

- Toward the end of his life, the great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, prayed to God: “Lord, what I wish you to give me are sufferings to be borne for your sake, and that I may be despised and regarded as worthless.” It’s a brave prayer.
- And it’s a prayer that was granted. In the last months of his life, St. John was unjustly deprived of his office, sent off in disgrace to a poor monastery, and then neglected and abused as he was dying a very painful death.
- More than anything else, John of the Cross wanted to be perfectly conformed to Christ. More than anything else, John of the Cross wanted to suffer with Christ, to lose his life for Christ and the sake of the Gospel. And he did.
- This is why St. John of the Cross is such a magnificent saint. For the truest measure of any man is how well he conforms his life to the life of Jesus.
- Considering that the most important thing that Christ ever did was to suffer and die on the cross, those who willingly bear their crosses and die to self are those who best conform themselves to Christ Jesus our Lord.
- As we hear in today’s Gospel from Christ Himself: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”
- This is one of the hard truths of our Catholic faith: man must suffer if he hopes to be saved.
- Whether we like it or not, if we wish to be true followers of Jesus, we must be willing to suffer and sacrifice. We must be willing to deny ourselves, even to the point of losing our very lives, if we wish to save our life for eternity.
- Of course, all of us have suffering and difficult things to contend with in life. No one’s life is perfect. And there is great holiness to be found if we are willing to embrace those sufferings and bear them well.
- The difficulty is that, in our broken human nature, we tend toward that which is comfortable.
- Making ourselves comfortable in every possible situation is really our national pastime, is it not?
- Because we implicitly believe that greater comfort equals greater enjoyment and satisfaction in life, we look for ways to make our lives easier, more delightful, and more pleasurable. We seek out the best of temporal goods that we can afford.
- And while there is nothing sinful about owning nice things or being comfortable, if we become attached to these things and begin to believe that we cannot live without them, then we will not grow in true union with our Lord. We will not be our Lord’s true followers.
- And, furthermore, we cannot rely on the grace of the sacraments alone to make us like Christ.
- If we wish to be our Lord’s true followers and be like Jesus, then we must follow the command He gives us in the Gospel today by denying ourselves and taking up our crosses.
- This we do, first, by gratefully accepting whatever suffering comes into our lives, for never are we more like Christ in this life than when we choose to suffer in union with Him.
- Each of us has particular sufferings in this life that we have to deal with. Perhaps it is a physical illness, an addiction, financial worries, difficult relationships or problems at work.
- Whatever the cross is, it can be the source of tremendous grace and holiness if we embrace it out of love for Christ and seek to carry it in union with Him.

- We can also follow Christ's command by practicing acts of penance and making small sacrifices on a daily basis, for penances and sacrifices are ways to voluntarily suffer with Christ, and they strengthen our faith by drawing us in closer union with Him.
- In our second reading St. James reminds us that our faith is not a private matter, but rather that it's meant to be lived in a public way. People should know that we are Christians by the way we conduct ourselves in the world.
- In particular, St. James highlights for us the virtue of charity in living our faith. Truly, the greatest hallmark we should possess as Christians is a generous love that reaches out to all people, especially to those in need.
- James speaks of the importance of providing for the needs of others less fortunate than oneself, and to be sure, charity of this type is not optional for Christians; it's essential.
- But just as essential as serving the poor is the requirement that we be charitable to those with whom we disagree, or whom we view as enemies.
- As we consider all the division we see in our world today, especially as regards politics, it's easy to see that there's an overabundance of hate and lack of respect for the inherent human dignity of others.
- As I pray and reflect on the world, I am absolutely convinced that the only way to change our world is for those of us who are believers to practice a radical charity, one that's willing to bear patiently with the ugliness and hatred of others, just as Christ did with us on the cross.
- Like Isaiah in today's 1st reading, we must give our backs to those who beat us, our cheeks to those who would pluck our beards.
- This means not reacting with anger and venom when we are attacked or criticized. It means refusing to hate those who hate us. It means praying for our enemies and seeking their good.
- It means being willing to overlook their faults and failings with patience, having a ready forgiveness, and even allowing ourselves to look bad at times when it might help us lead others to salvation. It means striving to be meek and humble at all times.
- Truly, practicing this type of forbearance with others is a very efficacious way to die to oneself and to bear a cross that will make us true followers of Jesus.
- Brothers and sisters, the world has more than enough hate, lack of respect for others, and faithlessness. Let us not add to these sins. But rather, let us be willing to suffer all that we must in order to live lives of radical charity.
- May each of us be given the grace to bear our sufferings well when a cross is laid upon our shoulders, seeing in that cross a chance to follow Christ and to be conformed to Him.
- St. John of the Cross, pray for us.