

On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!

Daily Gospel / Liturgical Cycle A

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Matthew 16: 21-27

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For he who wants to save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what will he give in return for his life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done."

Introductory Prayer: Lord God, I come from dust and to dust I shall return. You, however, existed before all time, and every creature takes its being from you. You formed me in my mother's womb with infinite care, and you watch over me tenderly. I hope you will embrace my soul at my death to carry me home to heaven to be with you forever. Thank you for looking upon me and blessing me with your love. Take my love in return. I humbly offer you all that I am.

Petition: Lord, help me to become a saint by denying myself, taking up my cross and following you.

1. The Purgative Way: In today's Gospel Christ presents three ways to Christian perfection: "If anyone wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." The first step, self-denial, is called "the purgative way" by some spiritual mystics. Have you ever noticed that in order to advance, a time of purging is necessary? Champion football teams have to work hard during the hot August two-times-a-day practices. The same could be said for our striving for holiness; we must be purged and purified in many ways. It is essential that we hate sin and avoid it at all cost by fighting temptation. Our sentiments, passions, memory and imagination must be placed under the rule of our faith, intellect and will. Beginning a prayer life requires effort, fight and constancy. By embracing the cross of the purification process we can advance in holiness.

2. The Illuminative Way: A second step in the spiritual life can be summarized as "take up his cross." A soul in this step has achieved a certain measure of self-control over the force of his passions, avoids any grave sins, and has deep convictions regarding the truths of our faith. Their present task is to progress in good, strengthening themselves especially in charity. They seek to adorn themselves with Christ's virtues and to make Christ the center of their thoughts, affections and actions. These souls could be compared to an experienced mother who is raising the youngest of her children or an athlete who has the fundamentals down and is playing at peak performance. How happy and balanced our lives are when we arrive to this level in our spiritual life. Christ invites us to this level of friendship with him; all we have to do is say yes, work hard and trust in God's grace.

3. The Unitive Way: The third step in the spiritual life, the unitive way, can be described by Christ's words: "Follow me." Once we go through the purification of our own body and soul and are steeped in the practice of virtue, we are ready to be among the closest followers of Christ, the saints! In this level we are detached from created things, and our primary focus is on the presence of the Creator who dwells in our hearts. Love of God becomes the driving force in our life and we can say with our Lord, "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29). Deep union with God in prayer, never resisting grace, and perfect mastery over ourselves bring us to see crosses and difficulties with great joy. So have many souls arrived to this state of heaven on earth: John Paul II, Mother Teresa, and the many unknown husbands and wives, students and scholars who have taken Christ's call seriously and followed him above all else.

Conversation with Christ: Lord Jesus, I ask you for the courage to continue to follow your call to holiness. Help me to know where it is you want me to become more like you, and give me the strength to form myself into the saint of which you have always dreamed. Mother Mary, I entrust my spiritual life into your maternal care.

Resolution: I will invite someone to go to Sunday Mass today.