

Saint Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo (North Africa) and Doctor of the Church
Sermon 96 §1-4.9

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Christ

What the Lord has commanded us: «Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself» seems hard and difficult. Yet it isn't either hard or difficult because the one who commands it is the one who helps us to fulfill what he commands. For if that saying of the psalm is true, that: «according to the words of your lips I have pursued difficult paths» (Ps 17[16],4), so also is true the saying spoken by Jesus: «my yoke is easy and my burden light,» (Mt 11,30). For anything hard in the command, love turns to sweetness. We know well of what marvels love is capable. There are times when love is of doubtful worth and is depraved. Yet how many difficulties will not men endure, what humiliating and unendurable treatment will they not suffer if only they might attain to what they love!... Since life's great enterprise must be to choose well what one should love, is it surprising that anyone who loves Jesus Christ and desires to follow him denies himself in order to love him?...

What is the meaning of what follows: «Let him take up his cross»? Let him endure what is painful and so let him follow me. For when a man begins to follow me by acting according to my precepts, there will be plenty of people to disagree with him, oppose him, discourage him. And that on the part of people who claim to be Christ's friends. Those who stopped the blind men from crying out (Mt 20,31) were walking in Christ's company. So whether it is a matter of threats, flattery, prohibitions, if you want to follow Christ, turn it all into the cross; endure it, bear it, don't let yourself be overcome...

You love the world, but you should rather love him who made the world... We live in a world that is holy, that is good, reconciled, saved or, rather, that is to be saved but which is saved now in hope. «For in hope we were saved,» (Rom 8,24). In this world, therefore, that is to say in the Church, which wholly follows Christ, he said to all: «Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself.»