

Class 3: Prayer and the Purgative Way

In the first class we noted that Christ calls us to be perfect, and we looked at the role of prayer in making that happen. We also discussed how personal perfection isn't the end, so to speak. That's the final outcome, but the whole point of the spiritual life, including our prayer life, is to become like God. Becoming like God means becoming perfect. But how exactly does that happen? How does something become perfect? Sounds a bit difficult, doesn't it?

St. Thomas Aquinas tells us there is a sense in which perfection happens when something finally achieves what it was created for. A seed is perfected when it becomes a tree, for example. A tadpole finds its end when it becomes a frog. A pig eventually becomes bacon. That is its created end. It has achieved its delicious destiny.

It's the same with us. We are perfected when we finally grow into what we were made to be - "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). "Did you say 'divine,'?" Yes, but don't misunderstand. We don't become all powerful, all knowing, or present everywhere like God, because we always remain creatures. But through God's grace we become what he is by nature. It's a gift. We become true sons and daughters in the divine family of God. Created for union with God, we can't be perfect until we achieve that union with him.

So life essentially boils down to a journey to God. We're going to meet him one way or the other. It's either going to be a good meeting where he welcomes us into his presence, or it'll be a bad meeting where we are cast out because we rejected him by the way we lived our lives.

And if we're supposed to journey to God, that means there must be a definite road to travel. But we've got to find it. We need a map. A spiritual GPS. Otherwise, we're left driving in spiritual circles and the little voice in our head keeps repeating the word "recalculating."

The good news is Catholic doctrine and tradition provide that map, and it shows definite stages of the journey along a specific path. And I'm not just talking about going to Mass and confession and trying to pray. They are the vehicle, but they

travel a particular path. And when we're in the right vehicle traveling the right path, we'll experience a transformation that leads to perfection.

The Science of Sainthood

This transformation is what some spiritual writers call "the science of sainthood." It's the movement of each person toward God that unfolds in distinct stages — we move along these stages in order to achieve union with God, to reacquire his likeness we lost through sin.

Just as maps come in different shapes and sizes and colors, there are many different spiritualities and charisms in the Catholic faith. It's one of the amazing features of our Church. We can't hope to cover all the different descriptions and methods associated with the "science of sainthood," so we're going to focus on the more traditional definitions of how this happens and what it looks like. The backbone of our discussion will be what many spiritual writets call the "Three Stages" or "Three Ages" of the spiritual life. They are the Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Ways.

Some of you are encountering these terms for the first time and you're thinking, "The Whoative and the Whatative? I've been Catholic since before I was conceived, but I've never heard of this stuff." Don't start trippin' on me. These are simply the classic stages of the spiritual life taught by the great masters of Catholic spirituality and prayer like Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, and many others.

The stages can be summarized like this: our lives need to be purged of sin - particularly mortal, or serious, sin - and vice. This is the Purgative Way, the beginning. We are then "illuminated" by the light and love of God in the second way, called the Illuminative Way. And we continue to be illuminated to the point where we are eventually unified with him in the final stage of spiritual growth - the Unitive Way.

St. Thomas Aquinas illustrates these stages in more human terms. He says we grow from spiritual childhood into adolescents, and finally into mature spiritual adulthood. These stages are sometimes also described as the way of beginners, proficient, and the perfect.

Knowledge of these stages is vitally important because they give us an understanding of where we are in the spiritual life. It's like one of those "You are here" maps. We need this because if we don't know where we are, we can't get to where we're going. So let's chat about the first part of the map, the initial stage, the Purgative Way.

The Purgative Way

About right now, you may be thinking: "The Purgative Way ... well that doesn't sound so fun, Matt. In fact, it sounds like something along the lines of a colon cleanse." That's not too far off base. The Purgative Way involves a spiritual cleansing. It makes perfect sense when you think about it. After all, you can't get healthy until you've been purged of the diseases that are bringing you down.

But instead of looking at the negative side, let's look at the positive. What is really happening in the Purgative Way is the conversion of a soul from death to life. It's where we are born anew! Now that's pretty positive in my mind. The Purgative Way is the beginning of salvation because this is where a person moves from being in a state of mortal sin into a state of grace. We're not even close to perfect, but we're moving in the right direction.

A person enters the Purgative Way in one of two ways; either at baptism or, once they've lost their baptismal innocence, through confession. These sacraments are designed by God to get us into, or restore us to, the life of grace. If we are not in a state of grace, we are not in the Purgative Way. It assumes we are right with God through the sacraments.

Again, this initial stage of the spiritual life is like childhood. The spiritual child is constantly growing and learning. Not just about God, but about themselves, too. Just as babies gradually become aware of their hands and toes, spiritual children begin to recognize their faults as their spiritual poverty begins to make itself known. Their increasing knowledge of God instills a holy fear that helps keep them out of mortal sin.

I love the way St. Teresa of Avila describes beginners in the spiritual life. Her description of how we move toward God in this life makes it easy to visualize the process.

St. Teresa was a Spanish mystic and is a Doctor of the Church - one of the great spiritual masters in the history of the Church. In her most famous work, *The Interior Castle*, she eloquently describes growth toward perfection using the imagery of a castle.

Teresa had a vision from Our Lord in which she saw the human soul as a crystal globe filled with seven different rooms or "mansions." These mansions were not arranged in the way you might expect, in a line, but rather, "some above, others below, others at each side; and in the center and midst of them all is the chiefest mansion where the most secret things pass between God and the soul."

Each of the mansions was successively brighter, all of them illuminated by the King of Glory, who resided in the center of the globe in the seventh mansion. Outside the castle she described a great blackness infested by terribly foul and awful creatures like "toads, vipers, and venomous creatures."⁸ These creatures represented sin and were the dark world a soul escapes when it begins a life of grace joined to Christ.

But in Teresa's description, a soul can be in a state of grace, in the Purgative Way, and still have not entered the castle. In other words, everyone has a castle, but not everyone goes in. These souls who don't, she says, are hanging around outside with the guards (no doubt smoking). And when they do finally enter, they allow in with them many of the poisonous beasts that were previously lurking outside.

How do you get into the castle? Teresa says a soul enters through prayer, particularly meditation (which we'll discuss in detail later). Prayer is huge for Teresa and all the spiritual writers. You can't overestimate its importance. She says souls without prayer are like paralytics. They have arms and legs, but can't control them.

Teresa wrote *The Interior Castle* in the first place because she was asked to write a treatise on prayer. And prayer is the main focus and topic of the last three mansions because she knew that spiritual growth and prayer cannot be separated.

So how does Teresa describe those in the early stages of the spiritual life? She says that souls who do eventually enter the first mansions are still overly concerned and consumed with the world. Even so, their desires are good. They want to grow.

These souls will sometimes think about making some progress and will even pray a few times in a month. They're still battling with the poisonous snakes and vipers that slipped in with them, but they're on the right path.

Being so new to the spiritual life, though, these souls can easily make spiritually fatal choices. St. Teresa makes a point to emphasize how destructive and awful mortal sin is to the soul. While it never loses its splendor because it is created in the image of God, a soul in mortal sin can produce nothing but misery and filth. It is caked in grime. The brilliant light in the center of the soul is still there because God is always present, but his splendor is shrouded in darkness. Teresa stresses the awful nature of mortal sin because she wants to instill in us the fear of ever offending God. "O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! ... Remove the pitch which blackens the crystal."

Mortal sin is still a very real danger in the early mansions of *The Interior Castle* because the devil, says Teresa, has legions of fallen angels doing their best to deceive us and prevent us from passing on to the next mansions. Remember, the devil is the most envious of creatures. Envy isn't just jealousy. It's worse. Envy doesn't just want what the other person has. It wants to deprive the other person of what he has. The devil does not want you to have life. He wants to kill you. (If that doesn't shake you a bit, you need to read it again.)

This is very serious business. Satan and his demons will do whatever possible to prevent you from progressing in the spiritual life and attaining union with God because they hate you. "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

Cleaning Up

What else can we say about people in the initial mansions or the Purgative Way? As they progress, they eventually begin to seriously focus on giving themselves to God. They attempt to avoid sin and to fight against the disordered desires of their heart which keep them from truly loving God: no more trashy television; they take a hard look at the music they listen to, the books and websites they read, all the things with which they fill their mind. They even try to keep quiet and not listen when friends are gossiping even though they really, really want to know what happened to so-and-so.

If beginners are truly seeking after the Lord, they eventually won't even try to excuse themselves when one of their faults comes into focus - and they will. God will show you how wretched and sinful you are, and it's a humbling experience. This process never really stops because the more you grow in the spiritual life the more you understand the depth of your sin. This is seen clearly in the life of St. Paul.

Early in his writings (see 1 Cor 15:9), Paul describes himself as "the least of the apostles." (Not bad, Paul. Nobody likes a bragget.) Later, in Ephesians, he says he is "the very least of all the saints" (3:8). (Nice. A little humility goes a long way.) Finally, near the end of years and years of unflinching devotion and service to the Lord, he declares he is the "chief" of sinners (1 Tm 1:15, King James Version). (Let's not get carried away here! You're St. Paul, after all!)

Notice he doesn't say, "I *was* the chief of sinners." After giving everything he had, truly loving the Lord by making a gift of his life, Paul says he *is* the chief of sinners. His relationship with God had grown so deep he came to a more full knowledge of the gulf between himself and God, a gulf that is overcome only by God's mercy.

This is an important point. The Lord reveals our sinfulness not so we'll be depressed, but so we'll run to him who is love and forgiveness. So when we notice our faults we want to correct them, not excuse them. Unfortunately, beginners in the spiritual life are famous for taking their eyes off themselves and noticing the faults of others: "Did you see the dress she was wearing last night? It was a bit short, wasn't it?"

"Uh huh ... I saw 'so and so' drinking what must have been his second beer, and it wasn't even the end of the first quarter!"

Jesus has very clear words for those of us who engage in these antics: "Judge not, that you be not judged. ... Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Mt 7:1-3).

Hurt So Good

Of course, one of the things we can't avoid talking about when discussing the stages of spiritual development is suffering. (Uh-oh.) On one hand, people serious

about growing closer to God know they are going to have to deal with suffering. Everyone - Catholic, pagan, or just plain hedonist - has to deal with suffering in some way, shape, or form. No one can escape it.

It's like that classic scene in the movie *The Last of the Mohicans* where Daniel Day Lewis screams to Madeline Stowe before jumping through the waterfall, "I will find you!" Nobody escapes suffering. Adam's sin back in the Garden of Eden introduced suffering into this world, and now it's a part of all of our lives. Suffering always finds you - like an insurance salesman. The big difference between Catholics and everyone else is how we view it and deal with it. I don't have time to get into a long discussion of suffering, but we have to recognize it plays a vital role in the Purgative Way, as well as the rest of the spiritual life.

Ironically, we shudder at the thought of suffering in general terms, but many of us are more than willing to endure it for specific reasons, such as rippling abs and toned legs. Having spent a fair bit of time in my youth in weight rooms, I often heard my fellow gym rats screaming at each other what can only be described as motivation to suffer: "Feel the burn!" "Make it hurt!" "If you're not sore, you're not growing!" These "encouragements" - often accompanied by large amounts of spittle - were generally welcomed by the person exercising. They knew it was true. They knew they had to embrace the suffering so as to grow. ("Get big or get out!")

It's the same in the spiritual life. Just as we give up certain foods and force ourselves to exercise for our physical well-being, we need to wean ourselves from bad spiritual food and work out our spiritual muscles for our eternal well-being.

It's amazing, but Christ takes suffering and makes it the path to salvation. When we suffer, involuntarily or voluntarily through penance, and offer it to God, we become like Christ, who suffered and died for us so we could be saved. Yes, we're going to suffer one way or the other, but as Catholics we can make a simple act of the will - "Jesus, I give this suffering to you" - and it becomes a potent force for good. It can also lead to some powerful personal experiences.

Consolations

In return for this suffering and striving, many beginners in the spiritual life have discovered that God often rewards these generous souls with what we call

"spiritual consolations" - tastes of heaven, sensible pleasures from above, even as they begin turning away from the sensible pleasures of this world.

Most often, these pleasures happen while you're praying. You might feel a tremendous peace or the presence of God in a way you've never experienced. You may feel overwhelmed with gratitude at how much God loves you, overcome by sheer delight and wonder as you seek him. You might even have a sensation of burning love for God that is palpable.

Even so, there is a danger in putting too much emphasis on these spiritual consolations. They might feel really good, but they are not the end goal, a mistaken notion held by many.

Before I became Catholic, I knew a guy who sold everything he had, packed his remaining belongings and family into a station wagon, and traveled from spiritual conference to spiritual conference trying to constantly experience manifestations of God. (He was like a spiritual "Dead Head.") But it doesn't work that way. These consolations are given by our Father as an encouragement, a piece of spiritual candy that is a mere taste of what is to come. They're not the main course.

Hey, God! Where'd You Go?

So that we don't fall into the trap of focusing on these spiritual consolations, God brings us through what spiritual writers refer to as a second conversion. After we have traveled the length of the first stage, the Purgative Way, we come to a transition. St. John of the Cross calls it the "passive purification of the senses." Instead of spiritual delights, we begin to experience spiritual dryness. Prayer starts to be a little more difficult, and we just don't feel the presence of God the way we had. We're often left wondering - "Hey, God, where'd you go?"

What's happening is that we're being prepared to move into the second age of the spiritual life. We're starting to grow up. God is teaching us to seek after him for his own sake instead of just the sensible pleasure and spiritual candy with which we had associated him.

This second conversion begins to rid us of self-love. Why is this necessary? Because although we're growing, we're still immature. We still have trouble looking past our own needs. The world still revolves around us. Yes, we're

developing a fervent love of God, but we still love ourselves more. So God seeks to purify us of this self-love by taking away some of the sensible pleasures he had previously given. Everything starts to get harder, like when school stopped being about coloring and snack time and became about homework.

In the second conversion, God is intensifying what he started in our first conversion, when we began the spiritual life. He's uprooting deeper weeds of sin. This stage is akin to junior high and early high school. We're on the cusp of adulthood. Our spiritual voice is changing. Our spiritual body is developing. We still do dumb stuff, but we're starting to mature.

Grow Up!

Now, at this point, a lot of people stop. They refuse to grow up spiritually. You know people like this in the natural world - perpetual children who never assume the responsibilities of adulthood. It's the same in the spiritual life when people choose to stop maturing and never become fully functioning spiritual adults.

And if for some reason you're thinking: "C'mon, Matt! Being an adult isn't always cupcakes and brownies. Sometimes I wouldn't mind being a kid again." Really? Would you rather go back to junior high? Need I remind you of puberty? Awkward dances? Figuring out how to unlock the padlock on your locker before the bell rings so you don't get detention along with a bunch of kids sporting Black Sabbath T-shirts and leather bracelets? And those were the girls! No thanks.

We undergo a second conversion to help us grow up. And just as in our natural lives, it's not altogether easy. St. John of the Cross compares it to a mother weaning her child, which can be mildly traumatic for all involved. The most important thing to remember at this stage is to never stop, no matter what. We must be determined to seek after God at any cost, no matter what we feel or don't feel. And if we persevere through this purification, our senses submit more and more to the Spirit, and we gradually move out of the beginner stage into adolescence - the Illuminative Way. Phew!