

GROWTH IN HOLINESS: THE THREE STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE THE PURGATIVE WAY: INFANT HOLINESS

We enter spiritual childhood by responding to the grace of the first conversion, which leads to the decision to repent and abandon mortal sin. Therefore the acknowledgement of our sinful state along with the determination to change is the critical first step. This is illustrated in the life of St. Peter. Jesus instructed: “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:5:4). This statement has multiple applications. Initially, it looked to Peter’s immediate fishing experience, but it also foreshadowed his future missionary activity. It also finds a fulfillment in each of us, if we will surrender to our vocation as disciples. Notice Peter’s reaction once he saw the great catch of fish as the nets were breaking and Peter’s boat was in danger of sinking. He “fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’” (Lk 5:8). The purgative way is primarily a battle to overcome mortal sin.

Through baptism, confession or an act of perfect love for God, there occurs a definite movement from spiritual death to supernatural life. This is the beginning of the spiritual life, as we now share in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). This is also the start of our active determination to be faithful to God’s commandments. The battle is on. During this period we are very self-focused. Initially serious sin is viewed as a trivial matter, and it is easily rationalized. The occasions of sin are rarely avoided in the beginning and our contrition for sin is minimal. As we advance in the purgative way, mortal sin is firmly resisted and we habitually avoid the occasions of sin. We also begin to combat our deliberate venial sins and become more committed to prayer, which we can easily put aside in the face of dryness or our involvement with activities – yes, even good ones. Then we can easily fall back into sinful habits. In our early steps into the Purgative way, it is not uncommon for us to lapse into mortal sin, then repent and begin anew. Prayer is our vital weapon, because it acknowledges our helplessness and our total dependency on God.

When there are deep-seated habits of mortal sin, for example battling against addictive pornography or a host of other sinful habits, a fierce struggle follows. When grappling with sensual sins we may be plagued with a debilitating form of pride, namely, self-loathing. When we fail, we get down on ourselves. The reality is that we are all sinners capable of every sin, except for the grace of God. But self-hatred is opposed to true humility for it turns our remorse inwardly on us and not on the God who tenderly loves us. This kind of beating oneself up is self-focused, so it is far removed from genuine compunction, which grieves because we have offended our merciful God who created and redeemed us out of love.

In this baby stage of the spiritual life we have a sense of working hard, striving mightily to be holier. This is slightly true, but only to the extent we cooperate with grace. In the spiritual life at every stage of our development God always does the heavy lifting even if it is hidden to us. St. Paul admonishes us, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [because we who sinned before are very capable of sinning again]; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). Once the

first enthusiasm of conversion diminishes and prayer becomes routine, there is a real danger of abandoning prayer. This is particularly true once the sensible consolations in prayer disappear. Spiritual beginners are very much subject to the tyranny of their feelings. We are easily guided by momentary fits of fervor; then, when these emotions are gone, we fall away.

Vocal prayers like the Our Father and the Mass predominate and are very helpful for spiritual infants. However, we only talk to God intermittently because our focus is still rooted on our temporal issues. Even the prayers we do make are often self-focused. But as we advance we begin to pray more consistently because our love of God is increasing and we have become more aware of our spiritual vulnerability. Meditation becomes more regular. For example, one might recall the incident of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' head with expensive Nard and washed his feet with her tears (Lk 7:36-50). Commenting on this event and connecting it to the second verse of the Song of Solomon, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) preached about three kisses. The first is the kiss of Jesus' feet in sorrow and repentance. This reflection can readily lead to a conversation with God and expressions of our gratitude for his mercy. St. Ignatius of Loyola taught that we should use our imagination to place ourselves in the biblical scene and even assume one of the roles in the narrative, for example, the sinful woman, the Pharisees, or one of Jesus' disciples. What am I experiencing? What does this say to me? How do I need to change my behavior?

As we advance in the Purgative way there is a rudimentary growth in the virtues: the theological virtues of faith, hope and love; the moral virtues of temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude; as well as virtues like chastity, patience, and humility. However, as we leave behind habits of sin, pride can easily rear its ugly head. Pride is a multi-headed monster that always poses a real danger because it is opposed to God and disguises itself under many different forms. For example, as mortal sin becomes a thing of the past, we may begin to think of us as "holy," or become judgmental of those lesser mortals whose sins seem apparent to us. Reflecting on our spiritual superiority over anyone is exceedingly dangerous. Thus, St. Paul warned that recent converts run the danger of becoming "puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim 3:6).

The inordinate desire for and attachment to God's consolations is also a danger when we are in the state of spiritual childhood. The feeling of the presence of God and his love that we sometimes experience at the beginning of our conversion can be so powerful that it is never forgotten. This little foretaste of heaven awakens a deep longing for this experience when it is no longer palpitably present. Consolations are the mother's milk God uses to support us in this infant stage, but we can easily become more attached to the consolations of God rather than to the God of consolations. Then our efforts are bent to stimulate these experiences rather than growing in our love for God in the tough discipline of seeking his will and loving the neighbor. Combating the seven capital sins is a wearisome and fierce task: avarice, envy, anger, sloth, gluttony, lust, and pride. Furthermore, the pulls of the three-fold lusts are always with us. St. John warns us against the lust of the flesh (sensuality), the lust of the eyes (coveting possessions and

wealth), and the pride of life, which drives us to want to do things our way, not God's (1 Jn 2:16). Success against these foes is found in the determined habit of prayer that relies on God's strength. Many of us are not willing to set aside daily times of prayer, at least a half hour each day.

Many wallow for long periods in this beginning stage of holiness, the purgative way. Some of us never progress out of it. Abandoning mortal sin is a formidable challenge that requires real courage and a strong determination. Jesus never presented our journey in the spiritual life as easy. On the contrary, Jesus instructed us that the way to eternal destruction is wide and easy, whereas the road to eternal life is narrow and hard (Mt 7:13-14). Therefore, Jesus admonished us to take up our cross daily and follow him (Lk 9:23). Genuine holiness requires a voluntary death to self, which is no easy task, but it is the doorway to the joy of self-sacrificing love. That is why eternal happiness is its apt reward.

As we grow in this beginning stage of holiness mortal sin gradually disappears as it is firmly resisted. We also become more vigilant in combating deliberate venial sins because we now recognize that all sins wound Jesus' heart. Earlier these sins were not even on our radar. We also become more committed to habits prayer even in the face of dryness. Gradually our prayer time becomes prolonged and we tend to talk with God during our day. Often our prayer experience may fluctuate between fierce trials and powerful consolations, both of which are designed to toughen us up so we can advance in our love for God and others.

However, the divine spiritual director never leaves us to our own devices. The Holy Spirit reminds us, "the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son who he receives" (Heb 12:6). Often God plays hide and seek with us to strengthen our resolve. As we mature in the state of spiritual childhood, he prepares us to enter the state of spiritual adolescence through the dark night of the senses. Spiritual consolations disappear. Prayer becomes dry and distasteful. Meditation is difficult and fraught with distractions. The soul is often hammered with temptations against chastity, patience, and forgiveness. These challenges afford us great opportunities for growth, but we will also face the danger of falling into lukewarmness, about which Jesus said: "Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew [vomit] you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:15-16). When we are spiritual infants we are still spiritually weak and flabby. Even when involved in ministries our own interests seep in to compete with the glory of God. We need a second deeper conversion to toughen us.