

Happy New Year!! This week we celebrated the completion of our journey around a star, a heavenly body essential to our life on earth. That star is the sun, and it provides us with everything: oxygen, food, light and it holds our planet on course by its gravitational pull.

Today, we focus on another important star, The Star of Bethlehem, a key element in our celebration of Epiphany Sunday. This star led the Magi through the darkness and in a dark world, to find our divine king and savior. Like the sun, the Son of God gives us everything, our every breath, our spiritual food in today's Mass, redemption of our souls, and His Holy Spirit, who works like a gravitational pull, to draw us in a heavenly direction.

Our reading from Isaiah says, "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you." This prophesy was fulfilled at the first Christmas, and Jesus continues to shine his light on His Church every day. This reading implies a responsibility to be a light to the world. It says, "Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you."

St Paul says, "You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace." Like St. Paul and the Apostles, we are commissioned to let this saving grace work in us and share the light of Christ with others. But, how does God's grace lead to salvation in our lives today?

Peter Kreeft says our salvation comes in two parts, "justification" and "sanctification." He says, "By Christ's death, God takes away the punishment for our sins, and that's what theology calls our 'justification,' our being MADE RIGHT with God." So, being right with God is part one. Part two is more of a journey. Again, Kreeft says, "And then God takes away our sins themselves by his Holy Spirit, and that's what theology calls our 'sanctification,' our being gradually made into saints fit for heaven."

We are all on the road to sanctification, a lifelong journey of growing closer to God by living a holy life modeled after his Son. So, what can WE do for our sanctification now, in 2026, as we try to make the Son of Man as important in our lives as the sun in the sky?

We turn to an Irish Catholic priest, Fr Conor Donnelly, who's written many profound meditations. Today, I will quote from his reflection on mortification. He says, "All through the Gospels, Our Lord reminds us of the care of our soul. One of the dangers is that the soul can be dominated a little bit by the body. So, we have to keep the body in check. That process is called mortification, to die to ourselves." Dying to ourselves is about calming our minds and hearts and letting go of things that separate us from God.

Jesus said to His disciples: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

In the words of Fr Conor, "Our Lord speaks a lot about self-denial, saying 'no' to self, to our appetites, to our tendencies, to our likes and dislikes, and to our whims. We have to try and keep our body in check, and in that way, we train our soul. Mortification unites us to Christ as we look to the cross.

St. John in his gospel says, "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." (John 12:24). St. Josemaría Escrivá, a Spanish Catholic priest who founded Opus Dei, recommended that we keep a short list of small mortifications, that we try and do every day. Things that fit in with our daily routine, like praying a decade of the rosary for those in need or practicing our listening skills in our relationships.

Fr Conor points out that, "Sometimes the world gets a bit scandalized by self-sacrifice, but it's a funny thing, because all the greatest athletes in the world undergo an enormous amount of self-denial." Michael Phelps, who earned 23 gold medals as a swimmer, maintained a highly regimented life including 4-6 hours a day in the pool and gym, and 2-3 hours of napping sleep. I can go along with the napping 😊, but he did this 6-7 days a week for the entire year! His training was nothing short of heroic. Fr Conor says, "When we feel that we have to deny ourselves little things, it's nothing compared to what these great athletes do."

Next, I will quote some of Fr Conor's key points regarding mortification starting with a comparison of our spiritual journey to the Christ's agonizing walk to His crucifixion. He says, "We're on a ROYAL pathway. Christ never said it was going to be easy. Even He fell three times. We mortify ourselves to be more like the apostles, to think more of others, to go out of our way, to deny ourselves little pleasures here and there that we offer to Our Lord for this soul and for that soul.

This is the excitement of our life. We live for souls, EVERYTHING for souls. Everything becomes a motive of joy. We must give our life for others, that is the only way to live the life of Jesus Christ and to become one and the same thing with Him.

We look to our Blessed Mother for strength. She went into the hill country. She faced the dangers and the risks. She didn't live in the realm of her own comfort. All the time she was forgetting herself, forgetting her own creature comforts. All of those things that were part of her vocation, she accepted them and lived them, joyfully and generously."

As we begin a new year, let us consider Christ as the sun in our sunny San Diego lives. Let's ask for the grace to accept the challenges of our present situation, and to find a few daily mortifications to better live our faith, share it with others, and sanctify our hearts to bring ourselves closer to Jesus.