

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**  
**March 18, 2018**

During his public ministry, Jesus had made it clear that one condition for being his follower was bearing the cross. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me" (Luke 9:23). As his passion draws near, he energetically reiterates this same condition: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." To be a Christian is to be where Christ is: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be." And where is Christ? He is always pouring out his life for others on the cross, giving himself for the good of others through self-forgetful love. This is the lesson of the Gospels, and of the Eucharist - the extension throughout history of Christ's self-sacrifice on Calvary. And so, that's also where we should be: giving our lives for God and our neighbors. Christ's great commandment was to love others as he has loved us. He taught this lesson by example on the cross, and with words during the Last Supper: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). St Paul learned this lesson well; he was always talking about the cross. He wrote to the Corinthians: "...the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:2). As followers of Christ, we should expect crosses, difficulties, and even, at times, persecution. To be a true Christian involves not just wearing a crucifix or hanging one on the wall, but bearing the sign of the cross in the very marrow of our lives and just like everyone else I have had my own crosses to bear and watch those I love to carry theirs.

All Christians bear the sign of the cross on their souls, even before they experience persecution and suffering in their life. Our souls are actually sealed, stamped, with the sign of Christ in two sacraments that we all receive: baptism and confirmation. Even if a baptized and confirmed Christian rejects his friendship with Christ later on, dies without repenting, and ends up in hell, he will still bear the seals of baptism and confirmation on his soul. The demons will be able to recognize that he had been a Christian. In ancient Rome, the soldiers of the Emperor used to receive a permanent, tattoo-like mark on their shoulder. It was a sign of their special identity and mission - Roman soldiers, even after their time of service was finished, retained many

privileges and responsibilities in the Empire. They also carried a special lead seal around their neck, which was used as a kind of passport throughout their travels. When we were baptized, we were marked in our very soul with the sign of Christ - he became our Lord, protector, and Savior, snatching us out of Satan's grasp. And then, when the bishop made the sign of the cross on our forehead with the sacred chrism at confirmation, we were sealed as Christ's soldiers, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails.

Whether or not we believe in Christ, we will still have to bear crosses. Life in a fallen world is full of crosses, no matter what. No one is an exception when it comes to suffering and struggling in life. But as Catholics, members of Christ's mystical body, we find meaning in these crosses, because we don't have to carry them alone - Christ bears them with us. We are the lucky ones, because we know that. But what about the people who don't know it? One of the most important activities we can engage in during Lent is almsgiving - helping those in need. And one critical - and beautiful - way to do this is by helping others find meaning in their crosses. We all know people who are suffering. They may be suffering economically - their marriage and family life stressed by financial pressures beyond their control. They may be suffering emotionally - working through an experience of betrayal, infidelity, or loss. They may be suffering existentially - wondering why they are on the planet and where they can find a reason for living. They may be suffering physically - their body and mind weakened or ravaged by disease, injury, or old age. One week ago, my sister died, she had been carrying a very heavy cross. In particular the last month of her life was very difficult. I was glad that I was able to get there in time to see her before she passed away, and was at her side when she died. I felt helpless, all I wanted to do was to take the cross off of her and carry it myself. As Catholics, we all experience forms of suffering, but we know what to do with them. We bring them to Christ; we grip our crucifixes; we offer them to the Father for the salvation of souls and the reparation of sins. In the few remaining weeks of Lent, let's reach out and help lighten someone else's cross, just as Christ constantly helps lighten ours. Let's show, and tell, someone else about the one Cross that transforms all other crosses. Who knows, maybe by sharing the good news of God's love with others, we will come to believe it more deeply ourselves.