

INTERIOR LIFE: MORTIFICATION



Part of Catholic practice is asceticism and mortification. Lent comes to mind as a season of fasting and abstinence, but we are called to practice penance throughout our lives. Some may question the utility of such actions. Does God really care if I give up coffee for Lent or don't eat meat on Fridays? As with so many aspects of our

faith, our penitential practices are for our spiritual benefit, to help us grow in our relationship with God and to serve our neighbor's good.

St. Teresa of Avila powerfully said that Christ wants to reign on the throne of our heart. In order for the Lord to take possession of us, we must be empty and free, so that Jesus has the space and opportunity to be truly at the center of our spirit. This surrender requires a decluttering of our life. Often, the noise, activity, material possessions, and satisfaction of our cravings take up all of our existential space, leaving little room for the Lord to live, speak, and act within us. In this sense, mortification is a subtraction, not an addition. We empty ourselves out, so Christ can fill us up.

This essential truth has inspired saints and mystics throughout history to fast, give away their wealth, abstain from meat and other luxuries, embrace silence, and practice heroic charity, so that God can truly take possession of their lives. This spiritual discipline is not some sort of elite athleticism to impress God, but rather our way of finding the radical freedom needed in order to surrender completely to Christ.

A NOTE FROM BISHOP HYING

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**WHERE THERE IS
NO GREAT
MORTIFICATION
THERE IS NO
GREAT SANCTITY.
ST. PHILIP NERI**

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YEARLY FORMATION NEWSLETTER TOPICS

EASTER 2020

The Paschal Mystery

JUNE 2020

Evangelization

JULY 2020

Discipleship

AUGUST 2020

Baptism and Confirmation

SEPTEMBER 2020

Reclaiming Sunday

OCTOBER 2020

Interior Life: Prayer

NOVEMBER 2020

[Interior Life: Mortification](#)

DECEMBER 2020

Confession

JANUARY 2021

Goodness

FEBRUARY 2021

Beauty

MARCH 2021

Truth

APRIL 2021

New Methods

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

DR. JOHN JOY

According to the saints, the two pillars of the interior life are prayer and mortification. Consistent growth in holiness requires both. Mortification gives power to our prayer and prayer gives meaning to our mortification. As part of our Go Make Disciples initiative, therefore, Bishop Hying is asking all Catholics, beginning with parish leadership, to commit to at least 15 minutes of prayer every day and at least one act of mortification, no matter how small, every week on Friday in memory of Christ's passion and death.

What is mortification? The word comes from the Latin *mors* (death) + *facere* (to make). It means dying-to-self, pruning away our disordered passions and desires in order to bear more fruit. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25).

Is mortification necessary? In Luke 9:23, Jesus says: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Read that again: "*If any man would come after me.*" This is such an essential part of the Christian life that anyone who does not practice mortification in some fashion cannot be regarded as a disciple of Jesus Christ: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

Why is mortification necessary? Mortification counters our natural tendency toward self-indulgence, which is a result of original sin. Think of it as resistance strength training for the free-will. The more we freely deny ourselves even legitimate pleasures

and comforts in little things, the easier it will be to resist moments of temptation in bigger things. And the more we voluntarily accept suffering out of love for Christ in little things, the easier it will be to remain steadfast in moments of greater suffering. The life of St. Therese of Lisieux is a powerful example of this with her little way of love. She reached great heights of holiness by offering up small mortifications with great love.

How do we practice mortification? There are two kinds of mortification: active and passive. Active mortification is when we voluntarily "*deny ourselves*" by giving up some legitimate good, like not eating meat on Fridays. Passive mortification is when we patiently accept the sufferings that we do not choose but cannot avoid. Life is full of suffering. But when we "*take up our cross*" and embrace it out of love for Jesus, when we "*offer it up*" for the intentions nearest our hearts, then it becomes for us the path to deeper union with Christ.

How often? Jesus says to deny ourselves and take up our cross "*daily.*" We all have many opportunities every day to offer up little inconveniences and annoyances with a cheerful heart and a smiling face. The Church also asks us to practice active mortification at least once per week on Fridays. The traditional practice of abstaining from meat is still the recommendation of the U.S. Bishops, but Catholics are free to choose another form of mortification instead.

"Take up your cross daily *and follow me.*" The goal is following Jesus. Our acts of mortification are not ends in themselves; they are means of being more perfectly conformed to Christ. "The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the *ascesis* and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes" (CCC 2015).

FRIDAY PENANCE: WHAT TO DO

It is obligatory for all Catholics to do penance on every Friday throughout the year unless a solemn feast day (such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus) falls on a Friday.

The traditional Catholic practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays throughout the year is still the form of penance recommended by the U.S. Bishops. But if you choose to eat meat on a Friday, or if abstaining from meat isn't penitential (e.g. for vegetarians), then you can choose another form of penance instead. Here are a few ideas:

- Give up cream or sugar in your coffee
- Give up butter or jam on your toast
- Fast from all food until 3pm (the hour of Christ's death)
- Abstain from non-essential use of technology
- Turn the water to cold for a few moments at the end of your shower (as long as it takes to say a Hail Mary or Glory Be)
- Wake up 30 minutes earlier than usual and spend the extra time in prayer

FRIDAY PENANCE: WHAT *NOT* TO DO

Don't give up something you don't like anyways. For example, if you normally drink your coffee black, then giving up cream and sugar on Fridays doesn't count as penance. Our mortifications should be personalized.

Don't make your mortifications penitential for others. For example, if Fridays are family movie night, then giving up non-essential technology will be hard on everybody instead of just on you.

Don't try to do too much all at once. If you bite off more than you can chew, and end up not following through, it's easy to get discouraged. It's much better to start with small acts of mortification and stick to them consistently. Remember, a small sacrifice offered up with great love is worth more in God's eyes than a larger sacrifice offered with less love.

Don't wait until Friday to decide what form of penance to embrace. It's far easier to keep Fridays penitential consistently if we make a plan ahead of time.

FURTHER STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

TO READ

- St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* (ch. 6: [Mortification](#))
- Thomas a Kempis, [The Imitation of Christ](#) (bk. 2, ch. 12)
- St. Alphonsus Ligouri, [The School of Christian Perfection](#) (ch. 9: Mortification)
- St. Francis de Sales, [Introduction to the Devout Life](#) (part 3, ch. 23: Bodily Mortification)

TO WATCH

- Fr. Mike Schmitz, [Offering Up Your Inconveniences](#)
- Fr. James Brent, O.P., [Offer it Up](#)
- Jackie Angel, [Why Do We Offer Up Suffering?](#)
- Formed Live, [Why Catholics Do Penance on Fridays](#)

TIPS FOR PARISH LEADERSHIP

Revive Parishes provides totally free online formation for parish leaders featuring top experts in ministry. Learn new skills and get inspired to take your ministry to the next level. Sign up at reviveparishes.com/madison. Courses include Evangelization with Chris Stefanick, Discipleship with Julianne Stanz, Preaching with Fr. Mike Schmitz, Leadership Teams with Pat Lencioni, and many more. Ask everyone on your staff and evangelization team (including Father) to enroll in the course that most appeals to them or applies to their ministry area.

Ask everyone on your staff and evangelization team to dig into at least one of the further resources listed on the left. The video by Fr. Brent offers a deeply moving Eucharistic theology of suffering. Fr. Mike also does a great job talking about the special value of passive mortification. If you have never read any of the spiritual classics listed here, definitely pick one up. The sections on mortification are valuable by themselves, but there is a wealth of spiritual wisdom in reading any one of them straight through one chapter per day.

Pastors and Principals should make sure that school teachers are keeping up with their study and discussion of these newsletters for their Seat of Wisdom certification this year.

FORMATION IN THE PARISH

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

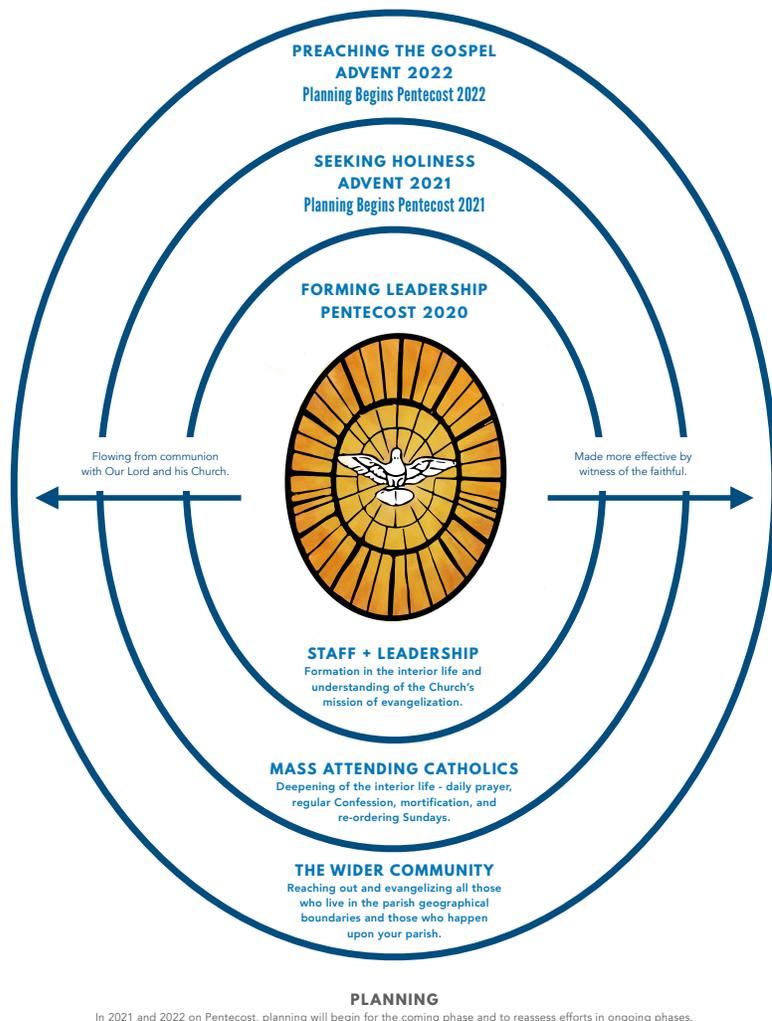
- Which is more central to your spiritual life: prayer or mortification? How is the Lord calling you to grow more in the other?
- What is your plan for penance this upcoming Friday?
- Do you have good spirits about accepting daily mortifications and little sufferings?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

- How can you help one another stay accountable to growing in the interior life through prayer and mortification?
- What kinds of little things do you make a regular practice of sacrificing?
- Are there things your parish does or could do to encourage the traditional Friday abstinence from meat?

Bishop Hying shared at the presbyteral gathering in September some changes to the timeline for the rollout of the Go Make Disciples initiative. See the diagram and points below to catch up on the changes! All mentors and priests should be able to help answer questions about these changes.

- The beginning of Phase 2, focused on helping Mass Attending Catholics seek holiness with greater enthusiasm and fervor, is delayed until Advent 2021. This doesn't give us reason to delay on getting started in Phase 1; instead we have the opportunity to dive deeper into formation.
- There is now a specific time set aside for planning for Phase 2. Along with planning, formation of leadership is expected to continue.



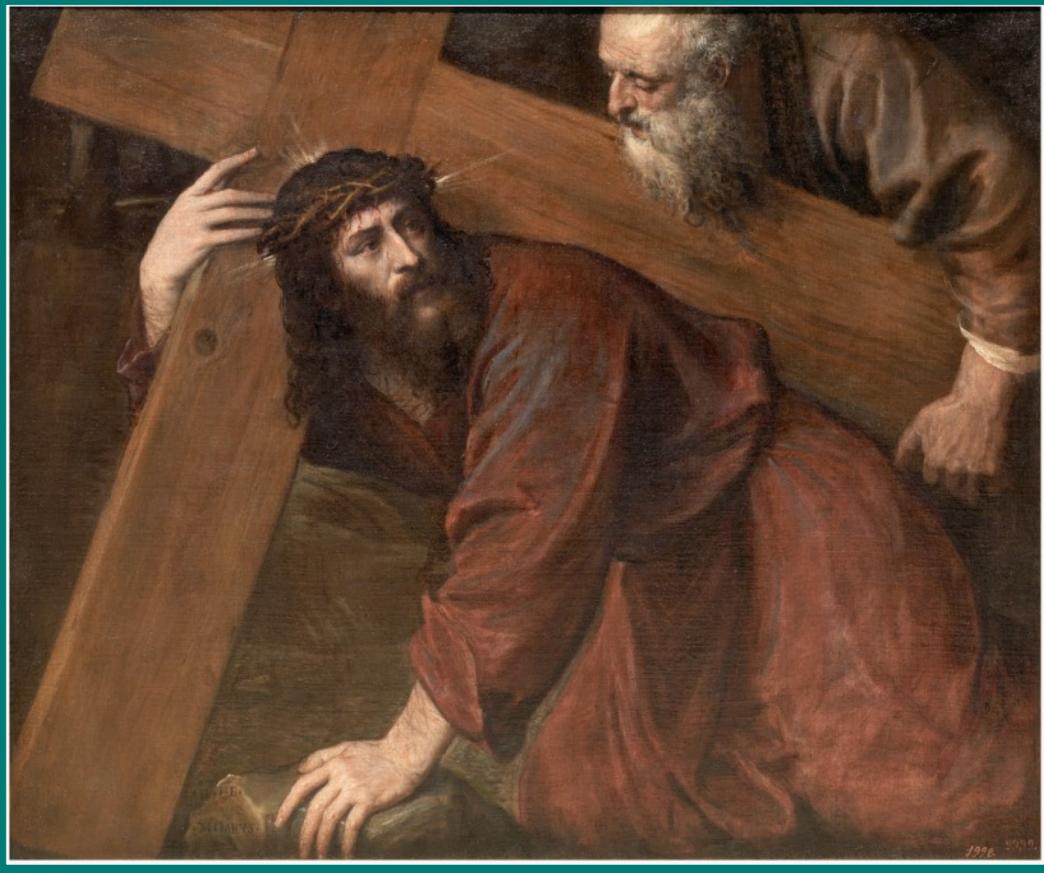
CONTACT INFORMATION

ON THE WEB:

WWW.MADISONDIOCESE.ORG/GMD

E-MAIL:

EVANGELIZE@MADISONDIOCESE.ORG



**CHRIST ON THE WAY
TO CALVARY, 1560**

TITIAN

"And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus" (Luke 23:26). Simon probably wasn't too happy about being forced by the Romans to help Jesus carry his cross. But the look on Jesus' face as their eyes meet changes everything. You can see the compassion on Simon's face as he leans down to carry the cross. He is no longer counting the cost to himself. He is not worrying about the weight of the cross or the whips of the soldiers. His service, which started out as something forced upon him, has become a gift freely given. It's harder to put into words the expression on the face of Christ. Certainly there is gratitude there, and love, and peace. But I think what moves me most is that Jesus really seems to have forgotten his own suffering as he looks at Simon. When we feel the weight of our own crosses pressing us down, perhaps it would help to remember that we are helping Jesus carry his cross, and that he looks at us with the same expression of gratitude and love that we see here.