

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

One response I received to this series that examined the three stages of holiness is to feel discouraged and conclude that holiness is beyond us – an impossible dream. Few of us, thankfully, think of ourselves as spiritual super stars. When I was in college in Missouri I learned to play ice hockey. It's a great winter sport. I developed to the point that I thought of myself as a good player, that is, until I saw my first professional game. The truth was obvious; I was merely a somewhat competent amateur. It was also obvious that I could never devote myself to the time needed to attain a professional skill level, even if I had that potential – which was doubtful. So, is genuine holiness like that? Is mediocrity the best most of us can hope to achieve?

Recently, I read a biography of St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta. What impressed me the most about her remarkable life was her amazing determination to love God with her whole being. That's what saints do. She was particularly struck by Jesus' words on the cross, "I thirst." Mother understood that Jesus was expressing the cavernous ache in his heart for souls. Those two words are prominently featured in every chapel of the Missionaries of Charity. She was also powerfully moved by Psalm 69:20, which also looks to Jesus' broken heart on Calvary: "Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; for comforters, but I found none."

She urged her Sisters: "Tell Jesus, 'I will be the one'... Try to be the one to share with him, to comfort him, to console him." How did she go about expressing her love for Jesus? She consoled his wounded heart by caring for the poorest of the poor while living as one of them. She understood Jesus' lesson, "As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Once a reporter accompanied Mother Teresa as she took care of the dying. It was an experience he couldn't face again. He exclaimed to Mother Teresa, "I wouldn't do what you do for a million dollars!" She replied simply, "Neither would I." She was in the grip of a much greater love.

But doesn't Mother Teresa's life highlight our difficulty. I think that most of us would say that we have a greater possibility of becoming a professional hockey player than achieving the intense love for God that drove Mother Teresa. But is that true? The answer is Yes and No. Yes, we all lack to innate capability of achieving holiness, even at the lowest level. That was true for Mother Teresa and all the saints. Jesus made it abundantly clear, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Jesus also taught, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Lk 18:27). St. Paul, for example, was painfully aware of his own limitations and sinfulness. He wrote to the Corinthians: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:9). So like us, Paul had to struggle with his limitations and personal failures. He found the strength he desperately needed in God's help, not in his natural gifts. Therefore, he could boast of God's mercy: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Let us not forget that St. Paul's apostolate was filled with discouragement and suffering:

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked, a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren, in toil and hardships, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak” (2 Cor 11:24-29)?

When Jesus sent Ananias to Paul in Damascus, he told Ananias, “Go, for he is a *chosen instrument* of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Wow! Who would not long to be God’s “chosen instrument”? But wait, Jesus also added: “For I will show him how much he just *suffer* for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Perhaps a reported would have said to St. Paul, “I wouldn’t do what you do for ten thousand talents!” Then, Paul would have undoubtedly replied, “Neither would I.”

The key to holiness is not found in relying on our gifts and ideas, but recognizing our helplessness and in surrendering to the God who loves us even in our wretchedness. We must will it, but only God produces the fruit. There is an insightful Latin proverb that translates, “Do what in your power lies; God will not deny the grace.” The saints, fully aware of their weakness and sinfulness, approached God with absolute determination and complete trust. Consider the following prayer by the great St. Ambrose, who guided St. Augustine in his conversion:

“A sinner, I trust not in my own merit; but, in fear and trembling, I rely on your mercy and goodness. I have a heart and body marked by my grave offenses, and a mind and a tongue I have not guarded well. For this reason, God of loving kindness and awesome majesty, I, a sinner caught by many snares, seek safe refuge in you. For you are the fountain of mercy. I would fear to draw near to you as my judge, but I seek you out as my Savior. Lord, I show you my wounds, and I let you see my shame. Knowing my sins are many and great, I have reason to fear. But I trust in your mercies, for they are beyond all numbering. Look upon me with mercy, for I trust in you, my Lord Jesus Christ, eternal king, God and man, you who were crucified for mankind.”

The history of the saints demonstrates that God frequently writes straight lines with broken and crooked instruments. In different ways we are all called to be a “chosen instrument,” if we will only completely surrender to it. Jesus reassures us in this great quest, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32).