

“Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”

It’s fitting that we hear these words of the Lord Jesus this weekend, since the Church has spent the last two days celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. It seems that the Lord is giving us an invitation to reflect on the cross.

With the cross being so universally present, so strong a symbol of our faith and belief, it’s unfortunate that it can easily lose it’s meaning. We see crosses and crucifixes everyday. We’ve heard this phrase “take up your cross” countless times. And that repetition can strip away what should be a powerful, even a shocking, impact.

When Jesus first said these words to His disciples - “Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.” - He had not yet died on the Cross. At that point His disciples did not have crosses hanging in their homes and around their necks. No, when Jesus first spoke those words, the cross meant only one thing: death, a death that was cruel and long and painful. It was as if Jesus had said to his disciples: pick up your electric chair and follow me or pick up your hangman’s noose and follow me. The cross was a symbol of torture, a symbol of execution, a symbol of death.

But on Friday the Church celebrated the Triumph of the Holy Cross. We remembered that in the Cross is victory, That in the Cross is salvation. And then on Saturday we celebrated Our Lady of Sorrows, as Mary stood courageously and faithfully at the foot of the Cross, watching her Son die. (By the way, this scene is portrayed beautifully in the statues of the crucifixion to your left. If you’ve never taken the chance, spend a few moments after Mass looking at that scene and see the great love that is there!) All of this - the exaltation of the Cross, Our Sorrowful Mother - makes no sense at all, except because of one thing: the Resurrection. The

Cross makes sense because Jesus rose from the dead. There is triumph in the Cross because it is the way by which Jesus destroyed death so that all of us could have eternal life. Our Lady of Sorrows is not hopeless because she later sees the joy of her Son rising from the dead.

It is Lord's power that transforms the Cross from a symbol of death and despair into a symbol of hope and new life. It is the Lord's power that strengthens us to take up our cross and to follow Jesus. And when we deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, then He leads us to the Resurrection, to new life, and to holiness.

This is a moment for us as the people of God, for us as the Church to take up our Cross and to follow Jesus. And this is not an easy task in this moment. The Church is in pain. She is bruised and beaten and dirty and ugly. The terrible sins of priests and bishops have harmed thousands of innocent people and have dragged us all down. And let us not forget that each of us, in our own way, have caused damaged to the Body of Christ by our sins.

This is why it is so important in this moment that we look to the Lord. These are His words to us today: "Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

This week I met with the pastoral council; and one of our topics of discussion was the present scandal and crisis in the Church and how we, as a parish, can respond. The suggestion was given that we should try to fast and to do it as a parish. That we should have one day each week where all of us who wish can give up something that we would normally enjoy. Perhaps it could be food or drink or television or internet. It seems to me that the most suitable day for us to do a parish-wide fast would be Friday - the traditional day of penance and the day on which

the Lord gave His life for us. So I invite you to join me and our deacons and our pastoral council in starting to offer some sort of fast on Fridays. It is completely optional, no one is obliged to participate. And if you decide to participate, the thing that you fast from can be as big or as small as you choose. I believe that even such a simple spiritual exercise as a weekly fast will bear great spiritual fruit for all of us.

By fasting we are following the Lord's words, we are denying ourselves. We are entering into some small voluntary suffering so that, through our suffering, we can unite ourselves to Jesus on the Cross. And when we unite ourselves to Jesus on the Cross, He assures us that we will be united to Him in His resurrection.

And since this coming Friday will be the first day of our parish fast, I have decided to make it for myself also a full day of prayer. Following the example of a few bishops and priests, I will spend this Friday in the Church in prayer and fasting. The Blessed Sacrament will be present in the monstrance for adoration, and we will begin adoration at the end of daily Mass at about 7:30 and it will continue until 5 in the evening. You and anyone else you wish to invite are welcome to come and join me during the day for some of that time of prayer.

My brothers and sisters, there is hope. The Lord has not abandoned His Church and He never will. He promised us that even the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. In these days of darkness, let us seek more than ever to become saints. Let us seek more than ever to deny ourselves and to take up our cross, so that we may follow Jesus.