

dying with Christ

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

—Hebrews 2:18

“**A** journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This truism holds good also for the spiritual life, which is often described as a journey of faith. This is especially true when one has the intention to become holy. The first step is a change in perspective. Holiness requires more than keeping the commandments and receiving the sacraments on a regular basis. To get as close to God as he will allow requires a definite plan, which will entail at least a change of perspective and for some a complete turnaround. The proper term to express a new sense of values that turns one more directly toward God is *conversion*. We can easily apply this to Augustine of Hippo, who had a steady, albeit dramatic, change in response to grace, or to the sudden jolt of grace in the life of Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. At some point in a

saint's life, a conscious decision is made to live only for God, face in a new direction and take a first step in that long journey to holiness.

A new set of values

That first step is a review and possible adjustment of the importance that is attributed to each part of our lives that we have up to the present considered a "value." Distinctions must be made between what may be true values in the area of piety and what may only be our emotional preferences. We must compare each with the basic principles of spiritual development.

A man who enjoys relaxing with a good book considers his quiet time very valuable. For another, nothing is more important after a day's work than sitting down with his family and having supper together. These are all values, but not of equal importance in every circumstance.

We may also speak rightly of religious and moral values, cultural and family values and so forth. We know that varying cultures often perceive family life from differing perspectives, and even persons with no religion can have moral values. It would appear to be futile to speak of "values" and expect common agreement or certitude unless the values are based upon principles. It is a mistake to equate *values* with *principles*, especially when the values are just personal choices. Principles are based on truths, and a value is not a truth. Cultural values are variables, and family values, for example, must go beyond any cultural base and be rooted in firm principle.

Values contradictory to the very principles of human relationships that reside in our nature by the

creative will of God are definitely false. The foundation of all Christian life must first acknowledge the relationship to our Creator. Our status as a redeemed people freed from sin by the death of Jesus on the cross calls for us to give high value to a serious life of penance. Without it holiness is impossible.

Thus we can truthfully say that the journey toward holiness is uphill, and the hill is Calvary. Motivated by love to accompany Jesus wherever he goes, we must carry the cross after him without faltering, keep our eyes on the goal and never give any thought to question whether the journey is worth the effort. To do penance for past sins and to practice mortification is fundamental to strengthen us in the face of the subtle and constant attraction to sin. In daily living we each experience different challenges and have different weaknesses. Hence, our sorrow for sin and accompanying penance might call for different practices than the classical *wearing a hair shirt* or *corporal flagellation* practiced by the ancient hermits in the desert. A life of solitude is probably also out of the question.

When our life situation is not already inherently difficult, we should give first preference, when feasible, to the biblical call for fasting, almsgiving and works of charity within modern circumstances. But the basic principle is not concerned with specifics of penance, however valuable, but is the need to live the cross of Jesus intimately. To that cross we touch our values to test their true worth. We must maintain the proper perspective from the hill of Golgotha through the eyes of the suffering Son of God who pleads with us to accept his mercy. This first of spiritual principles,

the need of penance and sorrow for sin, gives meaning to all the other aspects of our union with God. Just as a housewife notices the dirty window when the sun shines through it, the awareness that we are truly sinners becomes clearer as we grow closer to the light of God. The brighter the light of God's love penetrates our soul, the more the dark crevices of our spirit are revealed.

Mary carried a cross, too.

Just about all of us, I think, can remember an occasion when we pleaded with a teacher or parish priest or some adult: "Please don't tell my mother." Mothers are special and we want them to think the best of us. There are many things that we might have succeeded in hiding from them, things that we are not proud to look back on. Even if that were the case, we can also remember so many things that we talked over with them, because we knew we could trust them and they would help us with any difficulty when they were able.

As our natural mother was important to our human life in its beginning and its growth, so is Mary, our mother and the mother of Jesus, essential to our growth in holiness. Holiness is being one with Jesus, and that includes Mary. She cannot be separated from Jesus, as the one who was first to share his Passion, since she stood beside the cross and offered him for us. Indeed, no matter how close we might be or have been to our earthly mothers, none of them participates in our adult responsibilities to any extent. We all eventually go on to live our own lives. Not so with the mother of Jesus, who was given to us as the mother of the church. We are her concern always.

Before proceeding we need to contemplate the words about Mary from the Second Vatican Council's *Apostolic Constitution on the Church*.

The predestination of the Blessed Virgin as Mother of God was associated with the incarnation of the divine word. . . . She conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ; she presented him to the Father in the temple, shared her Son's sufferings as he died on the cross. Thus, in a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the order of grace. . . . which continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. (Chapter VIII, 61, 62)

Do we need it said any stronger for us to intensify our devotion to Mary and to look to her for our inspiration and strength? The principle is clear. She who offered him from beneath the cross and shared his life intimately from birth to sacrificial death must be part of our life in Jesus. Mary is the mother of the church, his Body, who guided it from the days after his Ascension into heaven, until today as she continues to love us, until we all share her glory in heaven. We must be one with Mary, as Jesus was, for he said to us from the cross through John: "Behold your mother."

As we struggle to walk with Jesus faithfully, we must remember that we are also imitating Mary, who

walked with Jesus on the way to Calvary just as she had accompanied him his entire life. She stood beneath the cross and received his lifeless body in her lap. That is our enduring picture of the Sorrowful Mother. We can understand how a human mother suffers when her child suffers and how she is concerned always for her child's welfare, even into adulthood. So we must see Mary as the mother of Jesus suffering with us and caring about us until we are together in heaven with her and with Jesus.

True, we contemplate her glory as Queen of Heaven and praise her beauty and comeliness. But on the journey to holiness, we remember her as the mother of the Redeemer. We need to know her as the mother who willingly shared her son's Passion and death and as the mother who at times weeps over us when we forget. She is the example to us of a mother's love, which keeps focused on the interest of those she loves, renouncing self-interest in all things.

We are always self-centered.

We need all kinds of things to live, things that are helpful only to ourselves. After all, we eat and drink to maintain life; we sleep to renew our strength that we might do our work; we study to prepare ourselves for our life's vocation; we clothe our nakedness and dress warmly in winter so we will not get sick. No one else benefits from these actions, at least directly. Nor do we think of ourselves as selfish for taking care of our health and seeing to our present and future needs. God expects us to do so. And we also cannot survive without people since we are made to love and be loved. Both our physical and spiritual natures are dependent.

The reality is, however, that we often eat and drink too much; we can be lazy and avoid work. Our work can be inspired by ambition for power and possessions. We may dress more elegantly than our state in life demands in order to show up others. We may exploit people for our own interests, rather than love them. Our self-centeredness can be excessive and that, of course, can effectively separate us from any intimacy with Jesus, our Redeemer. We will be content only to avoid sin and get to heaven.

We need to prepare for the journey toward holiness by traveling lightly, by satisfying for sins of the past with penance and by mortifying our sensual and intellectual self-interest. Then we are freed up to receive the grace of the spirit, which is wisdom. Selfishness and love just do not mix. The totally selfish soul is even beyond the love of Jesus, although he will continue to look for some glimpse of goodness.

There must be a balance, of course, because penance and mortification have no value by themselves. They must have a purpose, and the more focused that purpose is, the more will we remove specific obstacles along our path to the perfection of love. And the greater good we sacrifice, the more perfect the love. Perhaps the following story can illustrate how a saint goes about his penitential life. The lesson may be applied broadly.

There was a young priest who enjoyed walking into the school playground after lunch to watch the exuberance of the children and exchange pleasantries with them. There were some who would run over the moment they saw him. One particular second grade girl often led the pack with obvious joy at his attention.

One February day she was not among the adoring crowd. But he noticed her at the other end of the yard. The same thing happened the next day. He was sure that he had unwittingly hurt her feelings and watched for a chance to make up. The opportunity came the following day in the school corridor.

After a greeting, he stated: "I missed you in the yard these last two days. Are you mad at me?" She look flustered and blurted out: "Oh no, Father! Not at all!" Puzzlement made him pause, but he asked: "Then why are you avoiding me?" She hesitated and then said simply: "Because I gave you up for Lent!" "Out of the mouths of babes..." (Psalm 8:2).

You might remember the time when every Catholic gave something up for Lent, especially when unable to fulfill the lenten fast of forty days. This was to ensure detachment from the things that might be hindering our love for God, especially anything that might interfere with our prayer life or distract us from our responsibilities. Maybe, like the girl above, we wanted to show Jesus that we did love him above everything or anyone, beyond the need to do penance for our sins.

Indeed, *fasting* represents the classical form of penance. It can mean giving up food by quantity, but it also includes abstaining from an excess of "good times" however innocent. Of course, nature abhors a vacuum, and so does our super-nature. So any life of penance must include prayer or spiritual reading and, most importantly, working harder to fulfill our responsibilities to family, friends, community and especially where we earn our livelihood. We must try to accept hardships quietly, without complaint, and

seek ways to bring some unexpected joy to others, such as answering a long delayed letter.

In Lent, of course, we might wish our penance to express gratitude for the Passion and death of Jesus. We rejoice that we have been freed from our sins and that by reason of his Resurrection we have been promised eternal life. Appreciation for what we have already received is an essential ingredient of love.

But let us finish the story that I began. Upon hearing the answer of the little girl, the priest smiled warmly upon the face of this little Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. "But you made me very sad," he said to her. "Why didn't you tell me what you were up to?" The child looked sheepish. "Because," she replied, "Sister said that we should not tell anyone what we give up for Lent. So it was a secret between Jesus and me."

Jesus suffers with us.

The expression "misery loves company" is a way of saying that our human nature finds it difficult to suffer in silence, to be totally isolated in the bad moments of life. A sign of friendship is to share with another his moments of bereavement or disappointment and offer solace by our words or simple presence. That is how love works. We appreciate it and are bolstered by another's concern for us. As we come closer to Jesus on our journey to holiness, we soon learn that we are expected to suffer with him more and more. It becomes our bond. Our strength, however, must come from the realization that Jesus knows what we feel and suffers with us. We need never feel alone in our misery.

An experience that we all have at various times in our lives is the loss of a loved one. For example, many

a widow acknowledges, even five or more years after the death of her husband, that she often feels lonely. When the initial pain of separation is relived, the emptiness is felt once again and the eyes fill with tears. Yet, married or not, all of us know the feeling of emptiness at the death of one who has been close to us, whether a parent or a sibling or a good friend. Part of our heart has been ripped away. That is why the Gospel narrative about the raising of the dead Lazarus touches us and is a reminder of how Jesus relates to each one of us when we are in sorrow.

Mary and Martha were grief stricken at the death of their brother. No mention is made that any of them had a spouse, much less children, who could comfort them. The two sisters and their brother seemed to have only each other. So Mary and Martha were devastated when Lazarus died.

When Jesus arrived at Bethany and upon seeing Mary and Martha, he began to weep. "See how he loved him," the friends and neighbors said. Actually the people did not understand. Jesus was not crying because his good friend Lazarus was dead. He wept because Mary and Martha, whom he loved as friends, were so very distressed, and his heart went out to them. We do the same when comforting a family member or good friend on the death of someone whose love we share with them. We weep together.

We know that Jesus was not sad because he was feeling the loss of Lazarus. He had deliberately stayed away, even after learning that his friend was sick. Only upon his death did he say: "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." When he arrived to perform the miracle of raising the dead man