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THE HEALING POWER OF CONFESSION

By Fr. Garry Cappleman, O.P.

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One of the great blessings for me as a priest is hearing the confessions of the people of God. I have found that experience so deeply humbling, challenging, and spiritually enriching. Besides hearing “first time” confessions of many children and RCIA adults entering the Church, and the confessions of estranged Catholics whose last confession was over 50–70 years ago, I have also heard the confessions of those who have suffered abuse, abortion, and abandonment. As you might expect, these confessions can be very painful and traumatic.

As I encountered them over a period of time in the confessional, and when they are open to it in later spiritual direction, they gradually begin to acknowledge how much they presently suffer from toxic messages playing in their heads. Often with great difficulty, they begin to acknowledge the shaming messages they automatically repeat to themselves in their personal encounters, in their relationships with others, especially in their intimate relationships, but also in their interactions with peers in the work settings. These tapes “play” when they experience great anxiety over worrying about “what” they did “wrong” to cause adverse reactions from peers, just like they did perhaps as children when their abusive parents blamed and shamed them for real and imaginary mistakes.

As a confessor and spiritual director, it takes time, lots of patience and kindness for the penitents to begin to acknowledge these hidden messages. The messages become a deep shameful secret; a secret that they have kept even from themselves—a secret that though it feels

unbearable—is even worse to possibly acknowledge to themselves much less to another adult. Like they did as children, they fear an angry rebuke from a priest, or another person.

Speaking personally, growing up I heard my parents give me this piece of advice: “Garry, remember, if you can’t love yourself—you will never be able to love anyone else.”

Those words felt like a sword piercing my heart. I knew I did not love myself; in fact, I was so used to being abused by my parents, I hated myself. I loathed myself. I had nothing but contempt for myself. How was I ever going to be able to love myself? I felt doomed. I made no connection with my self-hate and the toxic messages I received. I thought I was a bad child.

Adult children from toxic families feel like this. Confession can become a place where they can experience a momentary cathartic relief from the guilt and shame they carry—the effect of the sacrament is healing—but unless the underlying toxic message they have internalized is identified and addressed, the relief is temporary.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I remind all penitents that they are unconditionally and unreservedly loved by Christ. I show them that Jesus delights in them, cherishes them, and

that their present struggles with sin and self-esteem are not in the least off-putting to God. And, most importantly, that they do not have to ever earn God’s love or forgiveness.

These vital messages about the unconditional love of God, that God cherishes them and delights in them have to be mirrored by the priest confessor. This requires a lot of prayer as well as consistent healthy personal boundaries. At first, these individuals may not believe that I am real, and if I am real, that I am some kind of amazing exception that unfortunately does not see them as they see themselves. But, as I continue to see them with the eyes of Christ and share this unconditional love of God, they begin to take in that “maybe” it is possible!

(Continued on page 4)



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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The First Steps on Our Spiritual Journey Part I: Purgative Way

By Fr. Ambrose Sigman, O.P.

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Everyone knows the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up Mt. Tabor and is transfigured before them. In many ways, the spiritual life reflects this story. Like the apostles, our lives are an attempt to ascend the mountain, pointing ourselves in the direction of the Lord. At the end of the journey, the ascent, we are given the vision of God, Christ suffused with the divine light and the glory of God. Origen, in the *Contra Celsum*, identified the mountain of Tabor with the contemplative life, and the apostles' ascent as being one of prayer and virtue that prepares a person for the manifestation of God's glory in the hearts of his faithful ones.

THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on Luke*, writes the following: "He went up the mountain ... to show that an earthbound mind would never be suitable for contemplation, only a mind which has spurned earthly things and gone beyond all bodily matters to stand alone in stillness beyond all the cares of this life." Such a mind comes to possess a spiritual radiance like that seen on Mt. Tabor. All journeys, every attempt to climb a mountain like Tabor, demand a certain process, a procedure. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is the same with the spiritual life. The journey of the soul has a beginning, a middle, and an end. With this in mind, we can map out the path of the spiritual journey, its beginning, what we might call the Purgative Way, the middle, the Illuminative Way, and the end, the Unitive Way, where we will be granted a vision like that of the apostles on Tabor.

Christian spirituality has as its goal the perfection of the faithful in Christ. This perfection can only be attained by a participation in the divine-human life of Christ. Therefore, the goal of spirituality is the perfection of the believer through his union with Christ. The believer is imprinted to an ever greater degree with the image of Christ, God-made-Man. This journey toward perfection begins with a process of purification and the purging of sin and vice, as well as a cultivation of the virtues. This part of the journey, then, is

called the Purgative Way. The primary means by which this purgation is achieved is a process of asceticism and prayer.

One note of warning: Christian asceticism is not a one-sided, artificial technique which by itself produces the living and mystical union with God. This false asceticism has a number of unfortunate consequences: it implies no moral condition whatsoever, it is all about temperament; ecstasy is sought for its own sake, as if it were the supreme end, an ecstasy which is sterile and degrading, a person is neither better instructed nor morally improved by it. The primary cause of this false asceticism is the erroneous idea that the human person has contained within themselves all of the necessary tools to achieve the supreme spiritual level, and that all that is required is a certain amount of training to bring these tools to light.

THE PASSIONS

The Christian tradition is quite explicit; the direct vision of God cannot be reached without the grace given by Him. This grace requires a moral perfection of the whole human nature by ceaseless divine help. God is not an object which can be conquered by clever tactics on our part. He is a Person and as such, without an initiative on His part, He cannot be known. To be worthy of this self-revelation of God, we must make ourselves worthy by being sincere and virtuous, we must purge from ourselves the passions and vices which afflict us.

Before describing the process of purging the passions, we must first understand their nature and where they come from. The passions represent the lowest level to which human nature can fall. As their name implies human beings are brought by them to a state of passivity, of slavery. The passions overcome the will, a person of the passions is a person ruled, enslaved, carried along by them. By the passions, I am referring to the traditional vices enumerated by Christian spiritual authors, summed up in the Seven Deadly Sins Tradition. These include: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride.

Another characteristic of the passions is that in them an unquenchable thirst is manifested. They represent the human person's thirst for the infinite turned in a direction in which they cannot find their satisfaction. In a way, the spirit of the human person has no limits and desires only to be filled with the infinite; yet instead of looking for that relationship with the infinite Spirit, where lays its true satisfaction, it seeks to fill itself with finite and passing objects, so it is left with nothing, and its thirst is never quenched. All the passions have their root in what the Greeks called *philautia*, self-love. This is an egotistic love of self as an autonomous and independent absolute. At its core, egotism represents a rupture with God, as a center distinct from me, from my existence. Thus, the ultimate cause of the passions is a forgetting of God.

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The passions seek to subordinate our spirit to its baser tendencies, they produce a tearing and a disorder in our souls. This effect, though, is not limited to their subject, to one person. They also create disorder in our relationships with our neighbor. Our passions often extend into the lives of others. Almost any passion tries to reduce the people around us to the inferior level of objects. The egotism and narrowness of the subject of the passions awakens, in defense and revolt, the egotism, narrowness and poverty of others. The passionate person hurts not only himself, but others as well. Thus, the passions produce and maintain chaos between people. Hence, one of the objectives of Christ in founding the Church is the reestablishment of human unity and conciliarity. Love binds people together, but the passions destroy the ties between us. They are the fermentation of interior disorder, a thick wall between us and God, a fog which clouds our vision.

THE FIRST STEP: FAITH

The first steps, then, in the spiritual life are to purify ourselves of these passions. Think of the example of a garden. To plant a proper garden, the ground must be prepared, and all the weeds and other things that would interfere must be cleared away. These weeds are the passions. This process of purification has been discussed by many spiritual authors over the centuries, and all manner of different advice and plans have been offered. The fact is that each person's process is going to be unique to them, as they come to grips with their own particular vices and struggles. There are, though, certain basic steps which are universal. These eight basic steps were detailed, for example, by Saint Maximus the Confessor in his *Liber Asceticus*.

Faith, of course, is the first step of the spiritual life. As mentioned earlier, the passions, at their root, reflect a forgetfulness of God. To counter this forgetfulness, then, demands a constant remembrance of Him, and this is faith. We cannot take any systematic action against the passions and begin the life of virtue if faith is not present in us as an impetus. Before any human virtue or effort is possible, we must first have faith. In as much as we have faith through grace, it is necessary that grace come before any good that we try to do. All our virtuous living is an unfolding of the grace of faith placed in us by God. This is not an automatic development, though, beyond our control. Rather, it is a development helped and willed by us, by all of our effort. The "efficiency" of our faith depends upon our cooperation, so that we can advance on the way of perfection.

THE SECOND STEP: FEAR OF GOD

The second stage we can call the fear of God, which, in a way, is the opposite of the fear of the world. Its purpose is to overwhelm this fear. The fear of the pain and hardships of the world makes us chase heedlessly after the pleasures of the world, and the prosperous situations we believe will protect us from future troubles. Fear of the world ties us to the world; it makes us obey it and ignore our higher obedience owed to God, given to us in faith. These excessive attractions to the forces of the world, manifested in the passionate attachments to the pleasures of the world must be overcome by a greater fear, the fear of God.

At the beginning of our spiritual lives, we are not advanced or loving enough to be attracted only by the joys which come to

us from God. The power of the world's attractions is too strong for this alone to tear us away from these passions. We must be snatched away from these attachments by an act of power, of great fear. Spiritual authors, then, speak of two kinds of fear of God, the fear of slaves born from the fear of punishments, proper to beginners; and the fear born from love, a fear afraid to offend God and be deprived of His blessings because of our great love for Him, a fear more proper to the advanced.

This beginning fear of God, while a spiritual weakness, does have a purpose, it is strong enough to tear us away from the fear of the world. Our fears about this world will pale in comparison to our fears over eternal damnation. This fear is not meant to be a permanent state and is certainly not the ideal of the spiritual life, but it has its place and an important role to play, nonetheless. The fear of sin, which attaches us to the world, is basically the fear of God. If faith first gives us evidence of the presence of God, fear causes the revelation of this evidence to grow, and we feel this growth as a force powerful enough to weaken and break the ties which chain us to the world. Thus, in the fear of God, the consciousness of an authority is revealed to us, the sense of a reality superior to us (not inferior, like the world), the consciousness of an authority we cannot disregard. We cannot do just anything; we cannot submerge ourselves in the world, because we feel the prohibition on the part of a forum to which we must give an account, namely the Judgment Seat.

THE THIRD STEP: REPENTANCE

The consequences of this faith and fear manifest themselves in repentance. This repentance for our sins must be a constant activity for us. We must live in a spirit of repentance, always asking God's help to overcome our vices and to strengthen us in our struggles. It must accompany all that we do.

A caveat must be given here, though. Repentance should not be confused with a discouraging dissatisfaction, which can be paralyzing for us. Our repentant conscience does not pronounce a critical judgment on our past actions because we cannot ever accomplish anything truly good. Instead, it judges with the deep conviction that it can also do better. Repentance expresses the thought: "It can be better." Discouragement tells us: "This is all I can do. I can't do better." Discouragement is a fatalistic and skeptical resignation. Repentance is borne up by a faith in something better.

THE FOURTH STEP: SELF-CONTROL

After the gift of faith, and learning fear and developing a spirit of repentance, we must actually begin the process of refraining from vice, of controlling our desires for the pleasures of this world. This is the fourth step, self-control. This is where things start to become individualized, depending upon the struggles of the particular individual. Each person will develop the techniques that are most helpful for them in their circumstances. Certain general aids, though, have been recommended by spiritual authors. For example, do not try to bite off more than you can chew. You must be careful not to attempt too much too soon. When we inevitably fall or make mistakes, due to our weaknesses, it becomes easy for us to fall into despair and to give up.

Just as we must be careful about our actions, and guard against falling into sinful or passionate acts, so too are

First Steps on Spiritual Journey, Part I *(Cont. from pg. 3)*

we obliged to guard our thoughts. This is one of the most important steps. It was emphasized again and again by all the great spiritual authors. Pay attention to yourself! The mind and heart are the battleground of the passions, between the good heart, through which God works, and looks toward an abyss of light and life; and the evil heart, through which the Devil works, and looks toward an abyss of darkness, and an empty, unending dissatisfaction. This is the classic trope of the angel and the demon sitting on your shoulders, trying to convince you to follow their path.

It is on the battleground of the thoughts that the primary battle is fought. It is here that our every action, for good or evil, is born. It is here that our innocent thoughts first become corrupted. One way of fighting this corruption is to dedicate our every innocent thought to Christ, or to relate it to a thought directed toward Him. This is to cultivate a state of constant remembrance of God, a constant awareness of His Presence.

THE FIFTH STEP: PATIENCE AND LONG-SUFFERING

The two previous steps, self-control and the guarding of the heart are aimed primarily at what you might call the passions of the appetite, like gluttony, lust, and avarice. The next step, patience and long-suffering, though, is aimed more at the passions of anger and dejection. Patience in the face of the troubles and problems which come to us helps us to overcome these other vices and lay the groundwork for important virtues like humility.

With the patient endurance of trials, we can go in one of two directions. We can fall into the trap of believing that it cannot be otherwise, that the trials and tribulations are somehow permanent and purposeless. This can lead to discouragement, anger, sadness, and ultimately, despair. The other direction we can go in, though, is one of hope. As we endure the trials of this life, we can begin to see also the possibility of comfort from God, if not in this world, at least in the next. God has revealed to us much about Himself, including a set of promises which He has made to those who obey Him. This includes the promise of the Resurrection and Eternal Life. We trust that if we keep our end, if we are faithful to God, He will be faithful to us, He will keep the promises that He has made to us. This is a basic definition of the theological virtue of hope.

THE SIXTH STEP: HUMILITY

The final step is that of humility. Humility is both the crown of the virtues, and in a way the ground from which all other virtues flow. When our lives become less self-centered, less focused on us, we open a space for us to focus on God and neighbor, we develop a constant remembrance of God. This humility prepares the ground for the other virtues to flourish. Humility, though, is also the crown of virtues because it sets itself against the ultimate vice, pride.

Pride seems to lift us up, while in reality it drags us down to the depths of hell, because it is the worst case of evil; so humility, which seems to lower us, carries us up to the highest steps. Humility becomes the pinnacle of the life which pursues virtue because it opens the space for love. Pride tears human nature into as many pieces as the individuals

it exists in, humility brings it together again. If pride deforms judgment and darkens the right contemplation of reality, humility reestablishes the proper view of things. Humility becomes the goal of the Purgative Way because it creates the space for the next stage, the stage of Illumination.

AIDS FOR THE JOURNEY: CONFESSION

As we walk the way of purgation there are some aids offered by the Church to help us on our journey. The first is sacramental confession, whose importance cannot be stressed enough. It is through this sacrament that God grants us in a special way the grace to overcome our sins, vices, and weaknesses. It is through regular confession that we find strength for the journey. If we truly desire spiritual perfection, we must learn how to carefully examine our consciences, and to bring to confession all those things which interfere with our relationship with God, all of the roadblocks that litter our path. This includes our regular venial sins, as well as the weaknesses which we suffer.

The other great channel of grace through which God gives us the strength to continue this struggle is through the Eucharist, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The sanctification of our soul is found in an ever-deepening union with God, a union of faith and love. One of the greatest means of this sanctification is through participation in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Too often, however, the habit of assisting at Mass degenerates into routine, and then we no longer receive from the Holy Sacrifice all the fruits that we could. Yet the Mass ought to be the most important act of our day, and in the life of the Christian, all other daily acts, especially all the other prayers and little sacrifices that we offer to God in the course of the day, should only be an accompaniment of that act. ■

Healing Power of Confession *continued from pg. 1*

Slowly, with support they begin to share the ugly and shameful messages that have haunted them and then finally begin to feel their grief and pain as they finally see that these messages were truly toxic and false. This is a huge step. It takes time. The next big step is to ask God to help them forgive themselves for believing those toxic messages. This is a necessary step because they have ruthlessly judged and condemned themselves based on these internalized messages. This is where the very deepest healing begins.

Finally, when they are ready, they begin to pray for forgiveness of the individuals who abused them. This is itself a healing process. It takes time and it requires the grace of the sacrament. It takes a long time for the grace of these prayers to sink in; the individuals begin to grow in their ability to see themselves as lovable, as deserving of being treated with dignity and respect. The full process of this healing often takes several years of graced-filled healing.

That is the power of confession and our Lord's healing presence. ■

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