

GROWTH IN HOLINESS: THE THREE STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE INTRODUCTION

Call to Holiness

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms: “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” All are called to holiness: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).¹ Then quoting the Church Father St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-c.395) it adds: “Christian perfection has but one limit, that of having none.”² The call to holiness in the New Testament is a reflection of God’s revelation in the Old Testament. For example, God instructed Moses to tell the Hebrew people, “You shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).

Achieving this destiny is the greatest and the most difficult challenge anyone can experience. The *Catechism* gives the reason: “The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism [self-discipline] and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.”³ Jesus gives us the complete understanding of love, which is total self-sacrifice.

The Battle

In this lifelong spiritual battle to love unselfishly, we face three formidable enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The **world** encompasses all the false values that are opposed to the standards taught by Jesus as well as those persons and institutions that promote them. The world hates authentic Christians (Jn 15:8). St. Paul instructs us that we have not received the spirit of the world (1 Cor 2:12), and he warns us not to be conformed to its evil influence (Rom 12:2). The **flesh** is an enemy within us. We are easily allured and trapped by the disordered desire for possessions, by the pull of our sensual appetites, and by pride which puts us above others and even God (1 Jn 2:16). Finally, the **devil** is a tireless foe that “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). Using the example of Jesus, who suffered unjustly for our benefit, St. Paul exhorted us to faithfulness: “In your struggle against sin you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb 12:4).

The Process

Achieving holiness is a progression. In the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 385-6): “He who climbs never stops going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end.”⁴ Most of us experience that the intensity of our love for God and neighbor fluctuates. Like the rich young man to whom Jesus offered holiness, we are easily attracted to and entangled by false loves. St. Paul warned us about entrapment by the “works of the flesh ... immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like” (Gal 5:19-21). Then he added: “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the

¹ CCC, # 2013; See also: Eph 4:24; 1 Thess 3:13; 4:7; Heb 12:14; Jas 1:4.

² CCC, # 2028; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mos.*: PG 44, 300D.

³ CCC, # 2015.

⁴ CCC, # 2015; Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. In Cant.* 8: PG 44, 941C.

kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21b).

In Sacred Scripture and the teaching of spiritual writers from the convert Dionysius (Acts 17:34) and St. Augustine (354-430) down through the centuries⁵ the process of growth in holiness finds an apt comparison with the stages of development in the human person, namely, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. These three stages are called the Purgative, Illuminative, and the Unitive. Each of these stages begins with a conversion. In the next three months a reflection will be devoted to examining each of these periods of spiritual development. However, before these topics are explored it is important that five terms are defined because they will appear in these three future discussions. The terms are *holiness*, *sin*, *mortal sin*, *venial sin*, and *faults*.

Key Terms

Holiness consists in the love of God and neighbor that reflects the union of our will with God’s will. It comes from the infusion of sanctifying grace that imparts in us the “supernatural love of God and man for God’s sake.”⁶ Sanctifying grace, then, is the life principle of the spiritual life just as the soul is the life principle of our human existence. It makes us “children of God” (1 Jn 3:1-2) and “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). Our cooperation is required, but every degree of holiness is primarily God’s work. St. Paul eloquently captures the dynamic impact of grace in his letter to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Clearly, St. Paul is not speaking of a physical crucifixion, but the spiritual death of selfishness that freed him to become Christ like.

“**Sin** is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods.” Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas defined sin as an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”⁷ Every sin is an offense against God: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4).

Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from him. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods” (Gen 3:5), knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.”⁸ In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation. Sin is either mortal or venial based on its gravity.⁹

The idea of **mortal** (or deadly) **sin** that kills the divine life in the soul and estranges us from God is rooted in the Bible. For example, St. John writes: “If any one sees his brother

⁵ Consider the following sources: St. Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogue*, St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, St. Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*, Père Lallement’s *Doctrine Spirituelle*, and more recently Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange’s monumental two volume work, the *Three Ages of the Interior Life*.

⁶ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Conversion in the Spiritual Life*, p. 9.

⁷ CCC, # 1849.

⁸ Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 14, 28: PL 41, 436.

⁹ CCC, # 1850.

committing what is not a *deadly* sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not *deadly*. There is *sin which is deadly*; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrong doing is sin, but there is sin which is *not deadly*” (1 Jn 5:16-17).

To commit a mortal sin three conditions must be present. The first is objective; the second two are subjective:

1. **Grave Matter** - The sinful act committed must be a serious violation of the Ten Commandments. For example, the obligation to “keep holy the Lord’s day” binds all Christians. The Catholic Church instructs its members that minimally they must attend Mass on Sunday. Non-Catholic Christians do not here to this Church guideline. However, everyone is bound to the commandments. So spending Sunday fishing and partying with ones buddies, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, will not make the grade.
2. **Full Knowledge** – One must have full knowledge that the particular act is completely against God’s law.
3. **Complete Consent** – Ones consent must be “sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart (Mk 3:5-6; Lk 16:19-31) do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.”¹⁰

Mortal sin is a life and death matter for there is no holiness in a person who is in that state. He is a spiritual corpse. Eternal damnation awaits anyone who dies in mortal sin! The *Catechism* teaches:

“We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves. ... To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell.”¹¹

Venial sin is any act against the love of God or neighbor that lacks one or more of the conditions of a mortal sin.

Faults are not sins, but the choice of a lesser good. For example, Jesus instructed Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her” (Lk 10:41-42).

¹⁰ CCC, # 1859.

¹¹ CCC, # 1033.