

- One of the greatest and yet most misunderstood of all of the saints is St. John of the Cross. Born June 24th, 1542, St. John lost his father at a very young age and lived in poverty as a child, but he distinguished himself in his youth by his great intelligence and piety.
- Eventually John became a Carmelite friar and a close friend and confidant of St. Teresa of Ávila. While St. John of the Cross is well known for his efforts to help reform the Carmelite order, he is best known for his spiritual theology.
- It was St. John of the Cross who wrote the timeless spiritual classics: *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*. And because of his poetry and spiritual treatises, St. John of the Cross is known as the “Mystical Doctor of the Church.”
- His insights into the union of the soul with God through contemplative prayer are the most profound the Church has ever known, and it is for this reason that he is often misunderstood.
- St. John understood the mystery of our Lord’s suffering and death as much as any human could. He understood the power and necessity of suffering for growth in holiness, that man must be willing to suffer if he hopes to be holy.
- In the book *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, St. John gives his readers the secret to growing in holiness quickly, which are known as his maxims. I’d like to share them with you today as they correspond well with today’s Gospel message. St. John tells us:
 - *Endeavor to be inclined always: Not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most delightful, but to the harshest; not to that which gives most pleasure, but rather to that which gives least; not to that which is restful, but to that which is wearisome;*
 - *Not to that which is consolation, but rather to that which is disconsolateness; not to that which is greatest, but to that which is least; not to that which is loftiest and most precious, but to that which is lowest and most despised; not to that which is a desire for anything, but to that which is a desire for nothing;*
 - *Strive to go about seeking not the best of temporal things, but the worst. Strive thus to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to everything that is in the world, for Christ's sake.*
 - *To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. For to go from all to the all you must deny yourself of all in all. In this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest.*
- At first blush it all sounds a bit dour, doesn’t it? And yet, these words of St. John of the Cross express well the same sentiment that our Lord expresses in today’s Gospel.
- Think of our Lord’s final words in the Gospel today: “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.”
- So 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.
- This is one of the hard truths of our Catholic faith, but if we choose to embrace it, we will reap great spiritual benefits.
- In our broken human nature, man tends toward that which is comfortable. Especially in our affluent culture, we constantly look for ways to make our lives more comfortable, because we implicitly believe that greater comfort equals greater enjoyment and satisfaction in life.

- Thus, 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.
- You see, my friends, the Christian life is one of continually growing in the likeness of Christ; it's a process of constantly being configured to Him. The more like Jesus that we become, the holier we become.
- This configuring of our souls to Christ happens in a particular way through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Both of these sacraments actually change our souls in a supernatural way to make us more like Christ.
- Receiving Holy Communion worthily also helps to shape our souls, and making a good confession reconciles us to the Lord when we've turned away from Him. But 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 advice 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 a defiant child.
- 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 His suffering on the cross.
- But we also follow Christ's advice by practicing acts of penance and making small sacrifices on a daily basis, for penances and sacrifices are ways to voluntarily suffer with Christ.
- It used to be the practice of the Church that all Catholics were to abstain from meat on Fridays. This wasn't a random law imposed by the Church to make our lives miserable. It was meant to give Catholics a way to incorporate penance and fasting into our daily lives.
- Holy Mother Church has always understood that these spiritual practices teach us to become more disciplined, and that they help break attachments to material goods. Moreover, they strengthen our wills, making us more capable of saying no to temptations as they arise.
- While the Church doesn't strictly require us to give up meat on Fridays outside of Lent anymore, Catholics are still obliged to observe all Fridays as a day of penance.
- In other words, we are still called to fast from something on Fridays. If not meat, then it should be something comparable to giving up meat (cf. the Apostolic Constitution on Penance, "Paenitemini," Chapter III, section C, Norm II, from February 17, 1966).
- While giving up meat or something comparable may not seem like much, if we are disciplined about it and do it out of love of God and a sincere desire to grow in union with Him, this type of fasting will actually help us to reap great rewards in the spiritual life.
- While embracing our crosses and undertaking penances and sacrifices may not seem like fun, saints like John of the Cross teach us that following Christ in this manner produces great joy and peace in our souls. This is because these practices further our spiritual union with Jesus and truly make us more like Him.
- My dear friends, let us all make the decision today to take up our crosses and follow Christ. Let us be willing to deny ourselves all that we find delightful and comforting, and trust that in so doing, we will one day assure ourselves of the delights and comforts of Heaven.