

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

The Lifelong Journey of Holiness

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Hello, and welcome to today's talk on holiness. Before we begin discussing holiness, let's start with prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, in our weaknesses and our strengths, we ask that you guide us as we persevere on the path to holiness. We know the very meaning of our lives is to be a saint and to enter into communion with you. We ask that you just help us to continue on that journey, and we also ask that our Heavenly Mother walk beside us, intercede for us, and lead us towards her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as we pray. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's talk, I wanted to outline a few things that can help us on that path to holiness. Things that we need to remember in our daily lives as we continue to grow spiritually and in communion with God. And, so there's a process to holiness – in fact, it's a process that takes an entire lifetime – and most of us may not even notice that we're making progress in our daily lives, because the successes in the holy life usually are small. We take small steps forward, sometimes we take steps backwards, but we continue forward with our Lord guiding us. And as we begin to understand more and more about ourselves and about our weaknesses, we begin to see why St. Paul mentioned to the Romans. He says "What I do I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate." And as we grow deeper in an understanding of ourselves and of God, we begin to see that we tend to do the very thing we hate. We wake up in the morning, we say our prayers, we offer our day to God, and then an hour later we're yelling at our children, or our spouse, or are frustrated in traffic, annoyed with a coworker, or any number of situations that can arise in our daily lives.

And so we end up finding ourselves doing the exact opposite of what we set out to do in each day. And that can be discouraging and frustrating. But in reality, St. Paul is really helping us to understand something about ourselves, something in relation to the fall. When the fall occurred, all of us were born with Original Sin, which of course is washed away through the sacrament of baptism. However, our inclination, or what is known as Concupiscence, does not go away. So even though God created us ontologically, which is at the very depths of our being, for

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goodness and truth, we are wounded by sin. And so we have an inclination towards sin that we have to battle. Even though we're made for goodness, sin gets in the way of that goodness, and that's why our Lord had to come and redeem us, and that's why He continues to give us grace through the sacraments in the church, and he helps to strengthen us on the journey. Because he knows our weaknesses, he knows that very often we are going to choose to do the very thing that we hate.

But the point of the holy life is to continue to persevere, to continue to make successes, to ask our Lord to walk with us as we overcome sins within ourselves, many of which are habitual. Some of the sins have developed in childhood, or in adulthood, and habitual sin is very difficult to overcome. And so we need our Lord to help us to do that. And so we have to remember not to be discouraged because we have this inclination to do what we hate, but instead to turn to our God and our Lord in hope and trust as we continue forward.

So, there are a few things that I'd like us to try to remember as we progress in the holy life. First, it's very important, and I've already alluded to this, that we do not try to do it alone. Holiness is not something we can do of our own will and of our own power; holiness is only something we can do with our Lord. We have to literally give everything over to him – our weaknesses, our strengths, our joys, and our sorrows – in order to be able to progress. There's a tendency, especially in Western culture, to try to go it alone, a type of rugged individualism, where we think that we're the masters of our own destiny and we have the ability to conquer and overcome anything. In reality, in the spiritual life, that just isn't going to work. In fact, more often than not, we're going to find ourselves sinning and falling frequently. And when we rely on ourselves, we also are prone to the deadly sin of pride. And of course pride blinds us to our ability to fall on Christ and to choose him, and the opposite of pride is humility.

We have to be willing to accept that we are weak, and we have areas of our lives that need to be pruned away and healed through our Lord, and there are ways and areas that we need to develop new habits, and living in the virtue is trying to overcome that simple part of us. So, it's important that we always remember that we have to rely on Jesus. He is the one who's redeemed us, He's the one who gives us grace and strength, and we need to turn to Him constantly, or we are not going to progress. So, never think that we can progress in the holy life by ourselves. That's just setting us up for failure.

Second, it's important that we recognize we're going to fall daily. Sin is something that we battle in every part of our lives. There are temptations everywhere. There is

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the temptation to lose our temper, there is the temptation to not pray, there's lust, there's greed, envy. All manner of sins are present throughout the world, and they're tempting us and turning us away from God. And so we have to acknowledge that in our daily lives, we are going to fall into temptation, and we're going to sin. We can't be surprised by our weakness. When we become surprised by our weakness, we can often become discouraged and despair. And the last thing we want to do is turn and despair, because then we've lost the supernatural virtue of hope; we turn away from that gift of hope that God has given us.

So, first we have to acknowledge our weakness. We have to be willing to say "Okay Lord, I know I have this inclination towards sin, I know that I have made this mistake today. Please help me to do better." And so then, as then as we sin, we stop being discouraged and being so surprised, and then we say "Okay, I am weak. I need Jesus. I absolutely have to turn to my Lord in order to overcome this sin." And in acknowledging our weakness, we really are strengthened, because then we're not trying to rely on our own power. We are saying "Okay, I have a weakness towards this particular sin, or this list of sins, and the only one who's going to help me overcome this is our Lord." So, it's important that we remember we are going to fall daily, and to try not to be so surprised by our weakness. A lot of spiritual writers talk about this, that we shouldn't be surprised about our weakness because of our inclination towards sin. In fact, we should be more surprised when we choose good, because good has been wounded in us through sin. And so we need to focus on acknowledging our weakness, and then turning to God in trust and hope that he is going to help us to overcome this weakness, so that we can progress in holiness. Because if we fervently pray to these saints, if we ask God to make us a saint, he will. It's not going to be the easy journey – in fact, there will be times that are extremely painful – but he will help us to become saints, and that means acknowledging our weakness and being willing to continue forward in the journey as we make mistakes and we sin in our daily lives.

Next, we have to be willing to get back up. Like I said, we acknowledge our weakness, we know we're going to sin daily and make mistakes; we have to be willing to get back up. If we commit a sin, sometimes even serious sins, if we allow ourselves to wallow in self-pity, or shame, anger, then we're not going to progress. We have to say "Lord, I've messed up again. I've committed this sin again. Please help me to get up and to continue forward." One of the best ways to contemplate this aspect of holiness is to think about our Lord's falling 3 times on His way to the crucifixion. As Jesus carried his own cross, He too fell. And this is a very important image for us in the path to holiness, because as we carry our crosses, and we follow our Lord to our own death, He is going to help us get back

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up, and He's also shown us that we're going to fall. So, we need to be prepared for those moments when we are going to fall and dust ourselves off with our Lord's help and get back up.

One of the best ways to get back up is to go to the sacrament of confession, which leads me to my next point, and that is that we need to learn to seek forgiveness quickly. We know we're weak, we know we're going to sin, and Christ tells us to forgive and to forgive quickly. We don't want to dwell in anger. And so part of the spiritual life is learning to forgive when other people hurt us quickly, and also to seek forgiveness quickly. And this is an area of struggle for all of us, because we struggle with the sin of pride, we want to be right, or we don't want to have to show our vulnerability in our relationships with other people and that we made a mistake. But in order to progress in the spiritual life, we must be willing to seek forgiveness from other people and to give forgiveness ourselves. And the best way that we can foster that habit is through frequent reception at sacrament of confession. And the sacrament of confession is something that I have grown to love tremendously. It is one of my favorite sacraments, second to the most holy Eucharist, and it is because it is the sacrament that has truly helped me to understand more about myself, about my husband and my married life, and also about my path to holiness.

About 6 years ago, my husband and I decided that we needed frequent confession in our marriage. And so both of us go to confession every 2 weeks, or sometimes weekly depending, and we have learned a tremendous amount about our own failures and weaknesses. In fact, both of us usually go in with the exact same list of sins that we had the week or 2 weeks prior. And yes, that can be frustrating, and both of us have been exasperated and said to our confessor "Why do I keep doing this over and over again? I don't feel like I'm making any progress." And the priest usually laughs, because that is very typical of the spiritual life – we continue to struggle with the same sins over and over again. But, the priest always says that the spiritual life is about making small steps, not leaps and bounds, and that if I look back on my life, I've definitely made progress. I may not have seen it at the time, but if I look back 10 years I definitely can see major changes in myself, that God has pruned me of certain sins and sanctified me in different areas, and that I am slowly progressing.

And yes, there are periods that I have backslided, but the point is to continue moving forward. And that's another thing that the priest always tells us, is even if you don't sense it, even if you don't feel it necessarily, because our faith isn't dependent on feelings, then continue to move forward, continue going to

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confession regularly, even if you're confessing the same sins, because God is working in us and is calling us to continue to bring our sins to Him, because the sacrament of confession is where we meet the divine physician, it's where He heals our wounds, and then He also strengthens us for the journey. He picks us up, He looks us in the eyes and says "I love you. Continue to move forward. I am with you. And continue carrying your cross." And so I cannot stress the use of the sacrament of confession as frequently as possible enough in the spiritual life. We need it precisely because we are weak and simple, and because we need the divine physician to bind our wounds constantly. It doesn't matter if the sins are menial. Yes, of course, mortal sins must be confessed to a priest, but menial sins are heavy too. All sin is heavy, and all sin gets in the way of our relationship with God and our continued goal towards holiness.

Because it's important for us to remember that the center and the very meaning of our lives is to become a saint. The goal is for us to achieve holiness. And when we achieve holiness, we are able to enter into deep communion with the most Holy Trinity, which really is our, to use the theological term, eschatological end. That is what we were ordered towards. We are meant to enter into the most profound, incredible, deep communion with the most Holy Trinity, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give themselves away in self-giving love. We cannot enter into that communion of self-giving love if we are trapped in sin. And so part of the whole spiritual life is, and growing in holiness, is detachment from sin, and learning slowly, because of our inclination to sin, to give ourselves away in self-giving love as a reflection and a mirror of the most Holy Trinity.

So, it isn't that we're going to progress rapidly, but we have to learn to be patient with ourselves and patient with God, because He is working in us in his time. So, the point of holiness is to persevere, not to expect perfection every single day of our lives. In fact, perfection is probably not going to occur in most of our lives until we have been completely set free of sin. So, it is the very... Holiness is about continuing on. And the point is I don't want any of you to be discouraged, because I know I've had periods of frustration and discouragement. And so, if we keep our eyes firmly fixed on Christ, then we are going to achieve our goal. Asking God to be a saint, He will make us a saint. So please continue on in the journey. May God guide you and me to our eschatological end, which is Him, and may all of you have a very blessed advent season. Thank you for joining me today.