

- In the past couple of months as we've been reading through the Gospel of Matthew, we've been following Jesus and His apostles through parables like the sower and the seed and the pearl of great price; through the miracles of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, of Jesus walking on water, and of Jesus healing the Canaanite woman's daughter.
- And last Sunday we heard the story of the founding of the Church and the papacy.
- After all this, in today's Gospel Jesus says something very difficult to the apostles. He says: *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 will find it.*
- It doesn't make Christianity very attractive, does it? For, who of us wants to give up his life? Who of us *wants* to deny himself and take up a cross? Who of us has the courage, the faith, and the zeal to give everything for the sake of God?
- Well, the saints do; it's why they're saints! And this past Friday was the feast day of one of the Church's most beloved and important saints: St. Augustine.
- Perhaps more so than any other person in the Church's history, St. Augustine has given shape and form to our theology. Even though he died nearly 1600 years ago, all who study the Church's theology keenly feels his influence even today!
- Yet St. Augustine's greatest legacy is not his enlightening theology, but rather his autobiography – known as his *Confessions* – which give voice to the dynamics of spiritual conversion better than any other work known to man.
- This wayward son of St. Monica, who fathered a child out of wedlock and followed heretical teachings in his youth, is a saint so many of us love and relate to because of the tremendous honesty he showed in his *Confessions*, epitomizing the struggle for holiness.
- For example, in relating his struggles to attain holiness, St. Augustine famously wrote in his *Confessions*: "God, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" – a sentiment that, perhaps, some of us can relate to. Yet, in his *Confessions*, Augustine also famously wrote:

*You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

- If you look at our statue of St. Augustine over on the right side of the Church, you'll notice that he's holding a burning heart in his right hand. That burning heart is a symbol of the burning love for God that is akin to what Jeremiah mentions in our first reading today.
- As Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, once he felt God touch him and had a conversion, he felt his heart come afire with love. As he said, he burned for God's peace.
- This is a phenomenon that we find in the lives of many of our saints, and it's what enables them to follow Christ's command in the Gospel today to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Him even to the point of losing our lives.
- St. John of the Cross teaches us that, as we grow in our life of prayer and of trying to develop the virtues, we come to encounter God's Spirit of love dwelling within our souls. It's a personal experience in which we cannot doubt God's incredible love for us.

- In his works St. John of the Cross described this love of God as a “living flame of love,” which penetrates us at our deepest levels to purify us and heal us of sin, but also to ignite a fire of love for God within us. This is really the Holy Spirit working within us to sanctify us.
- And this is the experience that St. Augustine was speaking of that I mentioned earlier.
- Feeling the power of the Holy Spirit within himself, Jeremiah says, “it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in; I cannot endure it.” Again, this is an experience of the Holy Spirit, the great Sanctifier.
- As we surrender to the movements of the Holy Spirit within us, seeking to commune with Him through prayer and our living out of the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, this divine fire enlightens us to our sins and makes us acutely aware of what God has done for us.
- We come to realize our deep poverty and misery as sinners. We come face to face with our faults and failings as we grow in our knowledge of how we’ve offended our Lord. This process causes great suffering, what St. John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul.
- Yet while we suffer through the process of our sanctification, we come to desire nothing else than to follow Christ, no matter how much the pain of our sinfulness hurts us.
- Spiritually speaking, my brothers and sisters, this is how we most truly deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and lose our lives in order to find them.
- And as we persevere in following Christ in this way, we’re purified and healed of our sins, and we’re transformed into a closer image and likeness of God. In short, allowing this living flame of love to burn away all that is not of God within us, is how we’re made into saints.
- What’s more, this encounter with the Holy Spirit in the depths of our beings by which all of sins and weaknesses are drawn out and healed, enlarges our capacity to love in return. In this purification process we become unable to restrain our love for God and others.
- Our souls thirst for God in such a way that we know we will never be totally satisfied until we have perfect union with our Lord in Heaven, and we long for this union. And in this, we truly become the men and women that God has created us to be.
- Brothers and sisters, if we’re serious about becoming holy, if we wish to burn with the living flame of love, we must set aside time each day for prayer, and we must practice assiduously the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. And we must seek God’s will, no matter what the cost.
- When we persevere in doing our part to become holy, God steps in and sets us on fire with His love. When this happens, it is then that we find the strength to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Christ – even to the point of losing our lives – just like the saints.
- So, following the counsel of St. Paul in our second reading, may we *offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to Him*. May we never *conform ourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds, our hearts and our souls* in prayer, so that we may *discern God’s will... what is good and pleasing and perfect to Him*.
- As we come to know God in our prayer, in our practice of virtue, and in seeking to do His will, may we hunger and thirst for Him with a burning love. May all of our hearts be set on fire.
- St. Augustine, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us.