

**Homily for the Blue Mass
The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B**

**Church of Our Saviour
Jacksonville, Illinois**

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Father Meyer, consecrated men and women, brother Knights, first responders, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York and President of our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, once quipped, “The one thing Our Lord can never be accused of is false advertising. How blunt can you get? ‘Unless you take up your cross and follow Me, you cannot be My disciple.’ Hardship, sacrifice, suffering, adversity, struggle – it’s necessarily going to be part of the life of the disciple.”¹

Perhaps we have heard these words so often that they have lost something of their force: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34). These words should, at the very least, startle us. They ought to give us pause and concern. They should make us question what we are doing here. They certainly caught Saint Peter and the rest of the Twelve off guard.

“Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,” Jesus says, “but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35). Either what Jesus says is true, or He is mad. These words of His should make us question – seriously and honestly – whether He is worth following.

This is why, before speaking these words to the Twelve, He asked them, “Who do people say that I am” (Mark 8:27)? After hearing the Twelve give Him what others say about Him, Jesus turns the question directly to them: “But who do you say that I am” (Mark 8:29)? This question He addresses personally to each of us, as well: “Who do you say that I am?”

Whatever our answer to this question, our response, of course, does not determine the reality of who Jesus is. Rather, our response, our answer, shows how intimately we know Him and how closely we are willing to follow Him. For this reason, Saint Peter gives the supreme answer: “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29), and in Saint Matthew’s account, Peter adds, “the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16).

Though Saint Peter recognized the truth of who Jesus is, that He is the Messiah, the Son of God come to save us, he misunderstood how this salvation would be brought about. For this reason, when Jesus solemnly foretold that He “must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed,” Peter “took him aside and began to rebuke Him” (Mark 8:32). In Saint Matthew’s Gospel, we read another detail: Peter said to Jesus, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). Unwittingly and with good intentions, Peter tried to prevent the Father’s will and to bring about salvation by his own means and power. Whereas just a moment before Peter answered correctly, now he answers very much incorrectly.

We, like Peter, sometimes try to skirt around the cross, to avoid it or even to lay it aside, seeking an easier, more pleasant way. Whenever we do so, the Lord Jesus also looks at us and rebukes us, saying, “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do” (Mark 8:33).

To get behind Jesus is to follow Him; through this rebuke, Jesus reminds Peter of that initial call, when the Lord said to him at the Sea of Galilee, “Come after me, and I will you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17).

At every moment of our lives we have the option to try to lead Jesus where we think He ought to go, or to get behind Him and follow Him where He knows we need to go. We either view Him as the Christ, or simply as one good teacher like any other.

There is no other way to be a disciple of Jesus than to take up the cross in whatever form it comes to us. We forget that wherever we are, there is the Cross, as Peter himself found. "If you're going to put out into the deep, the Cross will be there. If you're going to fall in love with Jesus, the Cross will be there. If you're going to let Jesus wash your feet, the Cross will be there. The Cross is the classroom of sanctity, the professor of perfection, the arena of heroic virtue!"²

You who are first responders have a profound and challenging cross as you seek to defend, protect, and save those who find themselves in harm's way, either through violence or ill health. In your selfless service, you have an ongoing opportunity to conform yourselves to Christ who gave up his life so that we might live.

Your confidence that Jesus is indeed "the Christ, the Son of the living God," has brought you here today to receive His Body and Blood and to implore His blessings upon your work. We gladly join our prayers to

yours and ask the Lord to protect and guide you and to give you strength and wisdom in every adversity whenever duty and generosity should call you. We pray that you, too, may “set [your] face like flint” in the face of whatever difficulties and hardships you encounter, knowing that “the Lord GOD is [your] help” (Isaiah 50:6-7).

Your dedication to protecting the lives of your fellow citizens is a fitting way to keep the admonition of Saint James who challenges us, “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:15-17).

Each day you see your suffering brothers and sisters and rise to answer their needs, sometimes at the risk of your own lives, because your faith tells you that Jesus is worth following. You have come to know that through the Cross you will save your lives. If you willingly take it up each day in service of your fellow men and women out of love for Christ, you will indeed save your lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Timothy M. Dolan, *To Whom Shall We Go? Lessons from the Apostle Peter* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 63.

² Timothy M. Dolan, *To Whom Shall We Go? Lessons from the Apostle Peter* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 63.