

A circular image showing a dirt path winding through a forest with trees displaying vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and red. In the center of the path, a statue of a figure with arms outstretched is visible. The scene is captured from a slightly elevated perspective, looking down the path.

James 1:12-21

Castus Society

“A path to fidelity”

A Twelve Step Review

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P.

James 1:12-21

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brethren.

Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.

Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Step One



Jesus saves Peter, who relying on his own strength, began to drown

Al Brown Photo

WE ADMITTED WE WERE

POWERLESS...

That our lives had become unmanageable

I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand, for I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God-Jesus Christ our Lord

!

Romans 7:15, 18B-25A

All of us have been born with a wound, a wound of sin which is passed on from generation to generation. St. Augustine (d. 430) noticed a mother nursing her newborn, while the other child looked on in a rage of jealousy. That child, maybe one or two years old, didn't know the word jealousy nor how to say it, but was experiencing it despite himself. This is a manifestation of that Original Sin found in all of us children of Adam and Eve. Christ came to heal this wound in our nature.

The Wound of Sin

The natural perfection in which man was originally created was lost through the Fall of our first parents. Human nature itself was not corrupted by the fall, nor were its natural powers impaired. The Church has condemned the extreme position taken by some Christians, which holds that man's nature itself had become essentially corrupted and depraved by the Fall. As a consequence, they believe, all man's acts are evil. The Church, on the contrary, regards man, as essentially good-his essential goodness has not been destroyed by the Fall. Nevertheless, the Fall has left him wounded, with his inclination for goodness frustrated.

As a result of this wound, there is a certain disharmony in our nature. This disharmony is seen in:

- a weakness of the will in the face of evil (called the wound of malice);
- a great difficulty in acquiring truth (called the wound of ignorance);
- a weakness of the irascible power-that power in us which seeks to overcome difficulties (called the wound of weakness);
- a strong desire to satisfy our senses (called the wound of desire or concupiscence).

This wound in our nature does not mean that human nature has suffered any essential corruption as such. Rather, whatever belongs intrinsically to human nature has been left intact. Man has been wounded in his integral nature-that gift of integrity by which man's powers were united in perfect harmony. This unity has been severed by the Original Sin. In the state of fallen nature, man is born both habitually and directly opposed to God, his supernatural end. With his will thus deprived of its order to good, man's intellect suffers the wound of ignorance; his sensitive appetites suffer the wound of weakness and concupiscence, for the intel-

lect and will now lack the ability to direct and control them by what is reasonable, as St. Paul makes clear in the above quote from Romans. Practically speaking, we experience this when the good we want to do, and know we should do, we do not do, and the evil we don't want to do, and know we ought not to do, we do.

Self-redemption - an Illusion

This is the situation, for example, with the addict, whether the addiction is food, drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, etc. How many times has an addictive personality determined to cut down or quit altogether only to find himself once again giving in, and thereby increasing the hold his addiction has over him? We all experience this to a greater or lesser extent: some with drinking, eating, compulsive sexual behavior, etc. We experience not being in control of our lives; rather, other forces seem to control our will. The will has been weakened and we no longer possess the power, of ourselves, to overcome these problems. Try as we might, we cannot. No matter how much fasting we do or how many times we invoke God's help with our lips, there will be no relief for us until we, by ourselves, in our own minds and hearts, humble ourselves and acknowledge our powerlessness and become determined to surrender to His grace. God will help those who are willing to accept help.

Prior to becoming aware of our problem our (whatever it may be), we tried everything we could to deny it or fix it. With just ourselves to fall back on, nothing worked. When we come to the realization that we do not possess the wherewithal to redeem ourselves, we are ready for Step One. We have no alternative but to admit that, left to our own efforts, our lives become unmanageable. This first step-admitting with St. Paul our powerlessness-is the foundation of our spiritual journey.

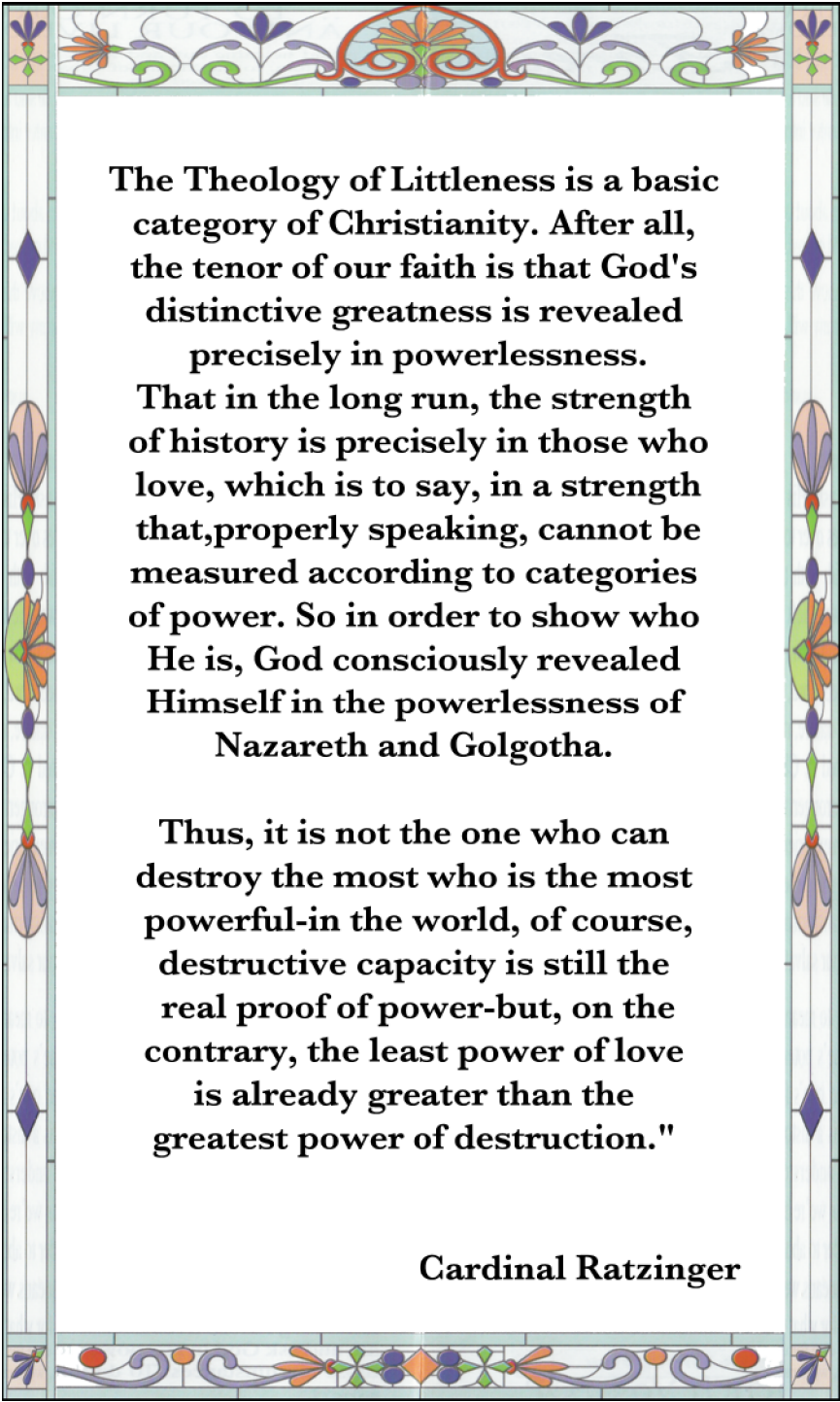
If we surrender to the idea that we are powerless, we will be more open to taking a closer look at ourselves to find what's been missing. We begin to see our behavior in its true perspective.

Two Parts to Step One

Control being one of the biggest issues in our lives, Step One invites us to admit our unhealthy desire to exert control in areas where we are powerless to do so. Secondly, as we look back over our lives, we see that certain areas of our lives have been, are now, and will continue to be unmanageable by us alone.

This is a big step for us self-willed individuals. Admitting powerlessness is no easy step. Many will never take this step; they continue to assert their will and to assume authority where they have none. But often if an individual hurts enough, he finds himself with no other option but to admit powerlessness.

Powerless doesn't mean hopeless; it simply means we don't have the power to overcome evil by ourselves alone. It means the outcome isn't in our hands. We need the help of spiritual forces greater than ourselves. We need a practical spiritual life whereby we learn to live by faith in a Power greater than ourselves. The outcome is left in His hands.



The Theology of Littleness is a basic category of Christianity. After all, the tenor of our faith is that God's distinctive greatness is revealed precisely in powerlessness.

That in the long run, the strength of history is precisely in those who love, which is to say, in a strength that, properly speaking, cannot be measured according to categories of power. So in order to show who He is, God consciously revealed Himself in the powerlessness of Nazareth and Golgotha.

Thus, it is not the one who can destroy the most who is the most powerful-in the world, of course, destructive capacity is still the real proof of power-but, on the contrary, the least power of love is already greater than the greatest power of destruction."

Cardinal Ratzinger

Powerlessness and Spiritual Childhood

Christ tells us, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). It is that childlike dependence on a Power greater than ourselves that can lead us out of our dilemma.

The theology of littleness is a basic category of Christianity, in complete contrast to what the world believes. People who belong to the world-”worldly people” - are intent on impressing others with their importance, their power, their looks, their money, etc. But in Christian revelation, God purposely reveals His greatness in powerlessness:

- In the powerlessness of Bethlehem, being born in a cave;
- In the powerlessness of Nazareth, a backwater nowhere, a place not even mentioned in the Old Testament, nor anywhere outside the New Testament;
- In the powerlessness of fishermen, zealots, and traitors as His special followers, called to take His message to the empires of the world, a seemingly impossible task;
- In the powerlessness of Golgotha where, after preaching, teaching, and healing for only three years of His adult life, He is crucified in ignominy.

In order to show who He is, God purposely chose powerlessness to manifest the truth, the truth that the least power of love is already greater than the greatest power of destruction. That power, that love, is available at all times and is within the reach of every hand.

It is for this reason that Christianity spread first among the weak and outcast of the world. With the coming of Christ, for the first time missionaries were sent to preach the Good News to the powerless, to those whom Scripture refers to as “the poor.” In the truth of the Gospel, they found their dignity. The Christian faith gave the powerless hope. And it continues to do so today, provided Christians don’t get caught up in the seductive escapes of contemporary society and are able to admit powerlessness in the face of addictive behavior and irrational fears.

A Thorn in the Flesh

To become as a little child is to trust in spiritual forces greater than our weaknesses. St. Paul came to this realization when he prayed that the Lord deliver him from a certain “thorn in the flesh.” The Lord’s response was, not to take away the trouble, but to give Paul the power to transcend the problem. Paul tells us:

To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times, I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians. 12:7-9

What an affirming statement: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This is the spirit of Step One, a recognition of our powerlessness in the face of the troubles and temptations and sins of our wounded nature in this broken world. Christ came to redeem, and this redemptive power of His is available to all who have the humility to accept their powerlessness. Once accepted, there is no situation too dark that the light of Christ can’t pierce it. This is evidenced many times over and through the centuries in the lives of the Saints. There was no unhappiness too great to be lessened, no obstacle too great to be hurdled.

The Example of the Saints

Some Saints had to overcome slavery. With the power of grace, the stigma of having been a slave did not defeat these saints. For example, in the first Canon of the Mass, we have the twelve apostles given and then the next twelve, “Linus, Cletus, Clement,” etc. The one that leads the group, St. Linus, was St. Peter’s successor. St. Linus was a slave!

In the same Canon we have the early female martyrs: “Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha,” etc. Here, too, the one that leads the list was a slave, St. Felicity.

The most renowned Saint who was a slave, who in our culture is celebrated with great festivity each year, is St. Patrick. He was kidnapped as a teenager and made a slave by his captors. At the age of 22, he was able to escape and finally return home. And here is the beauty of Christ’s Gospel: the Christian cannot take revenge on his enemies but must, in spite of it all, learn to return a blessing. So St. Patrick returned home and became a priest and returned to his slaveholders and brought them the Catholic faith. It was the first time in history that a people—the Irish—suffered no martyrdom in becoming Christian.

Some Saints were conceived through the crime of rape and yet this, too, His power could overcome. I met a woman some years ago who was raped at knifepoint. Coming from a devoutly Christian family, she refused to abort the child she conceived. She gave birth to a lovely girl and gave her up for adoption. Twenty years later that girl, wanting to know her background, found her birth mother and, of course, wanted to know why she was given up for adoption. Her mother explained how she had been raped at the age of 16 just three blocks from her home. She said her daughter’s first words were, “Thank God you didn’t have an abortion!” She couldn’t believe it, that she had been conceived through rape! St. David, the patron Saint of Wales was conceived in the same way.

St. Theodore was the illegitimate son of a circus performer and a prostitute.

St. Bartolomea Capitanio had to lead her drunken, abusive father home from the tavern several times a week.

St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine, had a drinking problem, as St. Augustine tells us in his autobiography.

St. Augustine inherited the obsessive-compulsive behavior of his parents, but his drug was lust. Sexually active from the age of 15, he had a son out of wedlock at 17, and lived on in lust until the age of 30, when he finally converted.

St. Mary of Egypt was a prostitute before her conversion.

St. Fabiola was a passionate, self-willed control addict who was restless all her life. She dumped her husband and married her boyfriend outside the Church. Then, years later, after his death, she returned to the Church in great humility, was reconciled, and became a friend of the poor.

The Saints include the rich and famous, even kings and queens who became saints despite their great wealth and power, like St. Elizabeth of Hungary who, after the death of her husband, spent her life caring for the sick poor in her own castle; The Saints include the weak and poor, like St. Germaine, and the physically deformed, like Margaret of Costello, who was born blind and deformed.

The Saints include teenagers who, despite peer pressure, having surrendered to

that Power greater than their youth, overcome their weaknesses: St. Dominic Savio, age 16; St. Joan of Arc, patroness of France, put to death at the age of 19.

The Saints include married people, like St. Isadore and his wife, St. Maria; Christians married to non-Christians or nonpracticing Christians, like St. Rita; Housewives who were Saints like St. Dorothy and Helen of Udine; People involved in terrible cults, like St. Lucian and St. Marcian. Bl. Bartholomew Longo had been ordained a Satanist priest before being rescued from depression and suicidal tendencies by some good Christians.

Medical doctors who are Saints, like St. Cosmos and St. Damian; soldiers, like St. Olaf, St. Leopold, St. Joan of Arc; teachers, like St. Cassian, St. John Bosco, Mother Seton; waitresses, like Margaret of Louvain; church cleaners like St. Theobald; lawyers (it' s possible! With grace, all things are possible!) Like St. Thomas More, St. John Storey; bakers, like St. William of Rochester. There is one thing that all these men, women, and children had in common, says the book of Revelation: These are the ones that have come out of the great tribulation (Rev. 7:14). What is the great tribulation? Life in this valley of tears, life where there is rape, alcoholism, Satanism, the peer pressure of youth, dysfunctional parents, sexual addiction, physical deformity, but none of these things had the power to defeat the Saints once they admitted their powerlessness over them and surrendered to a Power greater than themselves. God's power is the power of love, and love desires the freedom of the beloved. If we surrender ourselves to that Power, we too, will find the freedom that the Saints enjoyed in this life and perfect happiness in the life to come. But we have to be realistic. We are wounded. St. Paul perceived that in the depths of man's being, man is not at home with himself, that there's a struggle going on in man's soul.

Man Divided Against Himself

St. Paul realized that man is divided against himself. Though animals may have many external enemies to combat, they have no opposition from within themselves, as man has. Man cannot be sure of self-loyalty. This struggle in man is not simply a matter of the flesh against the spirit, but rather, in the very depths of man's being, man is not at one with himself. The executive branch and the legislative branch of the soul are in open conflict: What the mind knows to be right and good the will refuses to carry out, and in direct opposition to the well being of the person. The alcoholic, for example, knows that he is killing himself and he does it anyway! The lust addict knows the diseases he is vulnerable to and can pass on to his spouse, yet he continues in this betrayal. There is a force at work in man that seeks to deliver him over to slavery. This force, this law, once it is indulged, inevitably leads the person into slavery. St. Paul calls this law the law of my members. This law is not evil in itself but rather leads, to evil, once indulged. Take the prodigal son. He does not leave his father to go and sin and lose everything, to wake up one day with nothing, eating with pigs. Rather, he sets out to enjoy his inheritance by doing whatever he wants, except sin. Soon he finds that he cannot stop short of sin, and one day he awakens to find himself no longer master of his desires. He has lost everything, despite his good intentions, and is now captive to the law of sin and death. We freely indulged ourselves, kept giving in til we became a slave: to food, sex, drink, drugs, pills, or codependency in our need to please and fix, etc. We could no longer function without our pseudo crutches. We became captive to the law of sin and death.

There was only one-way out:

to admit we were powerless

Step TWO



Bread of Life
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CAME TO BELIVE.... **THAT A POWER GREATER** **THAN OURSELVES COULD** **RESTORE US TO SANITY**

Step Two is about restoration, a common Biblical theme, as we can see from the sample quotes given in the frame (pages 4-5). It is such a common biblical theme because of the many transgressions of man against his own good, against what God has created him for. All the wounded sons and daughters of Adam and Eve need to be restored from the effects of sin.

Rather than seek the divine cure for the effects of sin in his life, man reaches for pseudo cures, false salves for his wounds: alcohol, lust, gluttonous intake of food, addictive pills, drugs, etc., thereby increasing his misery. Jesus came to offer the only real salve, the one that alone restores man to a sane way of living while at the same time elevating him to a participation in His divine life. Restoration is about a return to a sane way of living, a way intended by God from the beginning.

Insanity has been defined as: doing the same thing over and over again, in the same way, and expecting a different result. Let's look at some examples of this insanity.

- A man (a "dry alcoholic," that is, one who merely has given up drinking but has never recovered and therefore, although dry, is not sober)-this man loves to coach sports for young people. While umpiring a baseball game, some man from the bleachers, angry at a call he made, lurches into his face and shouts, "What, are you blind or something? Can't you see...," etc. The unrecovered alcoholic umpire grabs the man by the throat and has it out with him, in front of his children.
- A woman, married for eight years with three children, is upset and in tears because of her husband's behavior. It seems when he's angry, he takes it out on her with verbal abuse even in front of their children, going so far as to call his wife names. And how does she handle this outrageous behavior time and again? She cries while offering irrational threats that she never follows through on!
- A man, with a lot of anger, is driving with his wife and small children in the car. On the highway, some woman cuts him off from the right and turns around and flips him the international sign of peace, so to speak. He is outraged and speeds after her to get back at her.

An elderly woman has worked for many years for people who took advantage of her. Finally leaving that job, she got another, and to her surprise, these people treated her the same way. In reality, she is a doormat personality who is afraid to set boundaries (she would feel guilty if she did), so she keeps giving in, and she continues to get what she's always gotten: anger, bitterness and resentment.

The above examples manifest the insanity of broken human behavior in times of trial. The outcome is unhappiness, yet people keep reacting the same way over and over again, expecting a different result. Insanity!

Lived in faith and with moral goodness, the Steps offer a way out. After a person has admitted his powerlessness in Step One, the next step is the life of faith, faith in a Power greater than man that restores him to sanity. Our goal in Step Two is not to try harder but to trust more. Trust is faith in action.

Practically speaking, an atheist

Once heard a wonderful sermon by a Franciscan priest who claimed most churchgoers were atheists, practically speaking. Theology makes a distinction between the assent of the intellect and the assent of the will. It's one thing to say, "That ladder will hold me," and quite another to actually climb it. Faith is not merely an intellectual assent to a set of dogmas. Rather, faith must be put into action: "You are my disciples if you do what I command you" (In 15:14). Step Two is about the life of faith as a doing. It means a real, living faith, not a mere intellectual assent to a set of dogmas.

My response to the Franciscan priest's sermon was, "Yes, I can see how churchgoers, on a practical level, act as if they run the world. Practically speaking, they are atheists despite what their intellects assert." But I never thought that I was one!

A priest and an atheist!

One day I was due to fly off to preach a parish mission and had arranged with one of our priests for a ride to the airport. We agreed on 7:00 a.m. I was all set at 6:30 (wonderful person that I am, I'm always well prepared and ahead of time) and so I waited, quietly reading. He comes out exactly at 7:00 saying, "I've got to take a shower"! A shower, now, at the precise moment we should be leaving? My blood was beginning to boil but I tried not to notice. He emerges after his little showery-poo and says, "I've got to make some coffee." Can you imagine? I really exploded then. I grabbed my luggage and flew out the door in a rage. Defrosting the car with the fumes from my ears, I waited in great anger for him to come out. We drove to the airport bitter enemies; all the while, I was wondering, "What is this? I'm not just a Christian but a priest, and here I am in a murderous rage because of Fr. Bozo's apparent unconcern for the agreed-upon time of departure?" As I was trying to overcome my misery through sheer willpower, he throws salt in my wounds by comparing me with some awful priest whom I could never abide! (There is a wonderful wisdom saying that goes, "If someone throws salt on you, you'll receive no harm unless you have sore places.") I was deeply insulted, for I saw myself as the male version of Mother Teresa!

Parting as bitter enemies at the airport, I checked in and sat down to wait, feeling so absolutely miserable, I wanted to cry. And I had a lot of time before departure to preoccupy myself with this misery. I truly believe in the spiritual axiom that says, "Anytime we're miserable, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong with us." So here, I am so terribly miserable. Why? My usual tendency when something like this occurred was to blame the other person. After all, he agreed to the 7:00 a.m. departure time, but no, he's got to take a little shower, have some of his precious coffee! Outrageous! However, as I sat there (with lots of time on my hands!), I realized my problem: on the practical level, I, too, was an atheist

Sure, I believed in God (assent of the intellect) but practically speaking, I was in charge of running the universe and when it didn't go my way, I was miserable, acting as if I didn't believe in God's power to help me. I believed only in my ability to run the universe. And it didn't work. I ended up in misery when things didn't go my way, over prepared as I always was!

When I returned from my trip, I went to Fr. Bozo and apologized for my monstrous mood. Surprisingly, he apologized for purposely being late! Ah, the Christian life! It works if you work it. I accepted responsibility for my miserable behavior and he in turn took responsibility for his. We both were restored to sanity.

- For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal,says the LORD,because they have called you an outcast. (Jer. 30:17)
 - Restore us, O God of hosts; let thy face shine, that we may be saved! (Ps. 80:7)
 - O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me to health and make me live! (Isa. 38:16)
 - Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old! (Lam. 5:21)
 - And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.(1 Pet. 5:10-11)
 - A life of faith is a life of sacrifice. Our Christian vocation does not take us away from our place in the world, but requires us to cast aside anything that would get in the way of God's will. (Blessed J. Escriva)
 - Faith, if it is strong, protects the whole house. (St. Ambrose)
 - Man, influenced by his prejudices or stirred up by his passions or bad will, is not only able to deny the evidence of external signs plain to be seen before his very eyes, but can also resist and reject the higher inspirations God infuses into his soul. (St. Theophilus of Antioch)
 - No one is entirely safe from temptation no matter how long he lives, for we carry temptation's source within us: We have all been born with a fierce,self-centered desire for success, status, and pleasure that clashes with our longing for God. (Thomas a' Kempis)
- The greatest hindrance to our spiritual development indeed, the whole hindrance-is that we allow our passions, moods, and desires to control us, and we do not strive to walk in the way of the saints by denying our very selves. When we meet some adversity, we are too quickly dejected and we turn to drugs, alcohol, food, or relationships for comfort, instead of to God.

(Fr. Emmerich, O.P.)

Reflecting on this in all honesty, I realized I had usurped God's responsibility to run the universe and I was miserable when things didn't turn out as I had expected (thus the wise saying, "An expectation is a premeditated resentment"). This lesson taught me to practice my faith, i.e. to trust in God who, I firmly believe, always wills what is universally best. I noticed in my reading of the lives of the Saints how they were people who refused to regard any situation as a trap. I've seen this many times with Mother Teresa. She liked to refer to what we might call a roadblock as a stepping-stone. My way is blocked here; then I trust God is leading me by a different route. I just had to do the next right thing and the rest was in His hands. I came to believe, practically speaking, in His power to run the universe.

The inner life of God

There is a philosophical axiom that says, all things must be proportional to their end. If our goal were to observe far-off galaxies, am I to exercise my eyes? No, human sight is not a sufficient means to the goal of gazing at far-away galaxies. Something entirely different must be introduced-like Hubble technology. Now we have a means adequate to that end.

Our end, the goal for which we were created, is union with the unchanging God of love. How will we attempt that goal? Is there some means on earth that is adequate to that end? No, because finite realities are not adequate to achieve a goal that is infinite. Finite reality is more unlike God than like God. For this reason Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that we know more about what God is not than what God is, so far does He transcend anything our little brains can conceive. What then will lead us to know God? Faith and faith alone. And faith is a gift from God. No one can attain it of his own power. No scientist is going to discover the inner life of God through a telescope, no matter how powerful, nor through a microscope, however subtle. It's wonderful because the mystery of God escapes human manipulation. Faith alone opens us to the inner Trinitarian beauty that is God. And faith is a gift out of man's control.

The darkness and dryness of faith

Faith, however, is dark to the intellect and dry to the senses. In faith, I know that God loves my enemy. In the darkness of my mind, I don't understand His love for my enemy. This is dark for me. I don't feel love for my enemy, but in faith I believe in my enemy's dignity as God's image. In my blindness, I don't see his dignity. Perhaps it has been marred by sin. I lack the power to see it. But this is where I surrender to the gift of my faith.

St. John of the Cross teaches that the Christian, "like a blind man, ... must lean on dark faith, accept it for his guide and light, and rest on nothing of what he understands, tastes or imagines.... For however impressive may be one's knowledge or feeling of God, that knowledge or feeling will have no resemblance to God and amount to very little." [Ascent of Mt. Carmel, 3, 2-3] "Lean on dark faith" might seem like an oxymoron, but in fact, there are things that our minds cannot see without that light that comes from Christ. For example, only with the advent of Christ were missionaries sent out to preach good news to the lowly, and thus for the first time in the history of the world, with the coming of Christ, lepers received their dignity. Faith enables us to see in the dark. The world wherein human life in all its stages is not respected is a dark place. The gift of Faith gives us the ability to see. However, it is easy to fool ourselves, sinners that we are, into believing something is from God that really isn't.

We often fool ourselves about God and the things of God. Many will say that the Lord wants this or that, often thereby baptizing their own will, when in fact it has nothing to do with God's will at all. How does one know, then, if some inspiration or insight is from God? The Doctors of the Church, like St. Catherine of Siena, St. John of the Cross, and St. Thomas Aquinas, remind us that God reveals His will not through spiritual visions and apprehensions, but by inspiring virtuous actions within us. To explain this, St. Bernard uses the image of a boiling pot: as long as the fire burns strong beneath it, the pot boils loudly with life. So, too, if a person boils with goodness, with the life of true love, it is certain that the divine fire burns within, for "he that loves is begotten of God," and "they will know you are my disciples by your love." It is easy to claim that one has faith, that one has intimacy with God, that one hears God speaking to him in the depths of his soul. It is easy to fool oneself about these things. But it is impossible to fool by one's actions. Words are easy; actions speak louder. We know that it is God who inspires, and not our ego's attempt at baptizing our own desires, if what comes with the inspiration is the desire for virtue, especially the killer virtue, humility. We will see in Step Six that it is only in proportion to our humility that God can love and sanctify us. Humility is the primary virtue that must be practiced by those who pray. It is the virtue that tests a person's mettle.

Faith in Practice

I know in faith that I have no control over Fr. Bozo and his actions. I can yell, get angry, seethe inside, be moody, etc., but this will not change reality. It simply makes me miserable and those I live and work with miserable. However, there is something I can change. By putting my faith where it belongs: in the infinite, unchanging God of love and His power to run the world, I can let go of the things beyond my control and use my energy in trusting in God by doing the right thing. And so today, when Fr. Bozo is scheduled to take me to the airport, I sit with a good book or a magazine article I want to catch up on, and wait for him to come. As it is, I am never late for the airport with him taking me. I know he is responsible and I will get there on time, maybe not my time, but on time. So when he comes, we go. Meanwhile, I've gotten some needed reading done.

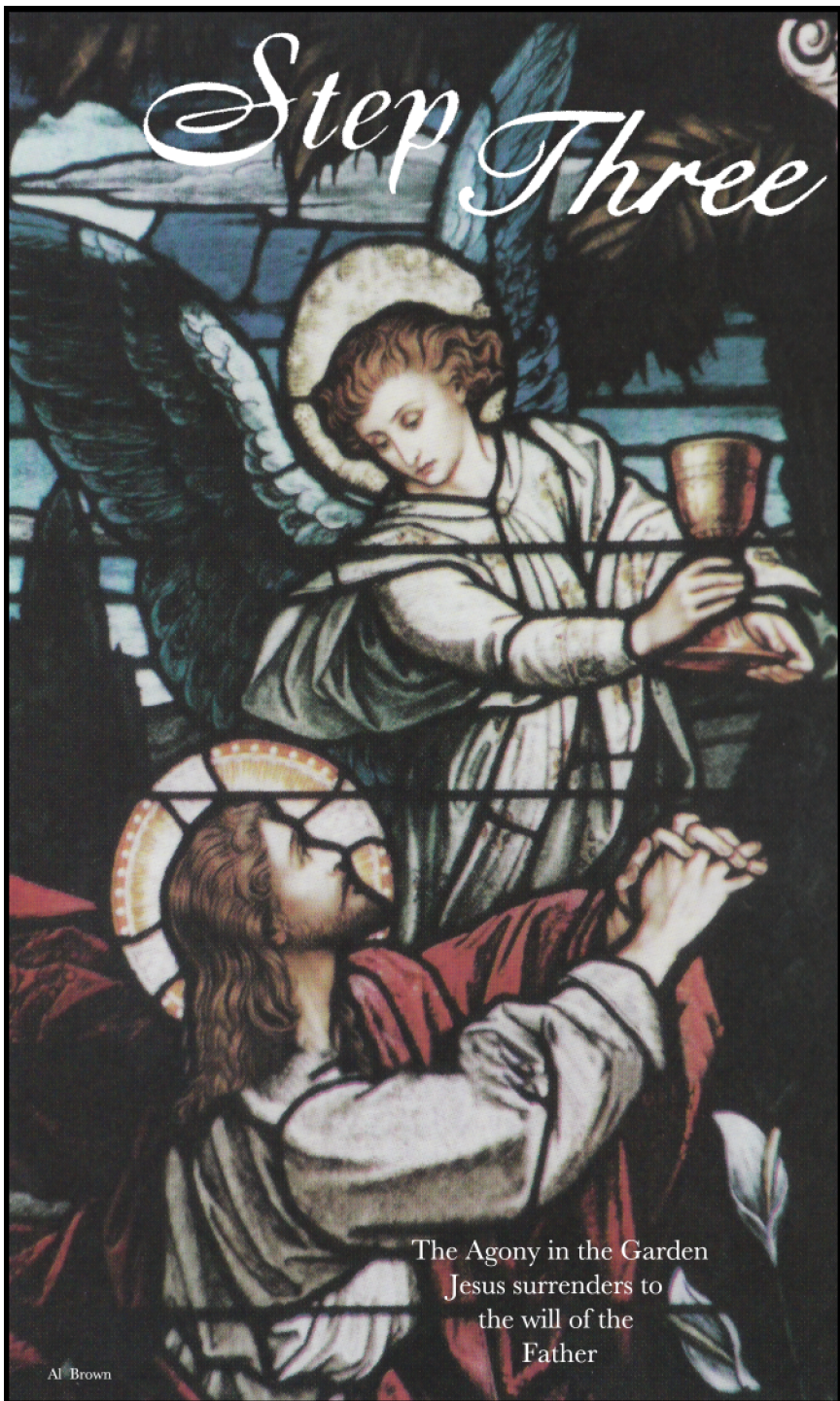
A Mustard Seed

Faith is like a mustard seed. It starts off small, but the more we practice it, the bigger it gets until I come to the practical realization that God has answers to all my problems. Only faith is a sure guide to God and His love. God gives only to the extent that we efficaciously desire something; that is, not merely wish for something to happen, but taking the necessary steps to fit myself to receive what God has in mind. This is the spirit of Step Two.

However, the deepest, toughest stumbling block to the life of faith is not intellectual doubt but personal self-will. The misuse of the will is the cause of most of our problems. We have to begin to put our faith into living action on a daily basis. Thus, the need to advance further in the spiritual life to the point where we are able to surrender to that Power that is greater than man. This is the work of Step Three.

For a further study of the role of faith in the life of the Christian, see our pamphlet: *Faith: Heaven's Knowledge Begun on Earth.*

Step Three



The Agony in the Garden
Jesus surrenders to
the will of the
Father

Al Brown

MADE A DECISION...
TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR
LIVES OVER TO THE CARE OF GOD.

And he came out, and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him.

And when he came to the place he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation."

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed,

"Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." Luke 22:39-42

Our Lord left us an example of perfect surrender, and He asks His followers to turn their lives over to the power of God's grace, as He did, with total surrender. Men of little faith were left depressed at the crucifixion, but on the way to Emmaus, they met their crucified Lord, living now with a glorified human nature, risen from the tomb. No one expected it. Christ showed us that God's love is stronger than death. We go through many death experiences in this sinful world, but "coming to believe" we know by faith that God's transformative power is at work to bring about our salvation.

Some people interpret surrender to mean defeat, giving up, surrendering one's potential to manipulation and control, and one's freedom to painful situations. This is a distorted view of surrender. Correctly, understood, Christian surrender does not mean we're helpless, nor does it mean we surrender to abusive or intolerable circumstances. It means we acknowledge those circumstances for what they are and ask God in His power to care for us in those circumstances. To do this, we must be grounded in the first three steps: we must recognize ourselves as God's creatures, we must be willing to live by faith in a Power greater than ourselves, and we must put that faith into practice.

These first three steps form the foundation needed for working through all the stages of the spiritual life whereby we achieve, by cooperating with His grace in those steps, a deep inner peace in the midst of a troubled, broken world. The spiritually mature are able to live in peace with that which they cannot change. To attain the promise of peace that is Christ's farewell gift ("Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14:27), we must be willing to turn our life over to His care on a daily basis.

Jesus seeks to teach us the way to true inner peace, but our self-centeredness blinds us to the path of peace, as Jesus lamented in weeping over His city, Jerusalem, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). They are hid from our eyes, too, but by faithfully following the wisdom of the steps, one step at a time, one day at a time, we begin to understand the way to Christ's gift of inner peace.

The key to success in working this step is our willingness. We must be willing to turn our will and our life over to God's care, one day at a time. Although this may sound easy to some, it is a great stumbling block for many of us, because we thrive on self-will. The misuse of the will is the cause of most of our problems, so this step is of major importance if we would mature spiritually.

No doubt, we've learned to pray, but prayer for most of us was telling God what He was supposed to be doing to make our lives better. Our attitude was quite different from that of Samuel who prayed, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3: 10). In our self-centeredness, we usually pray, "Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking" and get angry when God doesn't answer according to our expectations! Thus the old saying:

What people usually ask of God when they pray is that two plus two not make four.

But the person of deep and abiding faith knows that God always wills what is universally best. Mother Teresa liked to advise, "Let God work in your life without being consulted by you. Take whatever He gives, and give whatever He takes with a big smile."

It must be remembered: Mother Teresa's understanding of God is that of a merciful and loving Father, always eager for our salvation. When a person experiences in the depths of his being that he is loved by God, surrender isn't so difficult. The person of faith already knows that God is at work to bring about his salvation. Trust is faith in action.

The faith step, Step Two, precedes Step Three. Having come to believe back in Step Two that God is a Power greater than our issues, in Step Three we make a conscious decision every day to surrender to that Power. Someone once advised, "Don't tell God how big your problems are; tell your problems how big God is!"

If there are troubles in this life we have to suffer, in faith this will contribute to our spiritual growth. The image Scripture uses to clarify why God allows suffering in this sinful world is that of the refiner. A priest recently related that the church prayer/Bible-study group was considering biblical passages about God as a refiner of his people, such as: "[God] will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD" (Mal. 3:3). It's a common biblical image, and so one woman in the group decided to visit a refinery and watch the refiner at work.

She noticed that he held the metal in a certain position in the flame: he informed her that he had to place it in the hottest part of the flame. "Why?" she asked. "In order to burn out the impurities," he replied. She noticed that he never took his eyes off the metal. He explained that he needed to watch it lest it burn too long. "How do you know when it's finished?" "Easy," he said. "When I can see my image reflected in it."

It hit her! We were created in God's image, but that image was marred by impurities—the impurities of our sinfulness. She then understood the Scriptural image about God as a refiner, purifying His people so that they could once again reflect His image. That's what the holy person does: having suffered and been purified, the saint reflects the divine beauty. People saw this, for example, in Mother Teresa. People of good will longed to be in her company, strengthened by the sense of God she radiated. However, one does not achieve such moral beauty without suffering the affliction of many crosses.

What is it that most often causes a person to face himself in all honesty? Suffering. It is when a person's self-reliance fails and he is caught up in his powerlessness. It is then that the forces of grace can operate to restore, heal, and redeem. God wants this to happen, so that the life and happiness for which He created us can be ours. But we can't have the Glory of Christ without the Cross of Christ. We bear with our sufferings, surrendering to His will, knowing in faith that God means to purify us from self and sin, as St. Peter advises: "Therefore let those who suffer accord

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

We need to abide in the Lord and not depart from Him. For, if the Lord be our protector and helper, we are able firmly to endure every contest; but if we neglect and forsake the Lord, we make our adversary stronger.
St. Ambrose (4th Century)

**Always place in God thy trust, Will and do what's right and true;
Let thy soul be brave and just; Show thy Lord a humble mind;
Thou shalt thus His favor find; Love but few and simple things;
Simple life much comfort brings.**
Thomas a Kempis (15th Century)

**Let nothing disturb you, Nothing frighten you; All things are passing;
God never changes; Patient endurance Attains all things;
Who God possesses In nothing is wanting;
God alone suffices. (St. Teresa of Avila (16th Century)**

What is more elevating and transporting than the generosity of heart which risks everything on God's word?
Cardinal Newman (19th Century)

All is dreary till we believe-what our hearts tell us-that we are all subjects of God's governance; nothing is dreary, all inspires hope and trust, directly we understand that we are under His hand, and that whatever comes to us is from Him as a method of discipline and guidance.
Cardinal Newman (19th Century)

Plan not, nor scheme-but calmly wait; His choice is best: While blind and erring in thy sight, His wisdom sees and judges right, So trust and rest. Adelaide A. Procter (19th Century)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. Proverbs 3:5

**Whenever your soul begins to be disturbed and anxious, put yourself in His hands, and refuse to decide for yourself.
It is so easy. R.H. Benson (20th Century)**

ing to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19). As with the refiner, so God never takes His loving eyes off us. He holds us to the fire to burn out our impurities and to purify our intentions.

In order to make this surrender to God, we need to purify our intentions to rid ourselves of our self-centered need to have things our way. Self-will has kept God's power at bay. An impure intention, explains Thomas Merton, is one that surrenders to the will of God while retaining a preference for one's own will:

An impure intention, without doubting in theory that God wills what is universally best, practically doubts that He can always will what is best for me. Practically speaking, then, we act like atheist although in theory we say we believe in god. As a result, we make an adjustment between God's will and our own, and so the will of God comes to have for us a variety of values: richer when it is more pleasing to us, poorer when it offers less immediate satisfaction, and valueless when it demands a sacrifice of our own selfish interests.

As we mature in the Christian life, we learn to purify our intentions and let go of our inordinate self-will. When things don't go as we would like, we simply pray, "Lord, if this is how you've chosen to care for me today, I accept." A recovering alcoholic for over forty years, Fr. Fred (in *Father Fred and the Twelve Steps*) explains:

... I don't wait for serenity before I accept ... It works the other way. If I can accept something like a little failure, then I'll have serenity. If I can't accept it, I'll never have serenity. Acceptance is the key word-to accept what comes into my life today that is beyond my power to change, here and now, as something that's allowed by God. Then I have serenity.

If we are successfully working Steps One and Two, we will be able to accept the fact that running our lives on self-will alone has made a mess of things, has brought us a life replete with anger, frustration, stress, bitterness, moodiness, depression, resentment, fear, etc. Perhaps as a result of our desperation, the thought of letting God guide our lives becomes easier in time, especially when we practice it and find that it does work. We find our problems become manageable when we consciously surrender to God's power on a daily basis.

Experience shows us that the more willing we are to rely on God's power, the faster we mature, the quicker our recovery. We become immersed in the deeper mysteries of the Christian life. Our focus becomes "one day at a time." Jesus cautions us about becoming anxious (Matthew 6:31-34):

"Your heavenly Father knows what you need. Seek first His kingdom and His way of goodness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

There is no unhappiness too great to be lessened with the life of faith. Even the crucifixion of the Son of God-even that did not foil God's plan of salvation for us. The more we become willing to embrace our own cross-by learning to live in peace with that which we have no power to change, the greater the happiness we will possess, just as the Lord promises when He taught:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Matthew. 11:28

If we, one day at a time, one issue at a time, are able to surrender to His power, we see that trusting God works. Then we become more willing to trust Him in all our

affairs, in total surrender. We begin to experience substantial quietude in which the soul takes rest, something unattainable by mere human power. It is attained by those who have learned the secret of surrender to His creative power, whereby peace amid the trouble of life becomes ours.

In turning our lives over to God's care frees us from the insanity of trying to control the outcome of events. It frees us from other people's minds and from our own demands, expectations, and plans. For example:

- If we find that our compulsive need to have things our way is destroying our relationships with family, friends, and/or coworkers, and we begin to surrender to God, we find that we no longer need things to be right in order to have peace. Do you want to be right or happy? Is it wrong to want things to be right? Certainly not. But the person who depends on things being right in order to be happy has already defeated himself. This is a broken, sinful world, full of broken, sinful people, like us! True peace is deeper than trouble.

- If we expect others to be on time, or the drivers on the roadway to drive according to our specifications (to which, by the way, we don't hold ourselves accountable!), in order for us to have serenity, we are freed from these expectations only to the extent that we surrender these unrealistic expectations. By letting go of having to have things our way and letting God handle the world's troubles, we avoid a defeatist attitude. That is, when I say I'm not going to let this bother me, and it ends up bothering me, I have sabotaged my best interests by trying to predict the outcome. My plans have been defeated and serenity is gone. It is gone because I depended on my will by predetermining the outcome. An expectation is a premeditated resentment.

- No only does turning our will and our life over to God take control of our lives away from ourselves, but also from others: we learn to say "no" when we mean "no"; we learn how to set appropriate boundaries for ourselves (and we learn that setting boundaries doesn't mean forcing others to change); we learn how to respond to others in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way; we learn how to allow others to own their own issues.

Once we have been able to surrender totally to the unchanging God of love, we see a change come over ourselves. We become calmer and feel that a huge weight has been lifted from our shoulders: we're learned to stop doing God's job, for we now have the confidence-the faith-to let Him run the universe and to trust in the outcome.

Surrender and the Life of Prayer

A vital prayer life necessitates the honest desire and ready efforts to rid ourselves of our defects and inordinate attachments. The two go hand in hand: by our efforts alone, as we recognized in working Step One, we are incapable of overcoming our problems; what is needed is surrender. We have access to God through prayer, and so prayer becomes a necessity. Prayer is contact with the one Power who can help us if we let Him. Prayer is the first step to letting Him. It gives us access to His power so that we can begin to practice humility, obedience to the truth, love and patience. If our prayer life is to grow in depth, we must grow in Gospel living; that is, our life lived in union with others affects our prayer life. Likewise, a genuine prayer life affects our ability to get along well with others. You cannot have one without the other. Once we've been grounded in the first three Steps, we'll be ready to do a thorough, fearless, moral exam of our lives-Step Four.

Step Four



St. Monica: Inventories her drinking and surrenders

MADE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY OF OUR LIVES ...

We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might, which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places .

Romans 7:15, IHB-25A

In the above quote, St. Paul reminds us about the immeasurable greatness of God's power in our lives that has enlightened us as to the true nature of our sinfulness. This is the goal of Step Four: having the eyes of our hearts enlightened.

With Step Four we continue more strongly in the adventure of self-discovery that we began in the first three steps. This Step requires being totally honest with ourselves, a very difficult task because of our deep insecurities and our engaging dependencies.

Good Step Four work is difficult, if not impossible, without a firm grounding in the first three Steps. We need to have reached a point in our lives of surrender to His power. And His power is the power of love. Mother Teresa liked to teach people to pray the simple ejaculation, "Jesus, I believe in your tender love for me." She recognized the necessity of accepting that God does, indeed, love us, and not on account of anything, we've done. His love is unmerited (thank, YOU, Lord!). So many of us feel insecure and unlovable and as a result seek, in very self-righteous ways, to ground our self-worth in the world (in needing to be liked, in needing to be validated by outside sources to feel good about ourselves, in our need to control, in our perfectionism, in our need to suffer, in our need to win, etc.). But this is a trap of the devil. It is a good practice, as Mother Teresa knew, to repeat to ourselves in times of alienation, "Jesus, I believe in Your tender love for me."

Deeper Self-understanding:

Contemporary life can so preoccupy and distract us that we neglect to take adequate time for self-reflection and that nourishing prayer life that opens us up. Perhaps the greatest contributing factor towards our unhappiness is ignorance of our shortcomings. As a result, the true source of our afflictions remains hidden from our eyes. We victimize ourselves with superficial solutions to serious problems or, worse, escape into addictive behavior. And then we blame others.

Many failures in our lives come from this ignorance of ourselves. If we understood ourselves better, knowing what really motivates our behavior and our reac-

tions, we could make positive corrections. Allow me to give an example from my own life.

Growing up deeply insecure and, as a consequence, wanting to avoid conflict, I allowed fear and people-pleasing to make my decisions for me. To the ignorant Christian (like myself at the time) this may seem to be a cross the Lord was asking us to bear, something we had to put up with if we were to be considered “nice” Christ-like people. However, this is a distorted sense of the cross.

A true bearing of the cross is, ultimately, life giving. “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full,” our Blessed Lord ensures us. A “false” cross is one that is borne out of our insecurities. The pleaser, for example, always runs the risk of repressing his true feelings because of the fear of displeasing others. In his blindness, he thinks putting up with unacceptable behavior is the cross he is called to bear. In reality, what he needs is to die to his dependence on other peoples’ moods and attitudes as the motivating force behind his actions or as the source of his happiness. A person who avoids conflict because he’s afraid of it, and then excuses his behavior as a cross he must bear, is equivocating by portraying himself, at least in his own eyes, as a victim with a cross to bear.

In truth, he is weak and avoids the cross that would lead him to true peace and a genuine love of self. Fulfilling the Lord’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” is pretty difficult if a person’s love of self has no validity apart from other people’s minds. His love for his neighbor would be motivated by what others, including the person ‘loved,’ think. This is not true love.

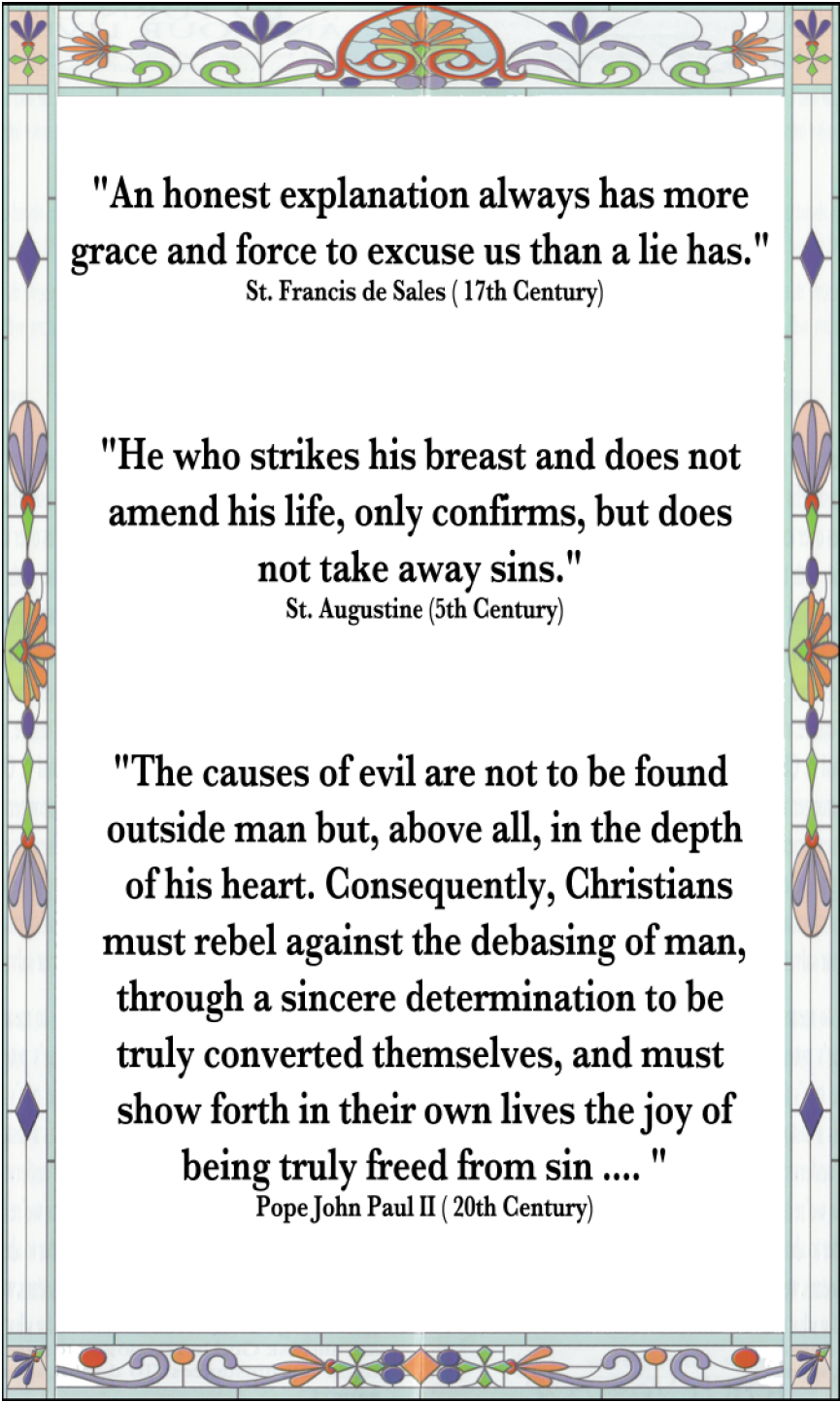
A person who is truly bearing his cross confronts his fears and engages the conflict that is necessary in order to do the right thing.

Back to my personal example. It happened one time that I asked the superior if one of our workers, instead of taking his food in the cold, dreary, basement of the church, couldn’t he, I asked, use the priests’ kitchen when the priests had finished? The superior readily agreed. I told the worker. He ate his lunch in the priests’ kitchen but then left a mess-for me to clean. How angry I became seeing that mess left for me to clean. Knowing my weaknesses, however, I did a little “spot check” inventory, and realized that there was a simple solution. However, it meant facing my fears - in this case, my fear of confronting someone. In the past, before working the Steps, I would have cleaned the area myself, seething with anger, all the while complaining to myself (and perhaps to others!) that I have enough work of my own to do without having to pick up after him! Or, when finally fed up, I’d go and shout at the person.

Gratefully, I knew from experience, the experience that comes from living the principles of the 12-steps, that one of my defects-the fear of conflict-was causing me the misery. I needed to go to the worker and, in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way, explain that he needed to pick up after himself if he wanted to eat in the priests’ kitchen. I was afraid to do this - because I’m weak.

I grew up afraid to displease others, and therefore avoided conflict like the plague. This is the cross the Lord was asking me to bear: to die to my need to please; die to my fear of confrontation. Then I could indeed be free and at peace. Life comes through the cross.

When I went to the worker and calmly explained that he needed to pick up for himself, his response was, “Okay, Father.” Huh! How simple. This is the true cross: facing our weaknesses, walking through our fears to new life in Christ. Adequate self-knowledge saves us from striving after the impossible: a world that



**"An honest explanation always has more
grace and force to excuse us than a lie has."**

St. Francis de Sales (17th Century)

**"He who strikes his breast and does not
amend his life, only confirms, but does
not take away sins."**

St. Augustine (5th Century)

**"The causes of evil are not to be found
outside man but, above all, in the depth
of his heart. Consequently, Christians
must rebel against the debasing of man,
through a sincere determination to be
truly converted themselves, and must
show forth in their own lives the joy of
being truly freed from sin "**

Pope John Paul II (20th Century)

corresponds to our expectations, a world devoid of suffering, a world that caters to our weaknesses.

How many marriages start out rosy, only to become progressively weakened with the passing of time, ending in separation or divorce because of the person's refusal to see his own defects, all the while blaming the other person? Instead of taking the time needed to deal with problems, the couple blindly goes on, expecting the other person to change, or expecting the problem to heal itself or, worse, moving the family somewhere else, thinking a change of place will help.

The untended wound only festers with the years and sickens the marriage. One spouse lashes out against the other, in a teenaged-attempt to get the results he wants. One partner becomes so obsessed with the other person's wrongdoing that he never notices the "log in his own eye" (d. Matt. 7:3-5). He considers his view as the only view on the situation. He deceives himself. The truth is, we need to know our motivations, and ourselves and then apply the remedy which Christ has provided.

We should be aware by now that in Christian life that remedy is the Cross:

"And Jesus said to all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" Luke 9:23

- It is a cross for the doormat to go to the powerful personality and confront the unacceptable behavior in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way.
- It is a cross for the controlling personality to left go of the need to force the outcome of events.
- It is a cross for the person who always needs to win to learn not to take life so seriously.
- It is a cross for the people-pleaser to look to God for his self-worth and not depend on what others think.

A lack of self-knowledge (of oneself as a weak, or a people-pleaser, or a control addict, etc.) will ultimately sabotage the person's happiness. And whose fault will the outcome be? Lacking the necessary insight into our own behavior, and thus failing to take responsibility for our part in what happens—we blame, criticize, deny, retaliate, attack, or minimize. Bad actions, says St. Augustine, "however enormous, when habitual, appear to be small, or not to be sins at all." The habit of sin not only blinds the understanding, but also hardens the heart. It blinds us to the "immeasurable greatness of His power." The cause of our spiritual sterility can often be traced here. Step Four is the beginning of our emergence out of darkness and denial.

Denial

How is it possible for a person to close his eyes to the most obvious and glaring facts about himself, involving the gravest consequences, which are perfectly evident to those he lives or works with?

Step Four helps us deal with our denial system—one of the major effects of original sin. We are that man born blind, about whom Jesus speaks in His teachings about the Christian life (see John 9). This blindness about our behavior and ourselves has distorted our perception of reality and prejudiced our judgment. Self-deluded people are blind to the true nature of their faults.

This blindness is the core element of our brokenness. To a greater or lesser extent, it is present in all the banished children of Eve. It is a source of our insanity—the reason why we keep doing the same things over and over again while yet expect-

ing, this time, a different result. Instead of a different outcome, we get what we've always gotten: anger, hurt, resentment, bitterness, self-pity, alienation, etc.-all of which crippled our ability to have an abiding peace. Our blindness can be the fatal aspect of our woundedness precisely because it keeps us locked into these repeated patterns of ineffectual behavior.

Our refusal to admit the truth about ourselves results in such behavior as: denial of our part in the unwelcome result, dodging the issue, minimizing the wrong done, attacking the one who points out our fault, etc. As we begin to act on the truth of our faith-that God loves us sinners however we are, but too much to keep us as we are-we are freed to take an honest assessment of our childish behavior and acknowledge that this behavior, carried over from our childhood, has been sabotaging our happiness. We need to inventory this immaturity in order to be freed from its power over us.

Taking the Fourth Step

Step Four is not a history of one's moral life as such. Rather, it takes as its point of departure what is going on in our life here and now. What situations in my life today have the power to make me miserable and why? If we write down this inventory, we are able to go over what we've expressed and see patterns of behavior we may not have noticed. When we reflect on our defects, it is most important not to brood over them (which is a part of the sin of pride; the humble person can accept that he is weak), remembering that Christ loved and died for us while we were still sinners. This was St. Peter's experience and it is an experience we need: knowing we are loved as sinners. Such a realization has the power to set us free to discover the childhood roots behind our faults. When we are tempted to judge ourselves negatively, we need to remember Mother Teresa's prayer: "Jesus, I believe in Your tender love for me."

The Root Cause

Step Four continues the adventure that we began in Step One-getting to understand our selves. Now, however, we seek to get to the roots of our dysfunctional behavior. This step does not deal with personal sins purely and simply, but rather with the motivating factors behind those sins, i.e. our personal faults. For example, a person may come to confession with the sin of lying ten or twelve times during the past few weeks. At his next confession, he confesses the same. He never evaluates why he lies. What is the fault that compels him to lie? His life, left unexamined, never changes. He never grows spiritually. He is always back to confession with the same sins. Perhaps the following scenario will illustrate this: Someone calls on the phone and asks, "Hey, Joe! What are you doing tonight?" Joe is immediately anxious upon hearing the caller's voice. He does not want to get together with this guy, yet he fears telling the truth lest the person think him unfriendly, unkind or, worse, unchristian. And so he lies, "My wife isn't feeling well and I need to stay here. But thanks for calling."

This may seem harmless, but there is a history behind this inability not to lie, a history of fear of other people, a history of avoiding conflict, a history of slavish dependence on what others think for one's own welfare, a history of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. A healthy personality knows it's none of the caller's business what he's doing tonight, that he doesn't have to divulge that information. So he simply says, "What did you have in mind, Fred?" "I was wondering if you'd like to get together for cards, Joe?" "No, not tonight, Fred. I appreciate your asking."

Now if Fred has a problem with Joe's not divulging his evening plans, or in not wanting to play cards that night, that's right: Fred has the problem! And Joe shouldn't make it his problem. For us banished children of Eve, fear is the chief activator of our faults. Acting out of that fear sets us up to be angry and resentful, and to lie. Step Four provides us with the opportunity to examine the fears and resentments behind our lying and our anger. Fear and resentment keep us from the true peace of Christ.

Step Four's honest assessment of our behavior leads to a new awareness of ourselves. This may be threatening to our security, for that security was built on sand. If some of our discoveries are depressing, we prodigal children need to affirm and accept the prodigal love of the Father. Now we have an opportunity to trust in His unconditional love for us.

As we carry out our Step Four examination, we acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses. Our strengths can be seen in behavior that has positive effects on ourselves and others. Our weaknesses manifest themselves in behavior that is destructive to others and ourselves. Before we can correct our problem areas, we need to examine and acknowledge our weaknesses. This is the task of Step Four. This understanding exposes the hidden motives behind our ineffectual behavior: we lied because we're pleasers; we tried to force the outcome of events because of a false security that depended on being in charge. This examination of conscience that you will be preparing is for your own benefit. It can be a tool for making a major breakthrough in your growth and setting you on the road that leads to true freedom as a child of God (1 Peter 2:16) and utter self-possession.

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

When preparing this examination, use recent events and examine what defects of character were responsible for the unwelcome result. We need to avoid blaming others. We focus on our dysfunctional behavior. It helps us to see what situations have the power to make us miserable and why, and keeps us from blaming others for our misery. A Christian's self-awareness and personal responsibility realizes the goal of inheriting the Kingdom in poverty of spirit. The ultimate goal of this endeavor is love. Self-knowledge is a prerequisite to experiencing what adult love really is. As one monk explained: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And what is this poverty of spirit but the meekness of mind in which a man can see his own weakness clearly."

By this Step, having the eyes of our hearts enlightened, that we may know what is the hope to which He has called us, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe, we become willing to share our faults and sins honestly with God, ourselves, and another human being.



**Christ
as Confessor**

Al Brown

ADMITTED TO GOD, TO OURSELVES AND TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR WRONGS ...

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; then You did forgive the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to You; at a time of distress, in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me, You preserve me from trouble; You encompass me with deliverance

Psalm 32: 2-7

The above quote from Sacred Scripture reminds us of the necessity of owning up to our wrongdoings and confessing them. This is the spirit of Step Five. The first three steps set the foundation of our spiritual progress in Christian maturation. With them, we realized that there were certain areas in our lives over which we had no control. Our attempts to exert control when things were not going our way left us angry, unreasonable, and resentful. So, we came to believe that God, being a Power greater than we were, could help us if we let Him. Thus in Step Three we made a decision to turn our will and our life over to His care. We can summarize these three important Steps by simply saying: I can't (Step One); He can (Step Two); let Him (Step Three.)

An honest evaluation of ourselves in Step Four surfaced those hidden traits of ours which hindered our growth and robbed us of serenity. Now in Step Five we become willing to admit these character defects that we've uncovered. It is a commitment we make to face ourselves as we are—the prerequisite for correcting whatever is keeping us from growing spiritually. We admit this openly and honestly (and without fear holding us back) to God, to ourselves, and to another human being. In doing this we guard against those two pitfalls of the Pharisee: self-righteousness and self-justification.

It is easy to make excuses for ourselves and justify bad actions and hurtful words, to blame misfortunes on others, particularly on troublesome people. Step Five offers the forum necessary to test our honesty and humility, and our readiness to take responsibility for actions incompatible with our Christian faith. No growth in genuine happiness and serenity is possible so long as we put off confessing the exact nature of our wrongs. This Step questions our honesty and humility.

Testing our Honesty and Humility

The least challenging part of this step is admitting our wrongs to ourselves, although the value of this admission should not be minimized. It is a great step in our growth to honestly own up to our defects of character. Then, we need to share this with a loving Savior who, we know, loves us. We need to honestly face ourselves in front of a loving God who does not love us because we are lovely or lovable. His love for us exists, not on account of our character, but on account of His. We are lovable because we are loved by Him. Accepting this truth of our faith makes it a lot easier to complete Step Five. Only admitting our wrongs to ourselves, however, does not provide an arena to test our honesty and humility, foundations of our spiritual quest. It is necessary to speak openly about these weaknesses to a fellow human being who, although himself weak and fallen,

is able to understand our woundedness and can provide us with that fellowship that brings healing. Somehow exposing our weaknesses to a fellow human being weakens their hold on us, whereas, if kept in the dark, they fester and poison. Exposing them to the light brings healing, the healing Sacred Scripture recognizes when it counsels: *“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed”* James 5:16

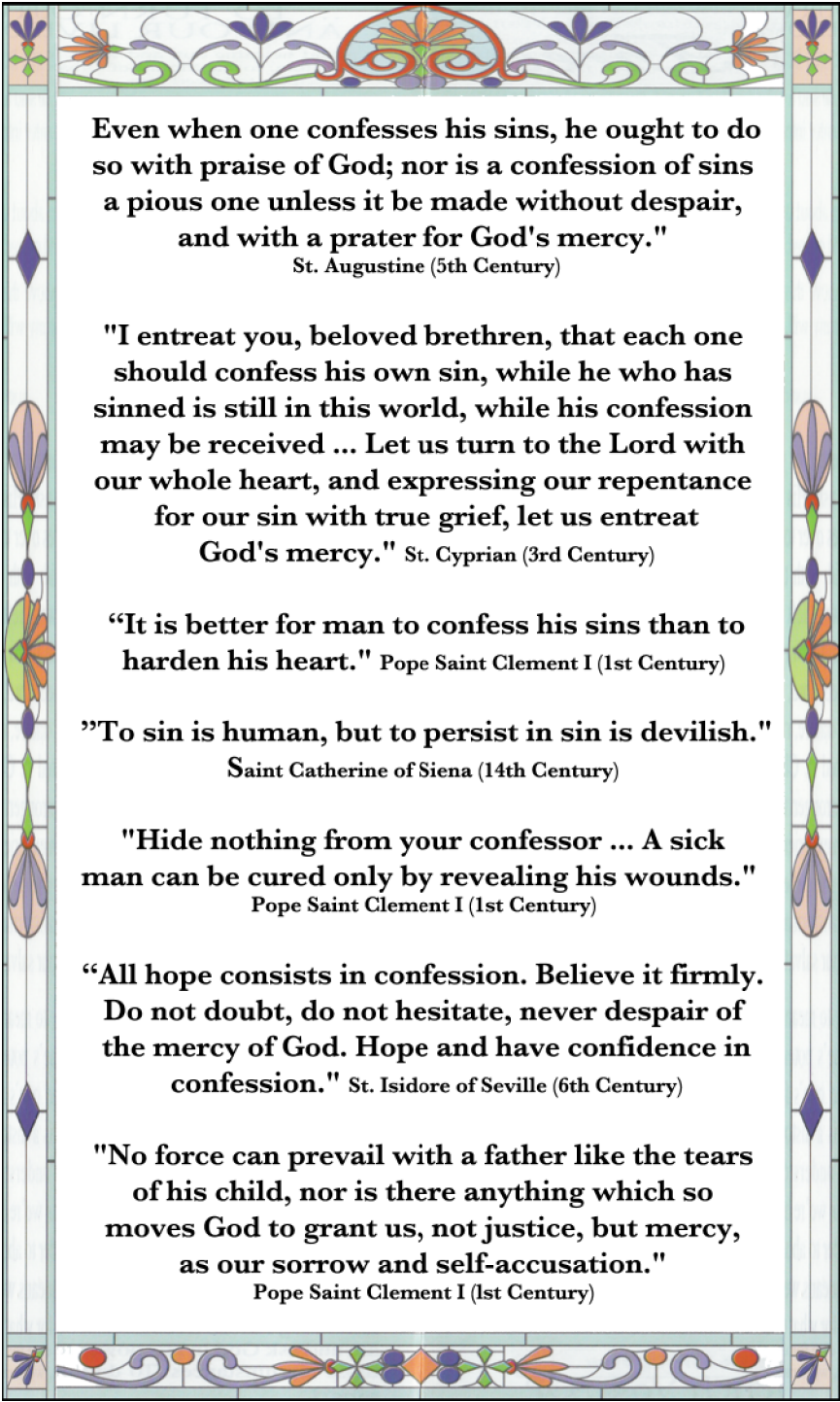
In being able to admit our faults to God, face to face as friend to friend, we experience a deepened sense of self-acceptance. Remember: humility isn't thinking less of oneself; it's thinking of oneself less. Humility is accepting your nothingness and being happy about it. Such a virtue frees us from the power of the world to make us miserable. The arrogant person, on the other hand, is very easily controlled and manipulated by persons, places, and situations that arise and over which he has no control. With the love of God, we come to realize our inherent dignity as His children, while at the same time recognizing that the wound of sin has left us hurting. We need His grace to be healed. Honesty and humility are two virtues all people of good will respect in others. In Step Five we are asked to exercise these virtues in confessing the exact nature of our wrongs

Sponsorship

Some people working through the Steps do so with a sponsor, someone recognized as wise through their own use of the Steps. Many people would like to have a priest as an ongoing spiritual director, and they are often frustrated because their parish priest has 2500 families to deal with and couldn't possibly fulfill this role. However, sincere people working the steps can find a wise person who has dealt with the same issues in his or her life. Such a person would have to have an understanding of confidentiality and anonymity. Having worked through their own issues with a sponsor, such a person can be a good ear to listen to another's Fifth Step. Others prefer to go to a priest and do their Fifth Step in the context of the Sacrament of Confession. That, too, is a possibility, since one is admitting the exact nature of their wrongs and is not, in the context of a true Fifth Step, seeking guidance as with a spiritual director. The sponsor can fulfill the latter role. Without confession, there can be no permanent healing. Why is this the case? Why can't I simply confess to myself and to God? Why is another person important in this equation that leads to healing?

When God created Adam, and all the animals were brought to him and he gave them their names, they were not enough. Adam enjoyed friendship with God and the fullness of grace. That, too, was not enough and God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). A helper fit for us is one like ourselves.

Man was created in the likeness of God, Who is not solitude enclosed upon itself, but a Trinity of Persons. A person is meant to exist in relationship to other persons. This is how man finds his fulfillment: in relationship with persons of his own nature. God's grace is mediated to man through man. Healing for the alcoholic, for example, takes place in a community of persons-in AA. Catholics express this by saying “There is no salvation outside the Church.” One can't be saved by themselves, in isolation from the rest of mankind. The sign that our love for God is genuine and not pharisaical is our ability to love others. Healing, therefore, is going to take place in and through others. Just as we cannot baptize ourselves, so we cannot forgive our own sins. God's grace of forgiveness comes through others. The measure we measure out will be measured back to us. It is humility that opens us to this possibility.



Even when one confesses his sins, he ought to do so with praise of God; nor is a confession of sins a pious one unless it be made without despair, and with a prayer for God's mercy."

St. Augustine (5th Century)

"I entreat you, beloved brethren, that each one should confess his own sin, while he who has sinned is still in this world, while his confession may be received ... Let us turn to the Lord with our whole heart, and expressing our repentance for our sin with true grief, let us entreat God's mercy." St. Cyprian (3rd Century)

"It is better for man to confess his sins than to harden his heart." Pope Saint Clement I (1st Century)

"To sin is human, but to persist in sin is devilish." Saint Catherine of Siena (14th Century)

"Hide nothing from your confessor ... A sick man can be cured only by revealing his wounds." Pope Saint Clement I (1st Century)

"All hope consists in confession. Believe it firmly. Do not doubt, do not hesitate, never despair of the mercy of God. Hope and have confidence in confession." St. Isidore of Seville (6th Century)

"No force can prevail with a father like the tears of his child, nor is there anything which so moves God to grant us, not justice, but mercy, as our sorrow and self-accusation." Pope Saint Clement I (1st Century)

Pride is always at work to subvert our best intentions. With regard to confessing our faults and sins, St. John of the Cross-warns of dangers involved. These warnings can apply both to a sacramental confession to a priest and the admission of our wrongs to a sponsor:

Many want to be the favorites of the confessor, and thus they are consumed by a thousand envies and disturbances. Embarrassment forbids them from confessing their sins clearly, lest their reputation diminish in their confessor's eyes. They confess their sins in the most favorable light so as to appear better than they actually are, and thus they approach the confessional to excuse themselves rather than accuse themselves. Sometimes they confess the evil things they do to a different confessor so that their own confessor might think they commit no sins at all. Therefore, in their desire to appear better than they are, they enjoy relating their good behavior, and in such, careful terms that these goods deeds appear greater than they actually are. It would be more humble of them ... to make light of the good they do and to wish that no one, neither their confessor nor anybody else, should consider it of any importance at all.

Sometimes they minimize their faults, and at other times they become discouraged by them ... and they become impatient and angry with themselves, which is yet another fault. They are often extremely anxious that God remove their faults and imperfections, but their motive is personal peace rather than God. They fail to recognize that were God to remove their faults, they might become more proud and presumptuous. They dislike praising anyone else, but they love to receive praise, and sometimes even seek it. In this, they resemble the foolish virgins who had to seek oil from others when their own lamps were extinguished.

At first glance it may seem quite harsh of St. John to advise not giving any consideration to one's good deeds, but if we in all honesty draw out the implications of praising one's good deeds while minimizing one's faults, we know that such behavior only reinforces our sick dependence on the world for our happiness and peace. Such peace is an illusion. The person who seeks his prestige in what others think of him is a slave to their minds; in short, a slave to the world. The word's peace is purchased only at the expense of true self-worth. The peace of Christ is the exact opposite and results in genuine freedom. St. John of the Cross-notes that when Christians mature spiritually, the following changes occur:

They are more eager to speak of their faults and sins, and reveal these to others, than their virtues. They have an inclination to seek direction from one who will have less esteem for their spirit and deeds. Such is the characteristic of a pure and simple and true spirit, one that is very pleasing to God. Since the wise Spirit of God dwells within these humble souls, He moves them to keep [the treasures He has favored them with] hidden and to manifest only their faults. God gives this grace to the humble, together with the other virtues, just as He denies it to the proud. These souls would give their life's blood to anyone who serves God, and they will do whatever they can to help others serve Him. When they see themselves falling into imperfections, they suffer this with humility, with docility of spirit, and with a loving fear of God and hope in Him.

People who are more eager to speak of their faults rather than their virtues are those who have entered the peace of God's kingdom. God's grace has liberated them from their futile dependence on the world and other people's opinions for their happiness. This freedom came about not by chance but by the honesty and humility of confessing one's character defects.

Contrition

It is an abuse to confess any kind of sin, whether mortal or venial, without a will to be delivered from it, since confession was instituted for no other end.

This quote from St. Francis de Sales' classical spiritual book *Introduction to the Devout Life*, stresses that contrition is an integral part of our inner healing. Admitting our wrongs to God leads to contrition as a person becomes conscious of the damage his wrongs have done. The heart that has experience of the love of God is led to real sorrow for his wrongs, and he repudiates the evil he has done. Without repenting of his wrongs, there can be no genuine surrender to His will and no readiness to be transformed by His grace. Dr. Dietrich von Hildebrand (*Transformation in Christ*, Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Press, 1990) brings out the nature of true penitence:

Bad conscience is not the same as contrition

1. There exists a kind of bad conscience which must be sharply distinguished from penitence. We can well imagine a sinner who, without being really penitent, suffers from a guilty conscience. He is oppressed with pangs of conscience: he is aware of acting badly, and that awareness disturbs his peace and deprives him of inner harmony. Yet he still refuses to capitulate, he refuses to shift his position ...

Contrition requires a repudiation of our past sins.

2. True repentance means a definite revulsion from one's sins, an active repudiation of them. It means a disavowal of the past, a relinquishment of one's former position with its implication of sinning. The disharmony which reigns in his soul will be changed in its quality when a person experiences contrition.

Contrition involves surrender to God's mercy.

3. We would like to revoke the wrong we have done, but we immediately become conscious of our powerlessness to do so; we are not capable of undoing the guilt resulting from our misdeeds. We feel clearly that our change of heart and our new orientation are unable to dissolve the sin and to erase the guilt. Therefore, unless it implies hope for God's mercy, contrition leads to despair. Judas' contrition was of this kind.

In true Christian penitence, there is always present a positive relation to God, grafted on to the negation of sin. True sorrow for sin makes an appeal to God's mercy, and humbly asks from Him the forgiveness of sin. Being sorry for our wrongdoings is part and parcel of the healing process.

Our self-searching is a long-term undertaking. It goes on for as long as we remain blind to the faults that cause us so much misery. For the present, however, we need only be open to an honest evaluation of ourselves and, sharing our inventory with God and another human being, we step into a deepened sense of peace that leads us to the next step: preparing ourselves to have God remove all these defects of character.



Step Six

“Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much”

Al Brown

WE WERE ENTIRELY READY TO HAVE GOD REMOVE OUR DEFECTS OF CHARACTER

“Put off the old man who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and put on the new man who, according to God, is created in justice and the holiness of truth.” Ephesians 4:22-24

The above quote from St. Paul reminds us of the truth we discovered about ourselves in the first five steps: that we lived according to erroneous desires which were the source of our misery. What were these erroneous desires? They were the character defects we acknowledged to God, to ourselves, and to another human being in Step Five.

Erroneous Desires

These desires of error may have included:

- The desire to be needed, which we confused with love, and so in fostering this desire, since it was erroneous, instead of receiving love, we became enablers and fostered dependency;
- The desire to be noticed. In our desperation to be worth something in the eyes of others, we became disloyal to ourselves;
- The desire to control, which did nothing to deepen an interior peace but, rather, made us irritable and unreasonable, and unable to get along well with others; in our attempts to control, our schemes and threats left us emotionally exhausted;
- The need to appear better than others which only deepened our insecurity because it was based on a false premise: that our self-worth was the result of something we did;
- The desire to suffer, where we had a (perhaps unconscious) feeling that we needed to suffer in order to be worth something, or maybe we felt we didn't deserve to be happy and thus felt anxious when things went well, and so we sabotaged our own happiness.

All true spiritual development begins with a deep yearning to change, to “put off the old man”, who is corrupted according to these erroneous desires. Christian life is a response to a call from Christ to become something fundamentally different. This grace is not earned. It is freely given to us in baptism, but it will unfold, one day at a time, only with our cooperation. Jesus revealed this call to Nicodemus when He exclaimed:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3

This new life is Christ's free gift, given at baptism, but it will not bear fruit without our cooperation. “Purge out the old leaven,” St. Paul exhorts us, “that you may become new ... “ (1 Corinthians 5:7). To accomplish our transformation into the likeness of Christ we need the desire to change, to become fundamentally different. Unless we have this desire, Step Six will never find us entirely ready to have our defects removed, and therefore we will never really know true freedom and happiness. If we do lack this prerequisite desire to change, is there some way we can increase this desire in us? There must be; Christ would not frustrate our inherent desire for freedom and happiness.

Desire: a prerequisite for change

He alone whose readiness to change is unlimited can attain the spiritual maturity

required by Step Seven. Step Six is our preparation to becoming entirely ready to have God transform us without setting any limits to the modification of our character by His grace.

We all know of people who said they had to change, but the desire was never deeply rooted. Sister Ignatia (the “Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous”) tells of an alcoholic priest coming to Rosary Hall—the recovery facility started by Sr. Ignatia and the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. “Oh, it’s you,” she said, recognizing him as a family member of some people who had been benefactors to the Sisters. “I suppose you think that just because your family has been generous to us that we are going to let you in here?” Sister Ignatia could be pretty tough, but she knew that any misplaced sympathy for the alcoholic could lead to his ruin. “Why do you want to come in here?” she challenged. “I’ve got to stop drinking,” he responded. “That has nothing to do with it,” she retorted, while ushering him over to the window of her office, showing him the bar that was across the street. “If you went in there now, half the people there would say that they’ve got to quit drinking.” What she was driving at was, did he want to stop drinking, and was the desire there. If it weren’t, she wouldn’t take him in. (To read more about St. Ignatia, see her biography by Mary Darrah).


We can say we’ve got to do something, but if the underlying desire is not present, we’ll never change. What is needed as the first precondition of our transformation is a deep desire to change, to decrease so that God’s power may increase in us. We can deepen our desire by reading good, solid classical literature, especially good lives of the saints. By good lives of the Saints, I mean those that are based on a true familiarity with the saints’ lives and teachings. I abhor books that present the saints as perfect from the get-go. Rather, we want to see the saints in all their human imperfection and how the grace of God was able to transform them once they made the conscious decision to change. Like St. Fabiola, who dumped her husband and ran off with her boyfriend, but then, some years later, repented and came back to the Church, becoming a friend of the poor. Or St. Mary of Egypt, a prostitute before her conversion.

Such literature stimulates us to want to be the people God has called us to be. And not just literature, but movies as well—good old classic movies with a good moral resolution to the problems portrayed in the movie, movies with real values. For example, there is an old classic starring a very young Bette Davis, called “Now Voyager.” In the movie, the Bette Davis character is in a codependent relationship with her controlling mother. In the course of the movie, Betty Davis falls in love with a married man, but because the movie was made in the days of Judeo-Christian moral values, the Davis character does not fall into adultery but finds some other way of expressing her love for this man.

Another inspiring video is the documentary on the life of Mother Teresa. If you haven’t seen this yet (or it’s follow-up called Mother Teresa: The Legacy), it is a must for any Catholic (see: www.petrieproductions.com).

Meditating on the real values that play out in the lives of the Saints or in good classic literature and movies helps increase the desire within us to let God fully transform us without our setting any limits to that transformation. For only by possessing this readiness to change are we capable of the cooperation God requires of us. This is the preparation necessary for Step Seven.

On the measure of our readiness to change depends the measure of our success in working Step Six. It is an essential aspect of the Christian life, as explained to Nicodemus by our blessed Lord. The grace of Christ allowed us to face our defects



"Even when one confesses his sins, he ought to do so with praise of God; nor is a confession of sins a pious one unless it be made without despair, and with a prayer for God's mercy." St. Augustine (5th Century)

"It is not of much use to be entreated to turn over a new leaf, when you see no kind of reason for doing so." R. H. Benson (20th Century)

"It is a small thing to seek goodness, unless you love it as well." St. Bernard (12th Century)


If you aim at spiritual growth, you should shun not only things bad in themselves, but things that have the appearance of evil. In the one case you have regard to your conscience, in the other to your reputation." St. Bernard (12th Century)

"Blessed are they who do not their own will on earth, for God will do it in heaven above." St. Francis de Sales (17th Century)

"The Church is a house with a hundred gates: and no two men enter at exactly the same angle." G. K. Chesterton (20th Century)

"There is no happiness in the world comparable to that of the experience known as conversion." R. H. Benson (20th Century)

"Grant to us, O Lord, we beseech Thee, the spirit always to think and do such things as are right; that we who cannot exist without Thee, may be able to live according to Thy will." Roman Missal (Leonine, c. 5th Century)



in all honesty in Steps Four and Five; with our cooperation, that active grace will prepare us to become entirely ready to have God remove those defects of character that keep us from the joy of living.

Having worked Steps 1-5, we no longer experience guilt over our past misdeeds. This is essential for our growth, for many people cannot forgive themselves for their woundedness. Ultimately this has to do with pride. Humility is accepting our nothingness and being happy about it. Yes, we have sinful desires; and, yes, we've acted on them in the past, but if we've sincerely worked the first five steps, and have truly repented and are sorry for them-and by sorrow for our misdeeds we don't mean a "feeling", for we cannot make ourselves feel (see our pamphlet on the passions where this is explained) - then we are humble enough to accept ourselves however we are. For God already loves us however we are-He loves us too much to keep us as we are and now we can love ourselves as we are.

When we say "love the sinner, hate the sin," that applies to us, too. We must learn to love the sinner in us but we reject the sinfulness. And so we've accepted God's unconditional love which gave us the permission, so to speak, to love and forgive ourselves. The ultimate step is to love our neighbors as our selves, but that's an impossibility so long as we cling to our faults. Our trust in God permits us to accept that He will remove only those character flaws that are essential and in His own good time. This process of becoming ready to have God transform us is part and parcel of the Pascal mystery that we, as Christians, are called to live.

Into the Heart of the Pascal Mystery

Christ offers salvation to the world by the sacrifice of His life offered through love. We, the members of His mystical body, which is the Church, are able to enter with our whole life into this Pascal mystery. Our baptism initiated us into this mystery and now, through a conscious decision of our own, stimulated by His grace, we freely offer all that we are and all that we do in union with His Pascal sacrifice for the unfolding of that baptismal grace. As privileged members of Christ, through our daily struggles we are brought near to Him who is our life.

Celebrating the sacred mysteries of the Liturgy each Sunday, and for some, on a daily basis, we are called to follow Christ into the heart of the Pascal mystery. Our preparation in Step Six, for becoming entirely ready to have the grace of Christ transform us in Step Seven, leads us into the desert, so to speak. The early Church Fathers portray the first stage of the spiritual journey as a recapitulation in our lives of the Old Testament up to and including the passion, death, and resurrection of our Blessed Lord. Saint Irenaeus (born in Asia in the first half of the second century and bishop of Lyons where he was martyred for the faith) expresses this journey in the following way:

God intends through the action of His grace that each Christian relive in Christ, during the first portion of his life, all that God led His people through from the fall of Adam to Christ's death and resurrection and that each Christian thereafter live as a child of God in Christ in the full freedom of the Holy Spirit, so as to glorify the Father in the Church by making Him known to all men through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus there are, according to the early Fathers, two basic stages to this spiritual journey. The first stage is the struggle that goes on as we experience the deep wound inflicted by original sin and our personal sins and which, through the redemptive grace of Christ, we wish to be healed of. If we persevere in Steps Six and Seven, and are able by cooperating with His grace, to proceed through Steps Eight and Nine, we will have reached the end of that first stage St. Irenaeus speaks

about. At that point, our three great enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—will no longer have power over us. Then will we be able to live in the full freedom of the Spirit, Whose power is the power of love. Having been healed, we are free to love.

To gain our freedom, we need first to pass through the desert on our way to the promised land, just as the children of Israel in their liberation from slavery in Egypt. It is there, in the dryness and desolation of the desert, that God purifies us through the sufferings we go through in this vale of tears, in order to liberate us. In that context, this is how one of the early Fathers explains why God permits trials:

“Before the soul comes to [freedom], it dwells in the desert, where it can be trained in the commandments of the Lord, and where its faith may be tried by temptations. Thus, when it overcomes one temptation and its faith has been tried in that, it comes to another. And so it passes as if from one stopping-place to another, and when it has gone through what happens there and borne it faithfully, it goes on to yet another. And thus by passing through all the trials of life and faith, it is said to have stopping-places, in which the growth in the virtues is every time the real issue, and there is fulfilled in them the saying of Scripture: they shall go from strength to strength, until they come to the last, even to the highest stage of the virtues, and they cross the river of God, and receive the promised inheritance.” It is here in this valley of tears, with all its troubles, that God will use those troubles to transform us into His divine beauty. Our life is a pilgrimage that entails trials and tribulations. God uses them to purify us. Again, an early Church father explains:

“We cannot get through to the promised land unless we go through bitterness ... The physician of our souls wishes us to endure the bitterness of this life in various trials, knowing that the result of this bitterness will gain us the sweetness of our soul’s salvation ... You who begin on the way of virtue, do not refuse to draw near to bitterness. For by it you will make progress, like the Hebrew people of old. These are the struggles by which the soul is healed.”

God permits the trouble and the struggles in order to purify us, to transform us, much as a caterpillar is transformed into a beautiful butterfly, with the freedom to fly instead of crawl. Becoming entirely ready to have our character defects removed is the result of persevering in the desert struggles of every day life.

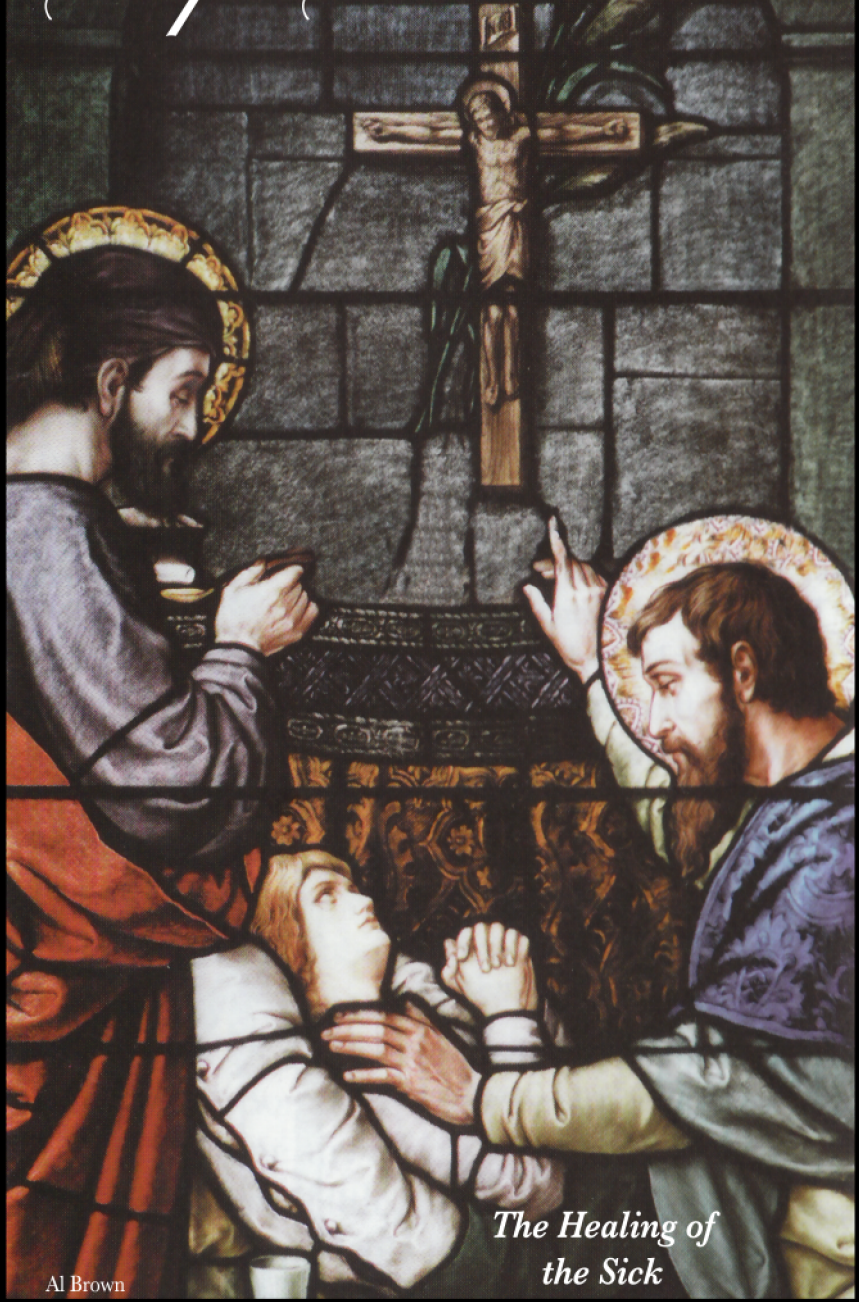
More Precious Than Gold

Our transformation is likened by Sacred Scripture to the purification of gold (Peter 1: 3-7)

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. By His great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

As we live out in faith these principles in our daily lives, we gradually, and almost unconsciously, become ready to have God remove our defects of character. We can move to Step Seven.

Step Seven



Al Brown

*The Healing of
the Sick*

WE HUMBLY... ASKED GOD TO REMOVE OUR SHORTCOMINGS

“We would willingly have others perfect, and yet we amend not our own faults. We would have others severely corrected, and will not be corrected ourselves. The large liberty of others displeases us, and yet we will not have our own desires denied us. We will have others kept under strict laws, but in no sort will ourselves be restrained. And thus it appears how seldom we weigh our neighbor in the same balance with ourselves.”

The Imitation of Christ (I, 16)

The above quote from Thomas a Kempis expresses a truth so very common yet, from a perspective of self-understanding, we are extremely insensitive to. Our faults have precluded any adequate self-understanding. It is in living life in common with others that our faults manifest themselves. We are unable to get along well with others, especially those we regard as troublesome people, because we don't understand the part we play in our troubles. And so, instead of seeing the part we play in the unwelcome outcome and doing something constructive to solve the problem, we blame the problem on others or situations.

Take the case of spouses of alcoholics. They do not perceive any dysfunction on their part but only see the insanity of the alcoholic. Some will divorce the alcoholic only to marry another. And even then it often does not sink in that they marry addicts because there is something wrong with them, that they confuse being needed with being loved and are attracted to needy people whom they try to fix. They remain blind to their own dysfunction and its contributing influence to their misery.

Thus does The Imitation of Christ, in the above quote, state the not so obvious truth about ourselves: “We will have others kept under strict laws, but in no sort will ourselves be restrained.” Indeed, we use a different scale in weighing our own dysfunction. We need the humility to take an honest look at ourselves for, as the saints teach us, it is only in proportion to our humility that God can love and sanctify us.

In Step One a certain, but limited, amount of humility was needed when we finally accepted our powerlessness over persons, places, and situations that we perceived as the source of our misery. But most often it is desperation, and not humility, that led us to taking this step.

In Step Two, humility enabled us to look to a Power beyond ourselves as the source of the strength needed to transcend our problems. We made an act of faith based on the example of those who had gone before us. And in Step Three, humility contributed to our surrender to His will. Steps Four and Five would have been impossible without some degree of humility. In Step Six our being ready to have God remove our faults or defects was in direct proportion to the degree of our humility.

And now, in Step Seven, the entire emphasis is on humility because, as Alanon states, “The strength of humility enables us to take intelligent, spiritual action in solving our problems.” Only by a deepened awareness that “of myself I am nothing” can I humbly ask God for the grace needed to change. Self-will has barred God's help from our lives. We thought we could handle our problems by self-will alone. We needed the humility to recognize this truth and to take intelligent spiritual action in solving our problems, aided by His grace.

The Attainment of Humility

The attainment of greater humility is the foundation of our spiritual edifice. If the edifice is built on the sand of self, it will eventually collapse. But with the strength of genuine humility, no storm is too strong, no wave too high, to collapse the house built on rock.

How do we acquire the humility needed in this Step? As St. Bernard points out in one of our quotes (pages 4-5), “humiliation is the way to humility.” We might portray ourselves to others as sinners: “Oh, what a terrible sinner I am,” and perhaps we are being genuine in those sentiments, but let us have to suffer some indignity-this shows the true state of the heart. C.S. Lewis warned, “A man is never so proud as when striking an attitude of humility.” The humility we are speaking about must be put into practice. This comes from suffering humiliations in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way. We want to caution, however, that humility is not doormat hood, as some people suppose. They don’t want to be humble because they think that they will have to be victims of other people’s bad behavior. But they lack the wisdom to know the difference between genuine

Genuine Humility

Humility isn’t thinking less of oneself....It’s thinking of oneself less.

A self-centered person can’t be humble, and so St. Francis taught (as we see in the Prayer of St. Francis) that it is in forgetting self that one finds. The virtue of humility is what enables one to forget self. This is the key to our finding the peace and happiness we all desire. But we have to die to self in order to find. Practically speaking, what does this mean?


What is a virtue?

Humility is a virtue and a virtue is a habit—a moral habit. Some habits can be artistic-like playing the piano or knitting. How does one develop the artistic trait? By practicing, and as the sayings goes, practice makes perfect. The more the athlete practices his sport, the better at it he becomes. The more the musician practices the piano, the easier it becomes. He reaches the point in his artistic development that he no longer needs the music in front of him. His fingers easily glide across the keys as beautiful music emanates from the piano.

It is the same with a moral habit, like humility: the more we practice, the easier it becomes. At first, though, since we are not accustomed to responding in a humble way, it is a great struggle, but the more we restrain our broken urges and learn to die to this world, the greater our freedom. The source of our freedom is our humility.

In saying that “humility isn’t thinking less of oneself”, we mean that humility is not, “I’m no good; I’m not as smart, as pretty, as talented, etc. as others are.” That’s one side of the coin of pride. The other side is that which causes us to put ourselves above others: “Thank God I’m not like other people.” That’s the pride of the Pharisee. It is cold pride that demands that love must be merited. It is a lie. Thus does say Paul say, “What do you have that you haven’t received?” Can I pride myself on my intelligence? Well, did I knit my brain together in my mother’s womb? Isn’t it absolute arrogance to be a racist? -did I choose the race I was born into? What arrogance. No, everything is a grace; a received gift from God and it is a false pride to think otherwise.

A humble person can admit to their talents, all the while giving humble thanks to God for the gifts they have received. But the arrogant attribute to themselves what is in reality a gift from God. So humility isn’t thinking less of oneself; it’s thinking of oneself less. Let’s look at the last part of that phrase.



"There is something in humility which strangely exalts the heart." St. Augustine (5th Century)


"For it is to the humble-minded that Christ belongs, not to those who exalt themselves above His flock. The Scepter of the divine majesty, the Lord Jesus Christ, did not, for all His power, come clothed in boastful pomp and oweeening pride, but in a humble frame of mind." Pope St. Clement I (1st Century)

"Humility which humiliation teaches us to practise, is the foundation of the entire spiritual fabric. Thus humiliation is the way to humility, as patience to peace, as reading to knowledge. If you long for the virtue of humility, you must not flee from the way of humiliation. For if you do not allow yourself to be humiliated, you cannot attain to humility." St. Bernard (12th Century)

"Never mention anything concerning yourself which people account praiseworthy, such as learning, goodness, birth, unless with the hope of doing good thereby, and then let it be done with humility, remembering that these are gifts of God." St. Teresa of Avila (16th Century)

"Humility is one of the most difficult of virtues both to attain and to ascertain. It lies close upon the heart itself, and its tests are exceedingly delicate and subtle. Its counterfeits abound." John Cardinal Newman (19th Century)

"True humility makes no pretence of being humble, and scarcely ever utters words of humility." St. Thomas Moore (5th Century)



Thinking of Oneself Less

When I have to suffer some humiliation from a hostile or belligerent person, I realize that hurt people hurt people and, rather than reacting out of anger because my own feelings are hurt, I can respond in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way. I can do this because of the virtue of humility. But because I'm making efforts at growing in humility and am not yet too accustomed to acting in a humble manner-just like the novice piano player who must concentrate more than the proficient player-I can feel the negative feelings within me seeking to lash out. I restrain myself and bear the indignity without any hostile reproaches to the offender.

I would like to lash out but I realize my need for humility; I need to suffer this indignity for the sake of my own spiritual development as well as for the charity I owe the offender. But again, humility is not doormat hood. Thus if there is some important principle that would be violated, or if there is some scandal that would be given if I did not stand up for myself or for someone else, then I need to do something positive in responding to the offender. But if there is no such scandal that would be given, or no offense against some moral principle, then I can simply "eat humble pie" and let go of it.

The Saints point out the example of being blamed for something as a place where humility can be given birth. Suppose, for example, I'm blamed for leaving the door open. "You left the door open; now, go close it!" someone yells at me. Knowing how desperate I am for the virtue of humility, I simply go over and close the door without any recriminations. It is God's policy, the Saints assure us, and to do literally what Jesus said He does: He exalts the lowly. But arrogant, self-centered people (a tautology-for all arrogant people are self-centered) can never respond in an appropriate ways to threatening situations. Their pride is hurt; they are blamed for something they didn't do (or worse, feel threatened because they are guilty, and so lash out at the source of their hurt).

The Saints know from experience that God grants a deepening of communion with Himself only after the soul deepens in the virtue of humility. Fr. Dubay lays out the advanced degree of humility seen in the Saints (Authenticity, p. 28.): such people easily avoid vanity; they do not dominate in conversations; they have overcome any desire to impress others; they experience little difficulty in accepting criticism; they are able to find joy in accusation and blame. The acid test of humility is found in being able to find peace in blame-unjust blame. Mother Teresa, for example, found her security not in praise but blame-unjust blame. She considered praise a torment. When she first experienced being the center of attention (at the Eucharistic Congress in 1976)-with everyone coming up and taking her picture-she said to one of our priests standing nearby: "See all this? It is very bad. I long to be back in Calcutta where no one pays me any attention." The Saints realize the harm that comes from praise.

An Understanding Attitude

Only a humble person is able to maintain an understanding attitude. And so St. Isaac teaches us:

"The humble man confronts murderous wild beasts. From the moment, they see him, their savagery is tamed. They approach him as if he were their owner, nodding their heads, and licking his hands and feet. They actually scent from him the fragrance that Adam breathed forth before the Fall when they came to him in paradise and he gave them their names."

If we want to mature into becoming the joy filled disciples of Christ, then we will have to acquire the ability to develop an inner peace in the midst of a broken

world, for serenity isn't freedom from the storm, but peace amid the storm (d. Matt 14:25ff). It is humility that confers this grace upon us. Sister Ignatia had this definition of humility always on her desk: "Humility is perpetual quietness of heart. It is to have no trouble. It is never to be fretted or vexed, irritable or sore; to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised, it is to have a blessed home in myself where I can go in and shut the door and kneel to my Father in secret and be at peace, as in a deep sea of calmness when all around and about is seeming trouble."

This is the humility we see in the Saints. Take Mother Teresa, for example. A very negative book was written against Mother Teresa, and accounts of it appeared in major newspapers. It was written by an English socialist with no love for Mother Teresa. Finally, when Mother Teresa was told about it, she said, "Bring me the newspaper article [about the book]." She read it and said, "We've accepted all the good things; we have to accept this, too." And she went right on with her life with no loss of peace. How was that possible? Humility, which "is never to be fretted or vexed, irritable or sore." How can a person be "at rest when nobody praises" him? Because he is humble, which means he does not need validation from outside sources to feel good about himself. He knows the source of his lovableness to be the infinite, unchanging God of love and not the world. Another exercise for humility is abstaining from self-justification when we are blamed, especially unjustly blamed. This, too, contributes to our growth in humility and thus to our spiritual maturity. We are building our edifice on a solid foundation. We are growing towards that point in our spiritual life when we will be able to manifest evangelical love for our enemies.

Humbly Asking God

When we practice this virtue of humility in all our affairs, we are in the right spiritual condition of being able to humbly ask God to remove our offenses against Him, which is what our defects are. They offend against His will for us. In preparing to have our defects removed, we have to demonstrate our willingness on an ongoing basis. We have to be alert to any attempts to assume control—a sign we are lapsing from Step 3. Also we must be aware of any attempts at demanding of God that things be as we would have them. Often our motive in wanting to have our defects removed is simply personal peace alone, as St. John of the Cross notes:

"Many ... will make numerous plans and great resolutions, but since they are not humble and have no distrust of themselves, the more resolutions they make, the more they break, and the greater becomes their anger. They do not have the patience to wait until God gives them what they need when He so pleases. Their attitude is contrary to spiritual meekness and can only be remedied by the purification of the dark night."

Our asking God to remove our defects must be grounded in genuine humility, thus demonstrating that we are moving away from our self-centered need to have what we want on demand.

Pride and Disobedience

He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to death on the Cross. Philippians 2:7-8

Pride and disobedience were the source of man's ruin in the Garden of Eden. Our redemption came about through the humility and obedience of Christ. If we are to be delivered from our defects of character, we need to humbly ask God.



WE MADE A LIST OF ALL PEOPLE WE HAD HARMED AND BECAME WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS TO THEM ALL

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar, and go and first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

Matthew 5:23-24

With this Step, the time for pruning the vines has arrived. Jesus came to reconcile us to God the Father and to one another. Reconciliation is part of daily Christian living, an integral part of the Christian message. This reconciliation that Jesus requires of us is necessarily twofold: it takes place with God and neighbor. In some religions this is not necessarily so. A person can worship deities without being concerned for others, especially those outside one’s religion or culture. For the Christian, whatever is done to others, especially the least, Jesus considers done to Him (Matt. 25:40).

In the Dialogues the Lord says to St. Catherine of Siena: “Your neighbors are the means I have given you to prove your love for Me,” and in Sacred Scripture St. John says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21). We see, then, that our life of faith in Christ is intimately connected with our social relationships. The more I grow in the love of God, the more the love of neighbor increases- in a direct proportion. For the Christian, growth in the love of God does not happen in isolation from the rest of life. If my love of Christ is really real (and not merely some spiritual trip I happen to be on), it involves love and honesty in all my human relations.

A follower of Christ cannot carry in his heart hatred towards anyone and expect to grow in the love of God, which alone brings that peace beyond all understanding. Either the love of God grows cold, or the person lives in great blindness while maintaining empty, external religious practice -like the Pharisee who prided himself on fasting and attending religious rituals while remaining unrecognized with others. Unreconciled, a person lives in alienation from others, unable to possess that peace beyond all understanding.

Step Eight is the way out of our isolation from those with whom we have remained unreconciled. We cannot reform our lives today, living in harmony with God and ourselves without recourse to the undoing of the wrong we have done in the past. Catholics learned to pray in the Act of Contrition: “I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace ... to amend my life. Amen,” manifesting that making amends is an integral part of Gospel living. For every harm that we have inflicted on others, knowingly or unknowingly, there are amends to be made. People are often bewildered as to why they lack divine guidance in their daily lives; in addition, they experience very little joy that should be a part of Gospel living. Often it is because they come to church and the sacraments without first having been reconciled.

We would prefer to offer fitting worship to God while hoping the one with whom

we remain unreconciled would simply disappear or worse, even die!), or at the very least that the situation be forgotten.

This important Step enables us to live in harmony with God, others, and ourselves. Releasing past hurts leads to new life for us in Christ in the present. With Step Eight we are preparing to be reconciled with others by taking responsibility for our behavior wherever it brought harm to someone else. Christians never return evil for evil; rather, drawing upon the grace of Christ, we return a blessing instead. This is the kind of behavior that brings light to the darkness of our times. This is the vocation we have been called to by Christ. How useless for us to bemoan the state of the world while doing nothing to redeem it.

Being reconciled with those we have harmed does not mean that we don't confront people and cause hurt in the process. But this kind of 'hurt' is good hurt-the same kind of 'hurt' we receive when we allow the dentist to attend to our cavities. But having dental work done does not 'harm' us. It hurts, yes, but this kind of hurt is good for us.

Sometimes, then, we have to 'hurt' people. For example, when we refuse to do for others what they should and could do for themselves. Making irresponsible people responsible for their bad behavior will not sit well with them; but in truth, the problem is with them. Even though they have problems with responsibility and I refuse to enable that behavior, and they are pained by my response, I do not make amends when such good "hurt" results because of my appropriate actions.

They need to be 'hurt', as with the dental work. But if in the past I truly have harmed others, then I do indeed need to become willing to take responsibility for my part in the unwelcome result, no matter how justified I may have felt at the time. People being irritating or even hostile or hateful, does not preclude my acting in a Christian manner.

That we are people of faith should be evident in our words and actions. If, through the living of these Steps, we have been freed from the bondage of self through grace, our relationships with others will reflect this (and not our religious practices as such, for it is very easy to fool ourselves into thinking we have been reconciled with God by increasing devotional practices while remaining alienated from family members and former friends or coworkers).

The devil will deceive some people with an insidious plot. He will fire them with a zeal to maintain God's law by uprooting sin from the hearts of others. Never will he come right out and tempt them with something obviously evil. Instead, he incites them to assume the role of a zealous prelate supervising every aspect of the Christian life. [The Cloud of Unknowing](#)

In Step Eight we are being asked to take responsibility for our part where real harm has come because of our action or inaction. (i.e. sins of commission or omission). Unless our Christian lives match our words, they will have little or no effect in redeeming the sinfulness of our world and bringing people to Christ. Rather, we give scandal and chase people from God's house.

If we have successfully worked the Steps to this point in our lives, we are usually aware of those we have harmed- irrespective of how justified we may have felt at the time of the dispute. Whatever the nature of the other person's actions, we never return evil for evil. We have only to open our mind's eye to see that such returning evil for evil does nothing to redeem the world and reconcile man with God. This will, of course, be painful, but such is the reality of true redemptive

"No one heals himself by wounding another."

St. Ambrose (5th Century)

"It requires more humility to recognize one's hopeless mediocrity than to proclaim oneself a great sinner." von Balthasar (20th Century)

"I am convinced that an imperfect person needs more courage to walk the way of perfection than suddenly to become a martyr, since the struggle for holiness is not brief." St. Teresa of Avila (16th Century)

"The life of man reaches fulfillment through a succession of deaths." St. Basil (5th Century)

"Here, the deeper the wound, the more richly health blossoms .. " John of the Cross (16th Century)

"One just soul can obtain pardon for a thousand sinners." St. Margaret Mary (17th Century)

"Do now, do now, what you will wish to have done when your moment comes to die."

St. Angela Merici (15th Century)

"It is a form of trade, you see. I ask God for souls and pay Him by giving up everything else."

St. John Bosco (19th Century)

"Anything you do to revenge yourself upon a brother who has done you an injustice will offend you during prayer." St. Nilus of Sinai (4th Century)

"The Saints had no hatred, no bitterness.

They forgave everything."

St. Margaret Mary (17th Century)

living: new life emerges from the Cross-, properly understood. “No pain, no gain” as they say in AA.

This Step is a step in Christian asceticism, where we discipline our broken urges. “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebr. 12: 11). This reconciliation that Jesus requires of us entails forgiveness.

The forgiveness of sins

In praying the Lord’s Prayer we are reminded that in order to be forgiven by God, we must first forgive others, and not seven times but seventy times seven times (cf. Matt. 18:22). A word of caution here to recovering doormats. We must not interpret forgiveness according to our former, sick way of acting. That is, forgiveness does not mean allowing others to trespass against us. When Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39), He is not encouraging abuse as such. St. Augustine asks, “Who is the model of Christian life?” and responds, “Jesus.”

All right, then, what did Jesus do when they arrested Him and struck Him across the face? He did not turn and offer the other cheek. Rather, He responded, “Why do you strike me?” (John 18:23). And when St. Paul was arrested and ordered to be struck across the face, what did he do? Like Jesus, he reprimanded his accusers (Acts 23:2-3).

Unfortunately, many Christians read Sacred Scripture out of context and often misinterpret its words, thereby distorting its meaning. Abuse is a serious sin and the serious Christian does not tolerate it-not in others and not in himself. If it is a sin for me to trespass against you, then it must be a sin for you to trespass against me. However, the Saints will point out that if the transgression we have to suffer is not of serious import, then for humility’s sake, we should bear with it. But if some principle is violated or some scandal given, then I should stand up for myself-while at the same time never rendering evil for evil

Table fellowship with sinners

What most impressed itself upon the people who observed Jesus’ actions was His eating with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners. Jesus came, not to condemn, but to redeem. He did this by associating with sinners and not by rejecting them. He rejected their sins, but not them. We, too, need to make that distinction. Step Eight helps us do just that. An important ingredient in working on Steps Eight and Nine is forgiveness, forgiveness of others and myself.

When Jesus rose from the dead, His primary focus was not on feeding the poor, nor visiting the sick or prisoners, but on the forgiveness of sins:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” Luke 24:45-47 (see also John 20:21-23).

My favorite example of the forgiveness of sins is in the life of the virgin martyr, Maria Goretti. Maria Goretti was stabbed to death when she was only in her thirteenth year. The young man who killed her was well known to her family. He lived alone with his father, having lost his mother when he was quite young. Growing up with the vice of lust ever increasing, he eventually looked for a victim with whom to act out his sexual fantasies. Maria would not cooperate, so finally one

day, when she was alone baby sitting her infant sister, and while the adults were preoccupied with working in the fields, he resolved to try again-only this time he took a weapon along in case she refused. Wielding the knife, he climbed the stairs and entered her room. Maria was shocked and refused his lustful advances. For her refusal, he stabbed her fourteen times.

There is no sin or crime committed by another, which I myself am not capable of committing through my weakness; and if I have not committed it, it is because God, in His mercy, has not allowed me to and has preserved me in goodness.

We can understand a victim screaming out in her own defense, focusing on her physical agony; but Maria's focus was the danger to Alessandro's soul for committing such an act. And so she cried out, "Alessandro, what are you doing? You'll lose your soul." And her last words, "Alessandro, I want you to be in paradise with me!" It is curious that she did not die on the day she was attacked, but three days later on the feast of the Precious Blood, the feast that honors the blood of Christ shed for wicked sinners. On that day of her death, she told the parish priest, "I pray God forgives my attacker, for I have already forgiven him and I want him to be in paradise with me."

At the beginning of the trial Maria's mother, Assumpta walked up to Alessandro and forgave him for killing her innocent daughter. He didn't even ask her forgiveness! How very different is this behavior from the dreadful revenge we see so much of in contemporary society. Assumpta's neighbors were angry with her, "He stabs your innocent daughter and you forgive him? Are you crazy?" Assumpta turned to them and replied, "What if Jesus Christ does not forgive us our sins?"

Soon after Alessandro went to prison, Maria Goretti appeared to him in a vision, saying nothing but simply offering him fourteen lilies. He looked upon this vision as a sign of her forgiveness. He converted in prison and became the chaplain's assistant. Finally, at the age of forty-five (he went to jail at nineteen), he was released from prison. He found odd jobs here and there, but once people found out his last name (the case was notorious), he would move on. During Advent that first year of his freedom, he received a letter from the parish priest inviting him not to be alone for Christmas but to come to the parish rectory. And so he did.

When he arrived at the rectory and knocked on the door, the housekeeper- Assumpta, Maria Goretti's mother-answered the door. Alessandro burst into tears. Assumpta gave him a hug, and Alessandro stayed with her as a son until she died. She became the mother he never had. And when she died, he became a Franciscan lay brother and lived a very long and holy life.

Because she lived the forgiveness of sins, not only is Maria Goretti in heaven, but so, too, her forgiving mother and her murderer. There have been many such cases in the history of the Church: there is Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul)-the ringleader of a group of murderers who killed St. Stephen, our first Christian martyr. The victim and the murderer are in heaven together because of the forgiveness which redeems the soul who embraces it.

The first Dominican martyr, St. Peter of Verona, forgave the man who viciously attacked and murdered him. The man converted and became a Dominican lay brother, living a very holy life of penance. Of course, it was Jesus Himself who led the way: on the Cross, with all its agony, He called out, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."

It is with this spirit of forgiveness that we become willing to make amends and can continue on to Step Nine.



E. Vogt

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
Prefigured in Abraham's Sacrifice

MADE DIRECT AMENDS TO SUCH PEOPLE WHENEVER POSSIBLE EXCEPT WHEN TO DO SO WOULD INJURE THEM OR OTHERS

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

As Christians, we know through the certitude of faith that love is the only thing that can save us. It is the greatest of the commandments and it entails not simply the love of God but the love of neighbor as well:

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. Matt 22:37-39

We are able to love because He first loved us (I John 4: 19). Our inability to forgive ourselves and others has its origin in a lack of love: we have failed to experience ourselves as loved by God and therefore are unable to live out His love through others.

How does the world love you? If you conform yourself to its demands: by being sexy, beautiful, rich, tall, powerful, or pleasing in some other way. Why does God love you? Is it because you're tall, rich, sexy, powerful, beautiful? Of course not. That is why God chooses for His special work those whom the world considers low-born (I Corinthians 1: 27). Take Mother Teresa, for example. From the world's perspective, this type of woman would not have been the right choice; rather, in order to sell His product, so to speak, God should have chosen a tall, gorgeous woman from Paris or Hollywood-not some small fry from Skopje! After all, has anything good every come from Mother Teresa's hometown of Skopje?

God likes to choose nothingness

In clear, reference to herself, Mother Teresa once said, “God likes to choose nothingness to show what He can do.” The world needs a tall, gorgeous blond to sell itself; God does not. God is all-powerful and can use whatever instrument He so desires, thereby demonstrating that man's salvation does not come from human endeavor but by God's own power. Thus, Mother Teresa would compare herself to the pencil. One doesn't applaud the pencil for the Shakespearean sonnet; one praises Shakespeare. It takes humility to accept our nothingness and to be happy about it. It took a great deal of humility to reach this Step in our spiritual journey. Now that humility will be exercised in a most important way: making direct amends to those we have harmed.

Having examined our hearts thoroughly in Step Eight where we pondered over those in our past that we have harmed, we are ready to make direct and indirect amends. In our last pamphlet, we said that this step can be likened to pruning a

tree: the dead branches are cut off and burned so that new and fruitful growth can occur. A painful process, no doubt, but one without which we lose our ability to produce fruit for the kingdom of God. Step Nine asks us to confront the issues of our past where harm has come to someone as a result of our action or inaction. Of course, as with all our actions, a certain prudence or practical wisdom is necessary. That wisdom, for example, that is able to distinguish “hurt” from “harm.” We looked at that in Step Eight. Here in Step Nine we are interested only in those actions or inactions of ours where actual harm has come to someone.


By the time we have reached Step Nine, we have experienced ourselves as gratuitously loved by God and we have accepted our littleness. This gives us the ability to recognize others as having the same right to be here and to be as happy as we want to be. We have learned to “live and let live.” Step Nine will heal the bitter experiences that have tarnished our lives because we are accepting full responsibility for our part in every action or inaction where harm has come to someone—despite the other person’s part. Christians never return evil for evil. Through the spiritual awakening resulting from these Steps, we learn how to return a blessing.

Step Nine has two stages

The first stage concerns the making of direct amends whenever possible; the second, except when to do so would injure them or others. Because of fear, often we try to escape the task of facing the person to whom amends are owed. Fear is the chief activator of our faults and as we progress through the steps, we need to develop the virtue of courage which, as we’ve said before, is not the absence of fear. A young man goes to war and is afraid; courage permits him to face his fears. I always liked the saying, “Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is fear that has said its prayers.” Mother Teresa always instructed her sisters, “First take it to Jesus.” Before going to make a face-to-face admission of our wrongs, taking it to the Lord first is good preparation. We learn to surrender the outcome to Him and to keep the focus simply on our part of the unwelcome result. If we refuse this hurdle, there will be no authentic and long-lasting healing for our souls. The delight of peace promised by Christ comes from humility and honesty, two virtues that draw us close to one another. And they are necessary for this Step. *When direct amends are not possible, God in His great mercy has provided a means of making indirect amends, a way of atonement that gives grace both to ourselves and to those we’ve harmed.* There may still be an old division in our relationship with someone and we did not do our part in healing that wound. Instead, we blamed the other person. Now we need to take responsibility for our part in what happened, no matter how justified we may have felt at the time. There is never a time when we cease acting in a Christian manner. Good behavior is healthy behavior. Unchristian behavior is devastating to our wellbeing, and so we need to take the medicine required of us by our Redeemer:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

What good are our religious practices if there is no personal responsibility for the harm we have caused others? Such religious practices are mere religiosity, something denounced continually by the Prophets. Jesus came to reconcile us to the Father and to one another: we have to have both. There is no such thing as an increased communion with God in the depths of our heart apart from living the Gospel. And so in making amends we once again deny our very selves and embrace this life-giving, life-restoring Step.



**"Is Jesus not more ready to pardon than we to sin?
And is He not the Physician and we the sick, the
Bearer of our iniquities?"** St. Catherine of Siena (14th Century)

"No one heals himself by wounding another."
St. Ambrose (5th Century)

**"Although by His death Christ sufficiently merited
salvation for the whole human race, each of us
must there seek his own cure. Christ's death is like
the universal cause of deliverance ...Nevertheless
even a universal cause must be applied to be
effective. The effects of original sin come to us
through bodily birth; the effects of Christ's death
come through the spiritual rebirth whereby we are
incorporated in Christ."** St. Thomas Aquinas (13th Century)

**"The truth is that all feeble spirits naturally live in
the future, because it is featureless; it is a soft job;
you can make it what you like. The next age is blank,
and I can paint it freshly with my favorite color. It
requires real courage to face the past ... "**
G.K. Chesterton (20th Century)

**"No one is redeemed except through unmerited
mercy, and no one is condemned except through
merited judgment."** St. Augustine (5th Century)

**"So let us also, while we are still in this world, repent
with our whole heart of the evil things we have done
in the flesh, that we may be saved by the Lord while
we have time for repentance. For, after leaving this
world, we cannot there confess or repent any more."**
2nd Clement (2nd Century)

**"To do penance is to bewail the evil we have done,
and to do no evil to bewail!"** Pope St. Gregory (6th Century)

Painful memories from the past dissipate if we own up to our part in past hurts. We have to be careful not to procrastinate out of fear. It's true, the timing has to be right and the person or people readily accessible, but we must not hold off out of fear. Fear is an emotion we are dealing with through practicing the virtue of courage.

We also need to let go of the outcome. Perhaps the person to whom the amend is made will not in turn forgive us, or won't even allow us to approach him. We leave this to God and practice the serenity prayer that calls us to accept the things we cannot change. It is now between that person and God, and God will not hold me responsible because I have done my part in making amends. Our intention must not be to manipulate the person into thinking well of us because we are now saying we are sorry, or to impress them with our willingness to come forward and express our regrets. Manipulation and impression management are defects we have already surrendered in Step Seven (if not, we need to return to Steps Six and Seven). If we have successfully worked the preceding steps, we no longer need to ingratiate ourselves to others in order to have serenity. No; we are making direct amends because that is what a spiritually mature Christian does, and we want to be healthy, free, and at peace with ourselves and others in Christ.

Indirect Amends

When direct amends are not possible (we don't know where the person is today, or maybe the person is deceased), God in His great mercy has provided a means of making indirect amends. How? Because we have been incorporated into Christ by the sanctifying grace of baptism, we share in Christ's divine life. "The life I live is no longer my own; it is Christ living in me," is how St. Paul expresses it (Gal. 2:20). We share in Christ's priestly, salvific mission. Thus the good we do can merit not only for ourselves but for others. How is this possible? It is possible because Christ in His great mercy has grafted us onto Himself, "You are the branches, I am the vine" (John 15:5). The sap that flows through us, so to speak, is the very power and grace of Christ, our priestly Lord. We contribute to the salvation of others through our own meritorious deeds done in Christ. We are one with Christ. He is the head, we the body. We belong to that Body that suffered and died on the Cross and rose from the dead. It is the same body! We carry out the redemptive mystery of Christ's passion in our own bodies, spreading the merits of His passion to all the world, as St. Paul expresses in the following passage:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:24-26

A terrible wound has been inflicted on the Body of Christ, and the wound needs to be healed. It is our sins that have wounded Christ; it is Christ we persecute, as St. Paul learned from the Risen Lord Himself who appeared to Paul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus asks Paul, thus identifying Himself with His Church, which Paul was seeking to destroy.

We need to make amends. It is part and parcel of our calling in Christ. To be reconciled with God I must be reconciled with others. And so indirect amends are made by offering whatever good we do or whatever hardships we have to suffer, by offering these for the good of those I have offended and to whom direct amends are not possible.

Step Nine and Atonement

Let's not forget the need to repair the damage we have done by our sins. Let's take an example from the secular world and then apply it to our lives as Christians.

Suppose a man is playing ball with his children in the back yard, and the ball accidentally smashes a window in his neighbor's house. He can go and apologize and if his neighbor thinks him sincere, he can forgive him, but if he returns to the back yard the following Saturday once again to play ball with his kids, and the same thing happens, is his neighbor going to forgive him? And again another Saturday. No! His neighbor is not stupid. He knows He is not serious. Apologies are not enough. I must amend my behavior. Apologies are sometimes called for but they don't mend the bad behavior. Going to the local park to play ball—that's making an amend.

Now, still in this secular example, is that it? I apologize and go to the park; my neighbor has forgiven me. What else? I must fix your window! So likewise on the spiritual level, I need to apologize, r need make a firm purpose of amendment, and r must repair the damage I have done by my sinfulness. This is the essence of Steps Eight and Nine. But God is more merciful yet. Often He offers His people indulgences, which is God's way of saying, "I'll pay for the window." But to obtain an indulgence, a person cannot have any attachment to sin. I must repudiate sin.

Now another marvelous gift of God is that we can make up in our own lives the suffering of Christ on behalf of others. We are coworkers with Christ in the work of redemption, as St. Paul expresses in the above quote from Colossians. What a marvelous gift! And so with Step Nine I can make indirect amends by offering the good I do and the difficulties I have to suffer in reparation for the damage I've cause by my sins and offer them for the good of people to whom I owe amends but who are not readily available.

Except when to do so ...

One time I met a woman who had the shock of her life. A stranger came to her door one afternoon and confessed to having had an affair with her husband in the past! The wife never knew of her husband's infidelity and was completely overwhelmed by this strange woman's utterance. We never make amends at the expense of another person. In such cases, indirect amends suffice.

Lastly, we must know what we are going to say and to be as brief as possible. Long explanations are not necessary, and no reference to the other person's part in the dispute is to be made. It is always wise to seek advice from a sponsor or other wise person before making our amends. With the completion of this Step, what then remains are the maintenance, sustenance, and growth phases of the spiritual life: Steps 10, 11, and 12.

*Step
Ten*



Sanctuary in a Swiss Church
E. Vogt

CONTINUED TO TAKE PERSONAL INVENTORY AND WHEN WE WERE WRONG, PROMPTLY ADMITTED IT.

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged our selves truly, we should not be judged.

1 Corinthians 11:25-31

A daily examination of conscience has been a traditional Catholic practice dating back into the early days of the Christian community, finding its precedents in the New Testament period itself as with the text above where we are exhorted by St. Paul to examine our consciences before receiving the Sacrament of Christ’s real presence. Elsewhere, we are encouraged by Sacred Scripture to seek out those we have offended and make our peace with them before the sun sets (cf. Matthew 5: 24; Ephesians 4:26).

Neglecting to examine our consciences keeps us in the dark about how our former insane ways of doing things are still impacting our lives. Can a person expect to clean house and be done with it? Isn’t our program a commitment to an ongoing reformation of our lives? The importance of Step Ten can be seen from the following warning from Matthew’s Gospel: When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. He says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. So shall it be also with this evil generation. No one can ever relax his efforts to grow spiritually. If the recovering person realizes this, he will maintain a daily spiritual program of honest self-awareness. The person who practices this recognizes the need for ongoing development. Any attempt to get one’s house in order, neat and tidy, “empty, swept, and put in order,” and to be done with it, can be the occasion for worse demons appearing and taking up residence within the soul. This can be seen, for example, in the life of the alcoholic who has “gone on the wagon” (i.e. has swept his house clean) only to resume drinking after some lapse of time. In doing this, is he merely picking up where he left off (i.e. is it simply the same demon that returns)? The answer is emphatically, No! In resuming his drinking after a period of abstinence, he is now much worse off: worse demons come to take up residence. It is not a mere resumption of drinking at the place he left off; the situation now is graver. This is the nature of the demons we fight. We see this also with gluttony. People who go on pseudo diets end up worse off once the diet ends and they continue on the path of gluttony. They don’t simply gain back what they lost, they gain more. Such is the nature of the seven deadly sins.

Temple Maintenance

Living and working through Steps 1-9 completes our initial housecleaning and we move on to temple maintenance. With Step Ten we begin the sustenance phase of the spiritual life. Keenly aware of our Christian dignity as temples of the Holy Spirit, we participate in a daily program that protects the progress we’ve made

with the first nine Steps and guards the temple against additional break-ins. *But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.* Matthew 24:43

Spiritual growth is a lifelong process; our program of spiritual maturation must be maintained on a daily basis. As Sacred Scripture makes evident and the Saints stress, there is no such thing as being finished. "To stop making progress," St. Teresa warns, "is to go ever from bad to worse." By neglecting an honest inventory of the day's thoughts, words, and actions, we place our recovery in jeopardy from the effects of sin that still pull at us. If neglected, we end up with worse demons still. The Saints learned from experience to integrate a daily self-survey into their lives. This can be seen in every Religious Order where Night Prayer includes an examination of the day's thoughts, words, and actions. Anything found that is in conflict with Christian values is immediately repented of. This exercise makes us aware of the day's excesses of negative feelings that rob us of serenity, such as jealousy, fear, anger, resentment, etc. These are the emotions that will set the person up to take their "drink". They have to be recognized and repudiated. This daily practice also prepares us to meet the next day's challenges all the wiser.

That holiness, which all of us should strive for, can be compared to a distant summit that requires a hard and tiring ascent every day. But do not be discouraged; resume with joy and a generous spirit your daily journey; restore your spiritual strength through prayer and the Eucharist.

John Paul II

Our daily examination will reveal where we've lost our focus as when we find our selves becoming irritable and unreasonable, short tempered, and dwelling upon negative thoughts. You can tell a Christian who is not maturing; he is preoccupied with negativity and lacks joy, which is a fruit of the Spirit. There is a reason for his lack of joy. The price of emotional balance is a daily examen that honestly inventories the real issues at hand.


Gentle Force of the Holy Spirit

Once we commit ourselves to a daily, life-support system, we can feel the gentle force of the Holy Spirit compelling us to grow further, and in ways we would never have imagined possible. The 10th Step examination is a feature in the daily lives of all our Christian Saints. For example, Mother Teresa explains:

Our examination is the mirror we hold up to our nature, a poor weak nature, no doubt, but one that all the more, on that account, needs the mirror to reflect faithfully all its deficiencies. If we undertake this work now, we shall find what we thought a stumbling block transformed by Him into a stepping stone. Our examen will no longer have a lonely feeling of doing it alone, but with a friend eager to help us. We may still discover in our daily examens plenty of "dirt and dust" but if faithfully we do our part, Jesus our friend and coworker will do the rest.

It becomes a matter of putting away the magnifying glass (that we so often use to expose our neighbors' inadequacies) and picking up the mirror of self-reflection, as Mother Teresa explains. Daily practice of Step 10 keeps us focused on ourselves and on today. This tool helps us to be aware of the return of old, self-defeating behavior that brings other demons along with it. It is very easy for us to fall into denial. Our old ineffectual behavior is second nature to us and constant vigilance is the price we pay for daily serenity. Here are a few examples:

- It is very easy for us to think we are being nice in doing something for someone, when in reality we are resorting to our old "people-pleasing" behavior which in truth has nothing to do with being nice but with subtle manipulation to get others to think well of us. So if, at the end of the day, I take a good examen of the day's thoughts, words, and deeds, I can make note of where my defective behavior has



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"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Galatians 5: 1


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Galatians 5: 13

"Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God."
I Peter 2: 16)

"They promise them freedom, hut they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved." 2 Peter 2: 19

"Once virtue is conceived, it Journeys towards perfection, and the ground hears fruit of itself because, with the help of grace, a person's soul rises up spontaneously to do good. Hut the earth produces first the blade, then the stalk and finally the ear of grain." 2nd Clement (2nd Century)

"[n his inner being, man transcends the universe: to those depths he returns when he enters his heart, where God, who searches the heart, awaits him; where, under God's watchful eye, he decides his own destiny" Vatican II, GS, 14



crept back into my life, sincerely repent of it, and resolve not to repeat it.

• I may find myself depressed and, upon doing a 10th step examen, recognize that I was not being honest and was saying yes to something out of fear of disapproval. I know that I must respond according to what is right and not simply to please. Once I repent of the dishonesty in my relationships with others and to disloyalty to myself, serenity quickly returns-provided I can accept a little failure, not as a measure of my worth, but as indication of where I went astray.

I am already keenly aware of my major defects and so it doesn't take but a daily inventory to recognize where they are at work to sabotage my serenity. If I take an honest and prayerful look (what is a prayerful look: an examen that is done in the secure presence of a loving Savior), grace shows me the way out. Step Ten makes us aware of the dysfunctional behavior that is operative at the time. Then I can do something about it before things get worse. Remember, we said in Step Four that our good qualities can be seen in behavior that has positive effects on ourselves and others, whereas our weaknesses manifest themselves in behavior that is destructive to ourselves and others.

• I may find that I am extremely angry and frustrated. If I take the time to examine my anger, I may find that the true source of my anger is one of my defects. (Please note, I am not saying that anger is always wrong; however, I know from an honest Step Four evaluation of my behavior, that so much of the anger in my life was a direct result of my acting out of my dysfunctional need to be right and to be liked, etc.) Walk with simplicity in the way of the Lord and do not torment your spirit. Learn to hate your faults, but to hate them calmly. St Padre Pio

A Spot-Check Inventory

The daily examen may take the form of a spot-check inventory. Maybe I'm getting extremely angry. An on the spot inventory can reveal what character defect might be operative at the moment. Realizing it, I can take positive step to correct myself. For example, one man (let's call him Bill) told me how, one day at work, he found himself getting extremely angry and upset. Having been involved with the Steps for some time, he automatically (but not without some reluctance) examined himself to find the true source of his frustration. He knew from his 12step experience that if he were angry, resentful, bitter, depressed, etc. he was probably responding in an inappropriate manner to a difficult situation. Doing a spot-check inventory at that very moment of frustration, he found it was his fear of confrontation that was at the root of his emotional imbalance. Someone had done something wrong and rather than taking the courage to respond in a reasonable, responsible and loving way, he stewed about it, obsessed about it, and was breeding resentment.

In this particular case someone who worked for him had forgotten to put the tools away. Bill, in order to avoid a fearful confrontation, would normally just do it himself, and the repeated occurrences of this left him feeling helpless and deeply angry. He felt it was easier to just pick up after the person rather than risk a confrontation. This time, however, he had the grace to inventory his anger and the fear that lay behind it. Courage is not the absence of fear-it is fear that has said its prayers. So he said a prayer and went to the employee and in a reasonable, responsible, and loving way-without incriminating angry words-reminded the worker of what needed to be done. And it worked! The man put the stuff away and Bill's anger dissipated. Salvation does, indeed, come from the Cross. He, who seeks to spare himself by avoiding the pain of the Cross, finds death; but he who embraces the Cross for the sake of what is right and good, finds life (cf Matt 16:24-25).

We close with a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas that expresses the fruit that comes of a good 10th Step Inventory:*Be assured that he who shall always walk in God's presence, always ready to give Him an account of all his actions, shall never be separated from Him by consenting to sin.*

Step Eleven



The Return of the Prodigal Son
Photo by E. Vogt

Prayer and Meditation

SOUGHT THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO IMPROVE OUR CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD, PRAYING ONLY FOR THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WILL FOR US AND THE POWER TO CARRY IT OUT.

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall, Though an army camp against me, my heart shall not fear though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One, thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after to live in the house of the LORD, all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble he will conceal me under the cover of his tent he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy, I will sing and make melody to the LORD. Psalm 27

This step introduces us to a more serious prayer life, which presupposes the first ten steps. Without our background in those steps, an adequate prayer life is not possible, for what appears to be a life of prayer becomes, what St. Francis de Sales calls, a “pharisaical phantom”—only the appearance of a prayer life.

One time a young man came to pray at our parish. Every day he joined us for the Rosary before the morning Mass. But then one day I noticed he no longer prayed with us but rather sat in the back of the college chapel and prayed by himself. And by his posture, he was attempting to pray perfectly: perfectly upright, hands perfectly folded, etc. This calls to mind the honest observation of the alcoholics who founded AA that the alcoholic, in addition to having the compulsion to drink, has the compulsion to be right. In his drinking days, the alcoholic might have had the attitude: “I can drink you under any table!” And after his “spiritual awakening” he could then have the attitude, “I can fast you under any table,” or “pray you under any table.” In other words, he switched one compulsion for another. And so I was suspicious of this young man, now perfectly at prayer in the back of the chapel, isolating himself from the community so he could pray in a more perfect manner.

So I asked if I could speak with him privately. A nice young man, now getting serious about his Catholic faith that he had forsaken some years back, he was indeed recovering from drug addiction. I was taken with his honesty and his willingness to see how his addictive behavior was influencing his religious observances. He was totally opened to taking a look at this need for perfect prayer. He told me he could pray better (more perfectly) by himself. And that’s the problem!

To have a legitimate prayer life, we need to have a firm foundation, such as one gets from living and working steps one to ten. After all, Jesus does instruct us:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with you brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

You can see in this teaching a reference to what we would call Steps 8 & 9 when we were called to make amends. We can see something of Step 3, when we made

a decision to follow His will, and it is His explicit will that we reconcile before coming to His altar. Step Eleven reminds us that prayer is about relationship:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. John 15:15


Step Eleven helps us to put aside all self-serving reasons for praying. Our interest is in fostering a loving friendship with the Lord, and one criterion of friendship is communication. If friends stop communicating, the relationship wanes and eventually dies. So, too, our relationship with God. Our daily lives, whatever we do and wherever we are, must be at the service of God, with Whom we have become as a friend. We must nourish what we have experienced in the preceding ten steps. This is the goal of our prayer life. Only then could we pass on to Step Twelve—our apostolic vocation. Vatican II expresses the centrality of our relationship to Christ in the spreading of the good news when it says:

The laity derives the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world" (Apostolicam Actuositatem 3).

Since Christ, sent by the Father, is the source and origin of the whole apostolate of the Church, the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ, in keeping with the Lord's words, 'He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is nourished by spiritual aids which are common to all the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy. These are not to be used by the laity in such a way that while correctly fulfilling their secular duties in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate union with Christ from their life but rather performing their work according to God's will, they grow in that union. In this way, the laity must make progress in holiness in a happy and ready spirit, trying prudently and patiently to overcome difficulties. Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be irrelevant to their spiritual life, in keeping with the words of the Apostle, 'Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Colossians 3: 17

The pursuit of wisdom especially unites man to God by friendship: hence, it is said that wisdom is an infinite treasure to people, which they that use, become friends of God. It is the most profitable, because by wisdom itself man is brought to the kingdom of immortality. **From the Book of Wisdom**

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they make Christ known to others, especially by a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity. (Lumen Gentium 31).



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And the greatest of these is charity, which is precisely the love of friendship (see our pamphlet on friendship which explains the theology of charity as friendship). And friendship, as we said, demands communication. St. Teresa of Avila teaches: When you never talk to a person, he soon becomes a stranger to you, and you soon forget how to talk to him; and before long, even if he is a relative, you feel as if you do not know him, for both kinship and friendship lose their influence when communication ceases.

Prayer, then, is something far deeper than the mere asking of favors from God. Sadly, this is what prayer is often reduced to, and if those favors are not granted, people will get angry with God. But the person with a deep prayer life knows in faith that the infinite, unchanging God of love always wills what is universally best. This faith, which is dark to the intellect and dry to the senses, is the only means to the experience of God's abiding love. It is nurtured by prayer.

We must stress, in the context of the first 10 steps, that no deepened communion with God takes place in isolation from the rest of life, as with our young friend in the college chapel. St. Teresa of Avila gives three criteria necessary for a legitimate prayer life to flourish and produce fruit.

We must practice:

1. Love for one another

2. Detachment from all that the self holds worthwhile

3. Genuine humility

Humility-the foundational virtue of the spiritual life-was covered in our pamphlet on Step 7, and love and detachment in two separate pamphlets ("Friendship in Christ" and "Detaching with Love"). We can summarize St. Teresa's teaching here by saying that, as Gospel living deepens, our prayer life deepens-in direct proportion. Let us take a look at the prayer Jesus gave us: the Our Father.

The first three petitions have to do with God and His glory. The second three have to do with our needs and necessities. It is only when God is given His proper place in our lives that all things fall into their proper places. Prayer must never be an attempt to bend the will of God to our desires.

This is what Step Eleven stresses: "Praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry it out." God is all knowing and all loving, aware of all our needs, even before we pray. Prayer, then, is communication with Him Whom, we know, loves us; it is a seeking of His grace in order to know and do His will.

If something has become deeply united with your soul, you should not only regard it as your possession in this life, but believe that it will accompany you into the life to come. If it is something good, rejoice and give thanks to God in your mind; if it is something bad, grieve and sigh, and strive to free yourself from it while you are still in the body. St. Isaac of Syria

The second part of the "Our Father"-which deals with our needs and necessities-is a beautifully constructed unity dealing with the three essential needs of man and the three spheres of time within which man lives. First, it asks for bread-what is necessary for the maintenance of life (especially the Eucharist)-and thereby brings the present to the throne of God.

It then asks for forgiveness, thereby bringing the past into the presence of God and His forgiving grace. Third, it asks for help in temptation, thereby committing

the future to God's providential love. The Lord's Prayer keeps us focused on what is essential in our relationship with God and what the important issues are in our spiritual lives, for:

Anger is not getting my way in the present, Resentment is not getting my way in the past and Fear is not getting my way in the future.

Thus, we are taught by the Lord to commend the present, the past, and the future to God's love, to His mercy, to His will.

Three Stages of the Spiritual Life

Classic Christian spirituality delineates three stages of the spiritual life: the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way. We will take a brief look at these stages.

Obviously, the name "purgative" suggests purgation or purification, which is exactly what this stage is about (and what purgatory is about)-a stage in the soul's journey where it is purified of all that keeps it from seeing what is True and from being united with Love. Our goal, the reason for our being, is union with God who is love. All human relationships, including marriage, are meant to strengthen our relationship with God Himself. Christian spiritual writers note that goodness as such does not consist in what one feels. A person can "feel good" that God loves him, and "feel good" that God has revealed Himself to him, but such a person can be deluded, as with the Pharisees. No matter how sublime may be one's feelings of God, goodness does not reside there but, rather, in good things that one does not necessarily feel good about: like humility, contempt for adulation, renunciation of selfishness, etc. The virtue of humility, for example, confers grace and dignity on the soul, but acquiring this virtue may not feel so good!

To accomplish his goals better, the Devil (the Master of Deceit) attempts to get people attached to what is delightful in things relative to God so that the person pays more attention to the delightful feeling rather than to God Himself and doing His will. If a person can suffer and still love, then he is free from the power of the Devil. And so in our life of prayer, God draws us into a purgative dryness to wean us from our dependency on how it feels in order to serve God, Who is love. Thus purified, we begin to see straight and our union with God deepens because Gospel living deepens. This prepares us for our apostolic mission: we are ready to reveal His power to others, Step Twelve.

Step Twelve

A Spiritual Awakening



HAVING HAD A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AS A RESULT OF THESE STEPS, WE TRIED TO CARRY THIS MESSAGE TO OTHERS AND TO PRACTICE THESE PRINCIPLES IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS.

The Calling of the First Disciples

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once, they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4:18-20

The Christian life is essentially missionary, as the above quote makes clear. Jesus came that we may have life, and have it to the full. The attainment of this fullness of life necessarily grows out of our relationships with other people, for we were created in the image of God and God is not solitude enclosed upon itself, but a trinity of persons. "It is not good for man to be alone" for that very reason. A person is someone who, by nature, is meant to exist in relationship to other persons. Our defects of character manifest themselves in our relations with others; therefore, healing has to come about in a social context, without the false support of drugs, alcohol, or some other debilitating substitute. The disturbed personality is the one that is incapable of getting along. Restoration to wholeness is seen in our social relationships.

To maintain sobriety, the founders of AA realized that they needed, not only to meet together, but to have an apostolate. They had to reach out to those who still suffered in order to maintain their own sobriety and to grow spiritually. They had to become fishers of men," so to speak. In an analogous sense, then, we could say that Step Twelve was a call to become a missionary of the good news. It was a call to witness to others the legacy of the Steps. This is the witness of recovering persons who share their experience, strength, and hope in 12-step meetings and reach out to those who still suffer.

In Giving We Receive

Through a conscious decision of our own, we attained the unfolding of the supernatural life we received in baptism by living and working the principles set forth in Steps 1-11. Having established the center of our personality in God, we experienced a spiritual awakening which caused us to view all things, however painful, as a pathway to peace, as part of His plan. The maturity we attained by working those Steps in conjunction with our Christian faith enabled us to realize in a practical way the words spoken by the Lord to His followers, "He who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). What does He mean: "for my sake" but for the sake of truth and goodness, which are the attributes of God Himself. It is this mystery of dying and awakening to life again that is experienced as a spiritual awakening. This awakening places us in a new state of consciousness whereby we view everything in a perspective centered on God and His providential care.

As Christians we know that in order to receive we must first give. Step 12 is another opportunity to practice the fullness of the Christian life by sharing our recovery (from the effects of sin in our lives) with those who still suffer, and by that communal sharing, our growth is deepened because Christian life, i.e. a spiritually healthy life, presupposes giving. The prayer of Saint Francis focuses on this truth:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to
be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

This is the truth that the founders of AA learned the hard way, but once they grasped it, they went out as missionaries to find those who still suffered from the disease of alcoholism and share with them reason for their hope. Their own lives were enriched by the very sharing of their story with fellow “tax collectors and sinners.” The founders of AA needed to be of service if they were to protect their sobriety. This was at the very heart of the Christian message: “I will make you fishers of men.”

The Monarch Butterfly


When we go through the Steps for the first time, some of us tend to interpret Step 12 from our as yet unrecovered eyes. We see family members and/or friends as in dire need of the Steps, and our eagerness to share what we’ve learned is meant for their conversion. “Boy, do they need the steps!” we think.

One day someone in recovery was at a retreat down near Monterey, California. It turned out to be the place where monarch butterflies migrate. The mild winters of the California coast are a perfect haven from the harsh cold weather in our country’s interior. Monarchs take advantage of this climate and use the same overwintering sites year after year. Going out in the early afternoon, our 12-step retreatant noticed one of the butterflies struggling to emerge from its chrysalis. Worried about its efforts, she decided to aid it along and so opened the cocoon. The butterfly fell to the ground dead! She failed to realize that the struggle to emerge from the cocoon was necessary for the butterfly’s growth and survival. Step Twelve is not about freeing butterflies. It’s not about doing for others what they should and could do for themselves. Someone once said, example is not the best way to influence others; it’s the only way.

Love is not love which does not sweeter live for having something dreadful to forgive. Coventry Patmore

Any attempt to force others to change means that in truth we have not grasped the message of personal conversion. No change in others can be forced. The spirit of Step Twelve can be seen in the following prayer of Cardinal Newman:

Dear Jesus, help us to spread Your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with Your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that all our lives may only be a radiance of Yours. Shine through us and be so in us that every person we should come in contact with may feel Your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus. Stay with us and then we shall begin to shine as You shine, so to shine as to be a light to others. The light, Jesus, will be all from You. None of it will be ours; it will be you shining on others through us. Let us thus praise you in the way you love best, by shining



We do the works, but God works in us the doing of the works. St. Augustine (5th Century).

God calls those whom He deigns to call, and whom He wills to make religious. St. Ambrose (4th Century)

Those who wish to live happily and in perfect fidelity, must accustom themselves to live according to reason, rule, and obedience, not according to their own inclinations. St. Francis de Sales (17th Century)


To love God in sugar-little children would do as much; but to love Him in wormwood, that is the test of our fidelity. St. Francis de Sales (17th Century)

For the flesh is not life to itself, but the soul is the life of the flesh. The soul is not life to itself, but God is the life of the soul.... And if the soul live after God, then does the flesh live rightly after the soul. Grace is given or offered to all, but in odd ways. We cannot judge. Fortunately it is not our business just now, Our business is on the contrary, not to judge, and we will not be judged.
Abbot Chapman (20th Century)

He who stays not in his littleness, loses his greatness.
St. Francis de Sales (17th Century)

Nothing is more suspicious in a man who seems holy, than an impatient desire to reform other men.
Thomas Merton (20th Century)

Success makes us acquaintance, but only misfortune gives us friendship.
Ronald Knox (20th Century)



on those around us. Let us preach You without preaching: not by words, but by our example by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear for You.

When people observe a radical change in our own behavior, they are more likely to ask the reason for our improvement. It is then that we can share our experience, strength, and hope. Otherwise, our “helpfulness” actually harms others, as with the monarch butterfly. Our solutions are only superficial when our lives have not been grounded in the Steps. When they are so grounded, we don’t seek to fix others. We realize what they need is healing.

One of the great influences on the beginning members of AA was Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, the Episcopal Rector at Calvary Church in New York. He was a man of great integrity. In the following quote he recognizes the benefit that comes from those who have already dealt in depth with their own issues. He realized from experience that only then could they be of real service to others:

If I was to come up against a crying need in human lives and have an answer for that need, the needs of my own life must be met first, down deep where the world does not see. You can’t give what you haven’t got. It struck me that too many people were missed entirely by good souls who helped superficially with good advice, sympathy, and money. I had had help like this, and it had never cured me, and I knew such things never cured anybody else. The people who did the most for me were the ones who cared enough to give themselves, their inner lives and experiences, and helped me to face my own true self and carried me through to a solution. There is all the difference in the world.

This is the true spirit of Step 12-giving to others what we ourselves have received. Working with newcomers can be a rewarding experience and it protects our own growth, for it is a principle of the spiritual life that the measure we measure out is the measure that comes back to us (cf. Luke 6:38). On the other hand, inasmuch as a person is locked in on himself, concerned only with his own self, he becomes spiritually poorer, narrower, and dry. The supernatural life does not expand automatically without our cooperation. When we cooperate with grace by reaching out to others, as Christ would have us, the supernatural life unfolds. “It is in giving that we receive, in loving that we are loved, in understanding that we are understood, in forgiving that we are forgiven.” The prayer of St. Francis is the call to avail ourselves of God’s love for us by loving and serving others, as He would have us. This is the maturity of Christian love.

Those who have done serious work on the Steps have become convinced that self was what had defeated them. We saw resentment as the number one offender, seconded by self-pity. Once we dealt with these spiritual maladies, we straightened out mentally. This placed us in a position to be of service to others stuck in the same hole we were once in. Part and parcel of the Christian vocation is witnessing to the truth of the Gospel, but not by our words purely and simply, but by our actions which always speak louder than words. This is what Cardinal Newman’s prayer stresses. However, we can’t give what we don’t have.

It is a greater act to restore than to create, to bring the disobedient will back to obedience than to will it into existence, to reconcile enemies than to create worshippers, to redeem than to make.

R.H. Brown

If the first of the greatest commandments is embraced, then we can live the second: loving my neighbor as myself. But if there is no embracing of the fact that I am loved by God, defects, and all, I won’t be able to love my neighbor, defects and all. Such “love” is in fact false. I may think I am loving but in reality true love

is not what I'm offering. Something else is operative in my behavior: the need to please, the fear of conflict, confusing being needed with being loved, etc. In the Dialogues of St. Catherine, the Lord says to St. Catherine:

Love for others is drawn from my love, that is, from the knowledge, the soul has gained by coming to know himself and my goodness to him, which made him see that I love him unspeakably much. So he loves every person with the same love he sees himself loved with, and that is why the soul, as soon as he comes to know me, reaches out to love his neighbors

In our 12-step context, this means a spiritual awakening that enlightens my mind as to the lovableness of my neighbor and urges me to share my experience, strength, and hope. No longer blinded by my need to have things my way ("the right way"), I know, for example, that the driver with rage is suffering, that he is insecure, and now I know no judgment but rather I reach out to love my neighbor by my understanding love because I, too, was once a "slave in the land of Egypt" and Christ set me free by introducing me to the spiritual principles found in these steps. Now I'm capable of witnessing to the truth by putting those principles into living action.

There is a subtle difference here between the need to control and change others and carrying this message to others. It is the difference between help and interference which, before my spiritual awakening, I would be blind to.

Wounded Healers

In using broken people to reach others, Jesus continues to do what He did when He chose the twelve apostles—twelve broken men, full of empty promises and betrayals, but who, after a spiritual awakening in experiencing His crucified love, were able to bring the message to a broken world in a relatively short time. The success of their apostolate as fishers of men lay, not in hiding their own inadequacies (if they did, we would not read about them in the Gospels they wrote), but in revealing what Christ's grace had done for them in their weaknesses. They led from those weaknesses and called a broken people to that same conversion. Those who longed for a way out heard the message. Such was the experience of Saint Cyprian, who exclaimed:

When I had drunk of the Spirit from Heaven, and the second birth had restored me so as to make me a new man, then immediately in a marvelous manner doubts began to be resolved, closed doors to be opened, dark places to be light; what before was difficult now seemed easy.

It was this witness—the witness of seeing men and women happy who had been unhappy, victorious who had been defeated, living by a rule of life who had been aimless, serene who had been downtrodden—that contributed to the conversion of so many and to the rapid growth of the Church. To this same spiritual awakening, we are called by living and working Steps 1-11. Then with Step 12 we, too, become fishers of men.

Twelve Step Series

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