



Theology Corner

Vol. 123 – December 6th, 2020

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“How Can We Grow in Holiness During Advent?”

Our previous volume on “How Does One Get to Heaven?” explained that the principle of our salvation is primarily through the merits of Jesus Christ, secondarily through the instrumentation of his Church, and lastly by our *response* to the grace obtained through the Church. This week, I would like to consider the ways in which we can grow in the grace of Christ on our journey to heaven. It is no surprise to anybody that we all struggle, in our own unique ways, in maintaining the perfect level of holiness to which we are called. It doesn't matter if you are priest, monk, nun, or lay person. All human persons regardless of vocation are universally called to the same holiness, and this universal call entails a life of deep prayer in which the human person communes with God. The fact that holiness is synonymous with communion with God tells us that it must involve an exchange of some kind. While the source of our holiness must always be God, it entails both an invitation and an acceptance of the invitation. In other words, we cannot be sanctified without receiving this sanctification from God himself as an unmerited gift, and we likewise cannot receive sanctification without an active effort to participate in the life of God in a reciprocation of love. So, the straight answer to the question of how we can grow in holiness is that we must make an active effort to reciprocate the love that God extends to us. But we need a more specific answer as to how one can go about carrying this out in practice. In the mystical tradition of the Church, the most common emphases were given to **conversion from sin, progressive purgation, and prayer**. Let us briefly examine each of these in kind.

Conversion from sin is the first and foremost priority in growing in holiness since there can be no holiness in us if we are in mortal sin. Why? Because mortal sin is a state in which a person is cut off from God. Since holiness entails a communion between us and God, it is necessary that we be in a state of grace and able to receive from the source. If you are currently in a state of mortal sin, God is calling you to reconciliation. The Sacrament of Confession is available to you every Saturday or by appointment! In addition to a conversion from mortal sin, we must also convert from venial sin since these are sins that create a tension in our relationship with God. The more that you frequent the Sacrament of Confession, the more that you will become aware of venial sin. Examinations of conscience are very helpful in this regard.

Progressive purgation is essentially a gradual process of human purification. This means a purification of the whole human person – the mind (intellect), the heart (will), our emotions, and senses. These purifications are both passive and active, meaning that they involve a reception of purification by God reaching out to us, and an active seeking out this purification by removing impediments to our holiness. We can purify our senses so that one does not find joy in the sense pleasures if they do not lead one to God. We can purify our imagination and memory by avoiding circumstances of temptation (impure thoughts, images, etc.), and even by letting go of past sins we have committed and forgiving those who have trespassed against us. The purification of the emotions is also necessary because our emotions enable us to make human responses to the holiness we are called towards, and this can only be done if we govern our emotions with reason. The intellect should be purified for the sake of living according to God's truth and this can be done by prayerfully studying the bible and reading other sacred material provided by the Church. In a similar manner, the will must be subjected to God in total submission so that it may be conformed entirely to the divine will. In order to do this, we have to purify our disordered desires of all created things. It is okay to desire created things, but we have to ensure that we direct our desires primarily toward God so that the soul may love in creatures only the goodness that leads to our true perfection.

Lastly, and most importantly, we grow in holiness through *prayer*. “Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God.” (CCC 2559). We cannot deepen our friendship with God if we do not communicate with him. In prayer, the more we communicate with God, the more that we become conscious of the presence of the Trinity within us. Our relationship deepens in both intensity and duration as we progressively respond to God's call. As a result, all of the virtues (both theological and moral) will be intensified due to this disposition and the fruits of the union with God will lead to a true living out of the Gospel. The key is to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that, “It is not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20). Let us use this time of Advent to convert from our sin, align our whole being to God, and allow him to transform us by his love as we cooperate with the movement of the Spirit toward an ongoing sanctification, and as we prepare for and remember his arrival this Christmas.