it is also the path to true life. The Church Fathers and saints have shown us that by embracing the cross, we participate in Christ’s victory over sin and death, and we are transformed into His likeness.

In the words of **St. Padre Pio**,

“The cross will not crush you; if its weight makes you stagger, its power will also sustain you.”
By taking up our cross and following Jesus, we discover the strength that comes from His grace, which sustains us on the path to eternal life.