

Legion of Mary Acies at St. Michael's Abbey – 4 March 2017

(Lk5:27-32) For most of us, baptism was a lifetime ago. The road leading to the present day was filled with many doubts and anxieties, faults and failings, but the way to journey's end, to the summit of perfection, may seem immeasurably more difficult. Time and again we seem to confess the same sins. Sometimes it seems like we're getting nowhere fast – or even going backwards. Thomas a Kempis put it this way: *"If each year should see one fault rooted out from us, we would go quickly on to perfection. But on the contrary, we often feel that we were better and holier in the beginning of our conversion than after many years of profession. Zeal and progress ought to increase day by day; yet now it seems a great thing if one is able to retain some portion of his first ardor."* (Imitation of Christ, 1.11.5) Faced with this discouraging state of affairs, you might have wondered if there isn't, after all, an easier way, some shortcut to perfection. If so, rest assured, you are in good company! The saints themselves have been preoccupied with this same question.

Two saints in particular have indeed discovered shortcuts to holiness. They are St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Louis de Montfort. Here's what St. Therese wrote: *"I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am, with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new. We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway to perfection... The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather had to remain little and become this more and more."* (Story of a Soul, 10)

Listen now to what St. Louis de Montfort wrote: *"Just as in nature there are secrets enabling us to do certain natural things quickly, easily and at little cost, so in the spiritual life there are secrets which enable us to perform works rapidly, smoothly and with facility. Such works are, for example, emptying ourselves of self-love, filling ourselves with God, and attaining perfection. The devotion that I propose to explain is one of these secrets of grace, for it is unknown to most Christians. Only a few devout people know of it and it is practiced and appreciated by fewer still."* (True Devotion, 82)

These two shortcuts amount to one and the same thing, namely: becoming a child in spirit, with this subtle difference: St. Therese would have us strive to become a better child of God our Father, while St. Louis de Montfort would have us strive to become a better child of Mary, our Mother. No one has God as Father who does not also have Mary as mother. Therefore, we're talking about one and the same child here, so these two shortcuts are really two sides of the same coin. We become God's children at baptism inasmuch as we then become Jesus, who is God's Son. We become members of His Body. My hand is Fr. Theodore, even as my head is also me. We, members of Christ's body, must likewise be Jesus even as the head of the body is Jesus. Since the head and members of one body must have the same father and mother, we not only receive Jesus' Father as our own at baptism, we also receive Jesus' mother as our own at the same time. This explains why

baptism is profoundly Marian. The child that each of us becomes at baptism is both child of God and child of Mary. The two shortcuts boil down to the same thing – something, moreover, that our Lord Himself recommended to us in the gospel when He said, *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Mt18:3) And again, *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."* (Mt19:14) This idea of becoming a child in spirit is one scriptural paradigm, one shortcut, to holiness. But it isn't the only one. Another one of these biblical paradigms stands out in today's gospel.

Recall that when, *"the Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"* Jesus said to them in reply, *"Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners."* If one biblical paradigm for holiness involves becoming a child in spirit, another one involves becoming a good patient of Christ, our Divine Physician.

If we are patients, what, then, is our illness? – It shouldn't be compared to a purely physical ailment. Instead, it is like an addiction, for an addiction has both a corporeal and an incorporeal part. It belongs to both body and soul, to the realms of sense and spirit. Putting it bluntly, we are addicted to creatures through an obsession whereby we appraise them inordinately – loving some too little and others too much. So, our love for creatures can be both excessive and defective. In what follows, I will concentrate on the excesses. It's not the love or enjoyment of creatures in itself that is wrong. Our Lord even commands us to love many of them. It is the disordered love of creatures that is harmful – when we love them for their own sake instead of for God's sake. Often this disorder involves making an end out of what is merely a means. Likewise, it's not the love of wine that makes someone an alcoholic. It's the disordered love thereof. An alcoholic may end up preferring wine to his job, his reputation, his wife and family. Renouncing all comfort and security, he may even end up on the street rather than deprive his addiction. All this for the sake of wine! You might be tempted to think that no one loves wine more than him, yet the temperate drinker loves drink far more than he does. Far from being a true lover of drink, the alcoholic is its slave. The same is true for the abuser of creatures. Great sinners love creatures more than they love God – indeed, even idolizing them. You might, therefore, conclude that no one could love creatures more than them, yet they are not so much true lovers of creatures as their slaves. In reality, the saint loves creatures far more than the sinner does.

An addiction blinds you on the practical level to truths that you readily accept in theory. An alcoholic knows that his wife and job are more important than wine, yet his actions betray his convictions. Likewise for one addicted to creatures. We know that our attachment to God is far more important than our attachment to creatures, yet often enough our actions betray our convictions. Our addiction to creatures may also blind us to the truth on the theoretical level. It can even lead us to lose contact with reality – the supreme reality, God Himself, through mortal sin. What is more irrational than preferring finite creatures to the infinite Creator? This is far more irrational than preferring wine to one's wife.

St. Therese's idealized child in spirit never grows up. Instead, it becomes ever more trusting, humble and childlike. Likewise, for our current paradigm. The best an addict can hope for is a complete remission. There is no cure – in our case, for concupiscence. What's more, among

addictions, our craving after creatures is the most stubborn one of them all. Forget about a cure, even remission is beyond our own power to achieve without God's help. This was explained by St. John of the Cross when he said the active night – in other words, our own effort – is not enough. We must also suffer the passive night, which is God's work within us, one which we merely endure.

Since our addiction to creatures is a foregone conclusion, our best hope lies in becoming good addicts. Before he can think about recovery, an alcoholic must humbly admit his helplessness. He stands up in front of his peers and says, "I am an alcoholic." Much to our surprise, after 30 years of sobriety, he will be even more adamant about being an alcoholic. The same is true of us. Before we can think about recovery, we must admit that we are helpless sinners. We beat our breasts during holy mass and say, "I have sinned... through my most grievous fault." Much to our surprise, even after a lifetime of prayer and good deeds, a living saint – who seemingly never sins – will be the first to admit that he is a sinner. As in the case of the alcoholic, our frank admission must also coincide with a firm resolution never again to indulge our addiction. The alcoholic's most important aid in keeping this resolution is his support group of peers, his AA meetings. Likewise, for us. We'll never achieve holiness on our own – nor will this great work be accomplished by God and me. We also need our support group of fellow sinners, better known as the Holy Roman Catholic Church. As isolated individuals, we are powerless. Praying with and for one another under Mary's mantle, we become invincible.

In order to combat addictions, doctors prescribe both medicine and therapy. But often, success is best achieved by combining the two. Christ – the Divine Doctor of our souls – does something similar with us; His medicine is the sacraments, especially frequent confession and Holy Communion. As powerful and indispensable as this medicine is, it won't produce holiness of life in us without a corresponding therapy, which St. John of the Cross called the dark night. The aridity or anguish of this night is a kind of withdrawal symptom – withdrawal not from creatures per se, since that is neither possible nor profitable, but from our inebriating abuse of them, our creature binges. This dark night can be subdivided. As I mentioned above, our own efforts at starving our addiction to creatures through penance and mortification provoke the active night, whereas the passive night is God's work within us, one which we merely endure.

Since there are two fundamental kinds of creatures that compete for our attention – corporeal ones that our bodily senses see, hear, touch, taste or smell and incorporeal ones, like fame and honor, which only our intellect can perceive – the dark night can also be further subdivided into the nights of sense and spirit respectively. When our addiction for sensible goods – things that animals can also perceive – is starved, we are talking about the dark night of sense because our sensible or bodily nature is being purified. When our addiction to incorporeal goods is starved – intangible things which only our mind can perceive – then we are talking about the dark night of the spirit since our immaterial soul is being purified.

Money is primarily an object of our intellect. True, a dog can also see it, but he has more use for a juicy bone than for gold bullion! The more money you have, the more likely it is that – in the free exchange of goods and services – your will is going to prevail over the will of others. The empowerment here of an immaterial faculty – namely, your will – is itself an immaterial good. Similarly, the more money you have, the more honor you are likely to receive from others, that is to say, the more attention you command from their intellects. Your power over an immaterial faculty

– namely, the intellects of others – is itself an immaterial, or spiritual, good. For this reason, our inordinate desire for money – which our Lord said is the root of all evil – is purified primarily during the dark night of the spirit. True, money can also be used to splurge on creature comforts. Worse still, it can be used to indulge gluttony or lust. To the extent that any of this is so, our inordinate desire for money would be purified during the dark night of sense. Withdrawal symptoms can be excruciatingly painful and the dark night of the spirit is no exception. St. John of the Cross likened the passive night of the spirit to purgatory on earth. In this context, Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, had this to say: *“A great servant of most Holy Mary, St. Grignon de Montfort, has noted explicitly that Our Lady can sweeten the pains of the spirit which her faithful servants incur. That is not to be wondered at. If Our Lady can alleviate the pains of purgatory in the other world, and shorten them for those of her dearest children who showed themselves faithful by wearing the holy scapular and by regularly fulfilling some practices of piety and penance, it should not seem incredible to us that she could, with her maternal intervention, also alleviate the pains of the mystical purgatory.”* (Union with God, 9) What must we conclude from this reliable opinion of a spiritual master? – If we must indeed endure dark night therapy, then let Mary be our therapist!

The indispensable context for this liberating withdrawal therapy is a vivid sacramental life – with daily mass as the ideal. Since the dark night is primarily a phenomenon of prayer, it stands to reason that we must devote ample time to meditation. St. Francis de Sales recommends that lay people pray at least an hour each day. Since “God helps those who help themselves,” we shouldn’t be surprised if our success in the passive night is proportioned to our generosity in the active night through penance and good works.

In our spiritual life, the trick is to love creatures in the proper proportion. This is easier said than done. For the alcoholic, sobriety is straightforward. It means absolute abstinence. In our case, however, complete abstinence from creatures is neither possible nor profitable. Our situation is more nuanced. It’s like that of overeaters, who can’t abstain completely from food lest they starve to death, but still have to avoid overindulging. Their method, like ours must be one of moderation. On the other hand, we must also be absolute by striving to starve our addiction to death. The saints – especially St. John of the Cross – speak in absolutes and so does Jesus in the gospel: *“Whoever wants to be my disciple,”* He says, *“must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* (Mt16:24) We must be both moderate and absolute at the same time! We might call this moderate absolutism. Our Blessed Mother will help us navigate this apparent contradiction even amid a torrent of temptations. To this end, it’s not enough to “diet” vis-à-vis creatures, we must “fast” instead. Dieting would pamper gluttony with savory morsels while fasting would rather feed it unsavory scraps. Dieting only deals with the symptoms, fasting directly attacks the root of gluttony. It’s not enough to mow down the weeds of vice, we must root them out entirely! Whenever this task proves unbearable, it’s good to recall how much our dear Lord suffered for love of us!

Working in our boy’s summer camp as a young seminarian, I soon discovered that homesickness is a euphemism for a small child’s all-consuming love of his mother. At this tender age, the child’s love for his father is largely mediated by his mother. This is nature’s way. Grace works similarly. Since we are Mary’s small children in spirit, she mediates our love for our heavenly Father. May our all-consuming love for Mother Mary help provoke a world-wide epidemic of heaven-sickness, with this difference: homesickness can paralyze a child at camp whereas heaven-sickness renders us even more functional here below! So be it! Amen! Our Lady of the Dark Night! Pray for us!