

FOLLOWING CHRIST



Faith and Life Series

6

Third Edition

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CHAPTER 7

The Cross and True Riches

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Matthew 16:24

The path through life to heaven is often compared to climbing a mountain, and the mountain-top is heaven, God’s holy mountain. In Psalm 43, the pilgrim on life’s journey cries out to God:

Oh, send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to your holy hill,
and to your dwelling! (Ps 43:3)

Christ our Savior offers us a way that will lead to peace, joy, and our final goal of total happiness with God. The way that leads to this wonderful state of perfection, or holiness, is based on Jesus’ words: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23).

Self-denial means doing something we would rather not do or refusing some pleasure we would like for the sake of some greater good, for example, taking time to help your brother with his fractions or giving up dessert sometimes. Another example is giving your schoolwork your best effort, although it may not be easy and you may have to give up much of your free time to do it. Your schoolwork (or perhaps a particular subject) may take on the nature of a cross, especially if it is difficult.

Now we have come to a great mystery—the doctrine of the Cross. It is the principal sign of

Christianity. As a result of original sin, it is necessary for us to put to death in ourselves a certain way of living which Saint Paul calls “the old man” and to put on “the new man,” Jesus.

The old man is Adam, who misused the gifts of God and so brought sin and disorder into the world. As you know, this sin is passed on to all of us as Adam’s children. We are born in the state of original sin. Through Baptism, original sin is washed away and we are given the life of grace. However, original sin has left in us many wounds and disorders. These wounds can only be healed by God’s grace through a lifetime of right living, prayer, and self-denial.

This is not always easy. When Jesus asks us to love our enemy and to do good to those who hurt us, he is not asking us to do something that comes naturally or easily. But, by the power of God, it is not impossible. For with God “all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

Our daily cross is all the things which, naturally speaking, we dislike. Our cross may be a penance we choose for ourselves or suffering that God allows in our life—perhaps an enemy at school or some sickness. Such sufferings are permitted for our good or the good of others,

“God loves a cheerful giver.”

2 Corinthians 9:7

though we may not be able to see it at the time.

Bearing the crosses (that is, trials and difficulties) which we do not choose but which come to us anyhow in the course of life is a most perfect kind of self-denial, more pleasing to God than the acts of self-denial we choose for ourselves. For in all things it is most perfect to accept the will of God, even when we do not like it very much. Jesus' entire life was one of obedience to the will of the Father, no matter how hard it was or what it required of him, even his death. "Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).

And why are we willing to set out on such a way of life? In following the example of Jesus we are showing our love for God by willingly and, yes, even cheerfully accepting whatever he permits.

Fast and Abstinence

We are encouraged to choose some **penance** for ourselves. To help us, the Church requires **fasting** and **abstinence** from certain foods on penitential days. To abstain, in this case, means not to eat meat. If we are fourteen years old or more, we must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

In the United States, the bishops have declared abstinence from meat on all Fridays of Lent. In other seasons, Friday remains a day of penance on which we are supposed to practice some kind of self-denial, and the Church advises us to make Friday a day of abstinence all year round.

Fasting, in general, means not eating at all. When the Church requires us to fast, however, it means that only one full meal a day should be eaten. In addition, two smaller meals may be taken, but those taken together should not equal another full meal. In the Church, there are two days of required fasting: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This applies to anyone eighteen to sixty years old.

Penitential Seasons

Advent and **Lent** are special seasons in the Church year in which we are reminded to renew our spirit. They are called penitential seasons.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and is a season of special preparation for celebrating the birth of Christ. The Church suggests that we do some form of penance as part of this preparation.

The season of Lent begins six and a half weeks before Easter and is a season of preparation for the Passion, death, and Resurrection

of the Lord. Just as Jesus fasted for forty days, we too take on some penance during Lent to make up for our sins and to prepare our hearts to celebrate the great Easter feast.

Saint Paul compares the spiritual life to a race and the Christian to an athlete. Like an athlete, the Christian is asked to practice certain spiritual exercises. If an athlete will give up a great deal just to train for a race, how much more should we Christians be ready to practice self-denial for the sake of the Kingdom of God!

Besides, what the athlete gives up in training is not always so great, and his self-discipline is often very satisfying, invigorating, and enjoyable. His muscle tone, increased skill, and sense of well-being make it all worthwhile.

It is the same way with the Kingdom of God. The crosses we bear can include the many little things which make up our daily

lives, such as not always having our own way, forgiving an unkind word, turning from fun to duties at the proper time, not overeating, and the like. We are not expected to make life one big penance with no pleasures. After all, it is God who created the things in which we find pleasure. But, like a good athlete, we must keep an eye on the coach—Jesus—and not forget ourselves and break training.

By God's grace, penance can make up for past sin and help prevent future sin. It helps eliminate those things that take us away from God or are obstacles to our final goal—union with God in his Kingdom.

Words to Know:

self-denial penance fasting
abstinence Advent Lent

Rules of Fast and Abstinence in the United States

- The days and times of penance for the universal Church are each Friday of the whole year and the whole season of Lent.
- Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Abstinence is to be observed on all the Fridays during Lent.
- The law of abstinence binds those who have completed their fourteenth year. The law of fasting binds those eighteen years old to sixty years old.

*Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous;
teach me to serve you as you deserve to be served—
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labor and not to ask any reward
except that of knowing that I do your holy will.*

—*Saint Ignatius Loyola*

“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

(Matthew 6:16–18)

Q. 30 *What is abstinence?*

To abstain from something is to give it up voluntarily. A day of abstinence in the Church is one during which we abstain from eating meat (CIC, Canon 1251).

Q. 31 *What is penance?*

Penance is an act of self-denial or prayer that helps strengthen us to do God's will and, by his grace, to make up for sin (CCC 1434, 2043).

Q. 32 *When are the days and times for penance for the universal Church?*

All Fridays of the year and the time of Lent are days and times of penance for the universal Church (CCC 1438).

Q. 33 *What are the days when both fasting and abstinence are required in the universal Church?*

The days when both fasting and abstinence are required in the universal Church are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (CIC, Canon 1251).

Q. 34 *In the United States what other days are days of required abstinence?*

Other days of required abstinence in the United States are all Fridays during Lent (CCC 1438).