

- As we move away from Christmas, one of the holiest seasons of the year, and after meditating upon the great love of God shown to us in the mystery of the Incarnation, Holy Mother Church now challenges us to be holy ourselves, like Christ, and to take that holiness out into the world.
- In our first reading the Lord states that He desires to show His glory through His servant Israel, that He will make Israel a light to the nations so that His salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.
- In this we see God's desire to transform each of His children in holiness so that we shine with His glory, and are thereby able to lead others to Him!
- And in the second reading, St. Paul tells us that those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus are called to be holy. By accepting Jesus as our Savior, we become God's very own children, which means we are to be like Him in holiness!
- As we consider this call from Holy Mother Church to be holy, we need to define what holiness is, for it's a term that lends itself to a certain amount of subjectivism. That's why we must turn to the saints, for those who *are* holy are best able to define it for us!
- In particular I think it's good for us to turn to St. John of the Cross, the great Carmelite mystic and doctor of the Church who both loved much and suffered much.
- To St. John of the Cross, holiness comes from being in union with God. While he defines different types and degrees of union with God, the most perfect union a soul can have with God in this life occurs when one's will is perfectly united and conformed to God's will.
- To St. John of the Cross, we are holy to the degree that there is nothing within us that is contrary to God and His holy will. So, part of the process of becoming holy is being purified of anything that is contrary to God and His holy will.
- Referring to St. Matthew's description of the road and gate leading to Heaven being narrow and constricted, St. John of the Cross says that on such a narrow road there is only room for self-denial and the cross.
- His point is that we must deny ourselves everything that is not God, seek God alone, and be willing to suffer if we wish to be fully and perfectly united with God. Doing this makes us holy in this life, so that can enjoy the glory of God in the next life.
- With this in mind, it's good to ask ourselves: to what degree is my will fully conformed to God's will? Where do I fail to submit fully to God? Is there a particular sin I don't want to let go of? Do I make the Faith unto my own liking rather than conforming myself to it?
- Remember: our holiness is not meant solely for our own good. We are called to be holy in order to glorify God *and* to lead others to Him. We see this illustrated in our Gospel with St. John the Baptist, whose role it was to make Christ known.
- The same is true of us. We must make Christ known by the way we live our lives, working for others' salvation as well as our own. Christianity isn't meant to be lived in a vacuum. Christianity is communal by its very nature, which is why Christ founded a Church!
- When we are baptized and become members of His Church, we say that we become members of His Body, which necessarily means that we are joined in communion with every other member of His Body. And with this tremendous grace comes responsibility.
- So, we must strive diligently to purge all pride, vanity, and self-centeredness from our faith life – anything that leads us to focus only on ourselves.

- And it means that we must strive to cultivate virtues like magnanimity, generosity, and charity so that we can humbly serve others.
- In the common parlance of the Church today we speak of “stewardship,” which helps us with this. By giving of our time, talent, and treasure we force ourselves to focus on others rather than ourselves.
- But even more than just being a good steward, we must cultivate the proper attitude toward God and others: desiring to glorify our Lord and to lead others to Him.
- We must never fall into the habit of just going through the motions in our practice of the Faith. No! Within our hearts must burn an ardent fire of love for God and our neighbor.
- But it all begins intentionally seeking union with God, and ridding our lives of anything that is not of God, most especially sin.
- You see, every sin we commit is like a brick we lay in this wall that separates us from God. And every brick of sin we lay must be torn out by penance and contrition in this life, or purified in the fires of Purgatory before we can be fully united with God in Heaven.
- There’s a reckoning, there’s a price to pay for each and every sin we commit, and we begin paying that price just by being sorry for our sins.
- Yet it’s one thing to be sorry for our sins and to be forgiven in the confessional. It’s a whole other thing to repair the injustice we’ve done to God by our sins through an act of penance. But both must be present. We must sorrowfully confess our sins and do penance for them.
- This is how we tear away the bricks of sin in the wall we build between God and ourselves. But even as we do this, we must insure that our hearts are in the right place.
- Our relationship with God and whether or not we go to Heaven is not ruled and measured by some type of divine accounting system. Our virtues and vices are not like debits and credits that can be balanced against each other.
- What matters more than our acts of penance is that we truly love God and neighbor, that deep in our hearts we have a desire to please God, to do all that He asks of us, and to prove our love for Him by our charity toward those around us.
- As we consider our lives of sin and the walls we’ve built between God and ourselves, the process of tearing down that wall may seem daunting. But God does not lay upon us burdens too heavy for us carry. Yet He does us ask us to love Him!
- St. Catherine of Siena once said that one *Hail Mary*, said with perfect love was enough to atone for the sins of a lifetime.
- And St. John of the Cross said that a little pure love is worth more than all the good works of the Church combined! That’s what God wants more than anything; He wants our love.
- So while it’s so very important that we confess our sins and do penance for them, our confession and our penance must be driven by a pure love for God. If our acts of penance are not done out of love for God, then they won’t be as efficacious as they could be.
- Brothers and sisters, Holy Mother Church calls each of Her children to a life of holiness, a life of pursuing union with God by serving Him and one another.
- May we rid ourselves of anything that is contrary to God and His holy will. May we tear out the bricks of sin that separate us from God through our humble confessions and acts of penance.
- But most importantly, may we love our Lord with true purity of heart and be willing to suffer anything so that we might enjoy eternal union with Him in Heaven.
- St. John of the Cross, pray for us!