

CONFERENCE SEVEN

“UNLESS YOU DENY YOURSELVES AND TAKE UP YOUR CROSS,
YOU CANNOT BE MY DISCIPLE.”

“All other spiritual exercises are beating around the bush without self-denial” says St. John of the Cross. Self-denial is a cardinal part of the spiritual program. But it must be properly understood. We must understand what self-denial is and what it is not. In this conference I will treat of self-denial, first putting it in the context of the spiritual program of which it is a part. Then I will treat of stages of prayer, and finally of how the spiritual life applies to priests in various types of assignments.

Jesus Christ, His incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection is the way to eternal life, human fulfillment, and happiness. The priest by word and sacrament makes known this way and connects people with Jesus Christ. Just as white light put through a prism yields a rainbow of colors, so Jesus Christ understood in the Church yields a manifold way to follow Jesus and be united with Him.

We can be in His actual presence by frequenting the Eucharist and by visiting the Blessed Sacrament. We can receive His grace through the sacraments, and on a regular basis the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist where we receive Him into ourselves. We can keep in touch with Him by prayer and by good works which fulfill His will for example, by fulfilling the duties of our state of life and following His inspirations and practicing fraternal charity. We can avoid evil that leads us away from Him by self-denial. We can foster the practice of these means by reading the Scriptures and books commenting on the Scriptures, so that the word may dwell in us. This then is the five-fold spiritual program, which makes Jesus available to us and us available to Him. It is based on Scripture and the teaching of the Church. Thus, the *Constitution on the Church* of Vatican II says, “Each must share frequently in the sacraments, the Eucharist especially, and in liturgical rites. Each must apply himself constantly to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service, and the exercise of all the virtues” (No. 42).

In previous conferences we have spoken about these practices. Through them we practice all the virtues, first of all the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and then the moral virtues. And we are aided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord.

The priest who pursues the spiritual program earnestly will continue to advance in virtue and will go on increasing from grace to grace. He will also be able to teach those committed to his care how to advance in the love of Jesus and of the brethren. Thereby he will form associates who will assist him in his pastoral endeavors, or have vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Well-formed associates from his parishioners, whom the priest has helped to advance in union with Christ, can assist him in many of the parish ministries. Examples are visiting shut-ins, nursing homes, non-practicing Catholics, and the unchurched in the parish, conducting youth activities, CCD, being sponsors for RCIA, assisting the poor, the marginal, fulfilling the requirements of social justice, which is a constituent of the Gospel. The possibilities and needs are multiple.

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One might invite those interested in prayer to form a prayer and study group devoted to spiritual advancement. Guidelines for such a group are daily Mass, daily mental prayer, daily spiritual reading, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and attendance at a monthly group meeting, all adapted to their time-table and their state of life. A helpful book may be read at the meeting. The material given in these conferences, absorbed and interiorized by the priest, can be adapted to their needs. They can be helped to realize that they have the royal priesthood, and that all they do and suffer can be done and suffered for and with Jesus in love, patience, and meekness, and offered daily on the paten with the offering of the priest. They offer the sacrifice with the priest as the priest says: “Pray brothers and sisters that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.” Not only are they co-offerers with Jesus the priest, but also co-victims.

The important outcome of such a group is their sanctification. A by-product will be the service of some of them to the parish and to the Church, and vocations to religious life and to the priesthood. They need to be taught how to render service so as to make it contribute to, and not detract from, their spiritual progress.

As a layman and psychiatrist, I belonged to such a group. It was called *Sedes Sapientia*. Members were expected to participate in Mass daily and to confess frequently, to do daily spiritual reading, and a half-hour of mental prayer. Meetings were held once a month. Besides the nourishment that it provided for my vocation, a young man of this group became a diocesan priest, and a young woman a religious. Two of the lay women were exceptional in their holiness. Both died of cancer in the Dominican Hawthorne Home and in both cases, they gave no sign of pain, and preferred to suffer for the Lord without narcotics. I think I owe my perseverance in my vocation as a Trappist and priest in part, and perhaps largely, to them.

One of the elements of the spiritual program remains for our consideration in this conference: self-denial. Our Lord frequently singles this out. He says, “Unless you deny yourself and take up your cross, you cannot be my disciple.”

After Vatican Council II there was a great swing on the part of the theologians to the recognition of the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus for our salvation. F.X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R. wrote two excellent books on this subject: *The Resurrection* (more theological) and *In the Redeeming Christ* (an excellent book for spiritual reading). He pointed out that for centuries the emphasis in spirituality was on the Passion, with the neglect of the Resurrection. He noted that an exception to this was St. Thomas Aquinas who taught that we were justified both by the Passion and by the Resurrection, and that the Resurrection is the cause of our newness of life, which comes from grace (S.T. III, A2, RO3). In this St. Thomas echoed (and quoted) St. Paul: “He was delivered up for our sins and rose for our justification” (Romans 4:26).

Under the impetus of this rediscovery, as often happens, the pendulum swung, and the Passion and everything “negative” like penance, mortification, self-denial was put on the backburner. This fit in with the spirit of the times: the sexual revolution, the downgrading of authority, the putting aside of tradition and the past in favor of the present and its insights and discoveries, which of course need to be fully appreciated but not with neglect of the truth. Until about 1973, Catholic publishing and Catholic classics went down the drain, including for awhile my own book, *The Glory of Thy People: The*

Formation of Priests -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

Story of a Conversion,⁴ first published in 1948, and hence pre-Vatican II. I was in good company, because all the classics were out of favor, including the works of Therese of Lisieux, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila.

We are still recovering from the devastation wrought at that heady and exciting time. While the tide had turned a few years earlier, in 1978 Father Joseph Fessio, SJ spoke to the Dominicans of the Far Western province telling them that no good Catholic books were being published, and he was starting a company to publish them. This is the very successful Ignatius Press.

We recognize now that both the Passion and the Resurrection are the basis of our spiritual life. We include them both in the term, the Paschal Mystery. Negatives like mortification, penance, and self-denial have an essential and necessary positive effect. To live the spiritual life without mortification and self-denial is like a prizefighter entering the ring with one hand tied behind his back.

Little sacrifices that we make in relinquishing useless and curious glances, idle words, restless motion, hedonistic self-seeking, rash judgments, nourishing grievances, all these cut out the superfluous from our lives and concentrate our energies on the essential: the fulfillment of our duties, works of charity and service to others, and the retention of the spirit of devotion which comes to us especially through the sacraments and prayer. Then we are disposed to the more important mortification, which is accepting the reality of our being, our life, our situation – in short accepting reality.

By His permissive will, God accepts the action of the free will of men even when they disobey His manifest will. Having given free will, not as a token but in reality, God accepts the consequences, and we must also. It is through sin and the consequent disorders of nature, that evil and suffering come into the world, and we must accept that. We should not approve of what is evil, and when we can legitimately remove it we should. But when we cannot then there is the grace that comes with the evil to offer it in union with the redemption of Christ. We priests understand this well and in our daily Mass we offer our afflictions and sufferings, the evils we cannot remove. We must teach the laity to do likewise so that they truly participate in the Mass. To say the words is one thing, but to accept lovingly our afflictions and offer them in the Mass is another, and this pertains to participation in the Mass. Understanding this is good; putting it into practice is better.

We are ready to accept the cross and offer to do so, but often we don't recognize the affliction besetting us as a cross. We are prone to be frustrated, and frustration easily leads to anger and rebellion. The acceptance of reality and of our own reality, which is one of our greatest crosses, is a penance and mortification which should have priority in our life. It is the best of mortifications because it is not self-chosen.

The wonder of the Catholic religion is that it teaches us to profit by everything that happens. Everything has a value, a purpose. Every cloud has a silver lining, the grace to offer this adversity in union with the offering Jesus makes of His adversities in His passion and at Mass. The words of St. Paul are worth frequent repetition: "This momentary tribulation works a weight of eternal glory," and likewise the words of Scripture, "The anger of man does not work the justice of God."

⁴ Simon, Raphael. *The Glory of Thy People: The Story of a Conversion*. Preface by Fulton J. Sheen, D.D. New Hope: Remnant of Israel, 1986.

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But what is the first and foremost object of self-denial? Self-denial removes the obstacles to union with Christ, and the first of these is sin. Our Lord’s first teaching in the Gospels, taking up the teaching of St. John the Baptist, is “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Repentance removes sin which is the first object of self-denial. Quick on the heels of this obstacle are the occasions of sin: those persons, places, or things that, if we frequent them, will cause us to fall into sin. These occasions must also be removed by self-denial in order to give security in the possession of God and the life of grace.

Self-denial also removes legitimate pleasures which touch on our weaknesses in such a way as to weaken us. Finally, self-denial leads to patience in the acceptance of all that befalls us and is contrary to our will. Everything that is contrary to our will is a penance. We see then that while self-denial is negative, removing obstacles, its effect is positive giving us the fullness of the life of grace and security in pursuing it. Just as an automobile needs all its wheels in order to move, so we need all these means of the spiritual life to go forward in union with Christ and to abide in union with Him.

Besides the conscious obstacles to God’s will which self-denial removes there are also unconscious obstacles. These unconscious obstacles are the objects which depth psychiatry seeks to remove. Freud’s program was to make the unconscious conscious, so that it would no longer exercise an unhealthy influence on thought, emotions and behavior, and so that the person could make a reasonable decision with regard to the issues involved. St. Thomas also understood repression. He pointed out that the intellect is ordered to knowing the truth, which all desire, and the will is ordered to the good. Then he asked, “Is it possible to hate the truth?” Yes, he replied, if the truth is painful to us. What we hate we also turn from, and this turning from painful truth is repression. But what makes the truth painful to us? Is it not our pride? Christ then has a divine psychotherapy which we have all experienced, for we have all profited by progressive insights into ourselves. And what has permitted these painful and humiliating insights to surface in our consciousness? It is humility, the willingness to know the truth about ourselves, both good and bad. And humility in overcoming pride lessens our resistance to the truth.

But more than that -- by the revelation of Jesus Christ we recognize His unbounded mercy. His mercy led Him to create the world out of nothing and then, when the world turned against Him, led Him to redeem it and send His Spirit. Jesus said, “I came to call sinners, not the just.” And to the woman caught in adultery He said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” And also, “There is more joy in Heaven over one sinner doing penance (that is, repenting), than over ninety-nine just.” Hence, we understand that Jesus loves to exercise His mercy, and He can only do so insofar as we provide the matter of our sins. Our sins and defects acknowledged then, do not turn Him away from us, but draw Him to us. They are our drawing cards, and therefore are no longer so humiliating and painful. Hence, they become more accessible to consciousness. The spiritual life is a life in which we gain increasing self-knowledge.

The circumstances in which we are placed are not under our control in the same way that our faults and defects are. Instead of projecting blame onto others, we can recognize the extent to which our own behavior is responsible for the negative attitude and behavior of others towards us. While we cannot directly influence their thoughts of us and their behavior towards us, by removing what is obnoxious in ourselves, we can indirectly do so.

Formation of Priests -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

A person may have a very keen intelligence, and yet not apply that to an understanding of the extent to which he or she is responsible for the adverse behavior of others, or to the extent that he himself is responsible for the unfriendliness of his environment. This occurs because this person does not take into consideration the nature and effect of his behavior on others. Other people are acutely aware of the tendencies in themselves which, when expressed, create difficulties for themselves. This awareness has been called social intelligence. The advantage of social intelligence, which can be learned, is that it can change the climate in which one lives for the better. If we remove what is obnoxious to others in our behavior, we may remove the frustrations and unfriendliness which we meet. While we do not have control over the actions of others, we do have control over our behavior. By changing our behavior we can change the climate in which we live.

Now such a change in our behavior may not have an immediate effect. Others may not recognize it at first. It may take time for them to realize that we are no longer troublesome to them. This then is not our problem. But eventually this recognition will come in all probability. Thus, we learn to have interpersonal relationships in which we neither try to dominate or depend unduly on others, nor withdraw from them, but respond maturely and interact appropriately. This then completes the divine psychotherapy.

While there is an increasing interest in mysticism, there is still a carryover from the Sixties in wanting to jump into contemplation without having gone through the purgative way. Discursive meditation has an important basic place in setting a sound foundation for prayer life and spiritual life. Through it, as we have noted, we incorporate and interiorize the teaching of Christ, forming solid convictions and putting our life in order in accordance with faith and morals. This purgative way leads to the illuminative and unitive ways.

Some of the phenomena characterizing each of these ways are found in the others. For example, in the unitive way the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate more frequently. Through them the Holy Spirit moves the person. It is somewhat like a rowboat with sails. When the wind is not blowing the sails are furled, and the boat is propelled by rowing. This is the practice of the virtues, principal in the purgative and illuminative way. When the wind blows, the sail is unfurled, and the boat is propelled without the effort of the occupants. This wind is the Holy Spirit. The sails are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which the wind is caught.

On the other hand the purgative way is characterized by fight against vices. But still at times the wind of the Holy Spirit may blow, for the gifts are present to all souls in a state of grace. Indeed Leo XIII in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit states that they are necessary for salvation. There are circumstances when the soul would be endangered if it were not for the inspiration and the strength given the person by the Holy Spirit through the gifts.

So also, during the illuminative way, characterized by the practice of the virtues rather than by fighting temptations to mortal sin, it is necessary to be ready to fight against serious temptation. The fathers likened this to the Israelites who returning from captivity, began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (the practice of the virtues) while they kept their weapons on hand should the strangers in the land attack (readiness to fight temptation to serious sin).

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The transition from the purgative way to the illuminative way is, according to St. John of the Cross, the night of the senses. At this transition point discursive meditation has accomplished its work of forming deep conviction about the teaching of Christ, and the person has put his daily life in order in accordance with faith. This is where simplified prayer begins. And secretly, contemplation has started although the person is not aware of it. He receives an unfelt energy in his will to continue doing the things pleasing to God, such as fidelity in his religious practices and in his daily duties, although no longer sustained in prayer by sensible consolations. As the illuminative way unfolds, at times the person becomes aware of this contemplation as a drawing of all that he is into the presence of God.

In the unitive way, which St. John of the Cross identifies with spiritual marriage, the wills of the person and of God are in harmony and are united, the person willing what is pleasing to God in a sustained way. He is supported by a more evident contemplation, that is, by sensing that the divine love is moving him in his prayer.

St. Bernard says that a soul may be immersed in an ocean of sin and yet has reason to hope for the highest graces, the spiritual marriage, because it has a soul. We add because Jesus has won all the graces necessary, and they need only be claimed and used. In this unitive way the soul continues to make progress in love, but still practices the virtues as he did in the illuminative way, and may be subject to the temptations that he resisted in the purgative way. But it is more likely that if he falls, it will be little by little, almost imperceptibly. In the book of Revelation Jesus gives St. John a message to the people of Ephesus:

“I know your activities, your hard work, and your perseverance. I know too that you have . . . suffered in my name without growing tired. Nevertheless, I have this complaint to make: you have less love now than formerly. Think where you were before you fell; repent, and behave as you did at first, or else, if you will not repent, I shall come to you and take your lamp-stand from its place. . . . Let anyone who can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev. 2:1-6).

Hence, we must return to the fervor that we first had at our conversion, and continue growing in the love of the Lord.

Asceticism must prepare the way for and go hand and hand with mysticism. We should distinguish mystical phenomena such as visions, locutions, and revelations from mysticism per se, which is simply the experience of God in faith, and the summit of the ordinary way to God. Vatican Council II has spoken of contemplation as the embrace in faith of God. The height of mysticism is the spiritual marriage, which takes place, as we have just indicated, when the human will is completely conformed to the divine will. It is a union of wills.

The spiritual marriage is not just the acme of the spiritual life. It is itself a superior way of love to increasing union with Christ. The spiritual life is not over when the tried soul has reached the spiritual marriage. In this way, the person continues to make progress and still needs to be ready to fight temptations. Father Faber in his book *Growth in Holiness* says that he is not going to speak of the unitive way, because he has seen so many who have fallen from the sky. St. Thomas says that a person falls little by little. This is particularly true of advanced souls, who may little by little yield to pride or other temptation. St. John of the Cross says, “Some call the Bridegroom beloved,

Formation of Priests -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

whereas he is not really their beloved, because their heart is not wholly set on Him.” He also says, “A person can truthfully call God Beloved when he or she is wholly with him, does not allow his heart attachment to anything outside of him, and thereby ordinarily centers his or her mind on him.” It is important to note, that in the *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* St. John explains in the first thirteen chapters, that the kind of attachment that hinders a soul from advancing, and also from belonging wholly to Christ is a voluntary habitual fault. The above two quotations of St. John of the Cross are taken from an article by Fr. Paul Hinnebusch, OP in the *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* of April 1999 entitled “Calling God ‘Beloved.’” He adds, “Perhaps some are thinking, ‘How can I dare call Him Beloved, since my heart is not wholly given to him. I am still so full of failings and weakness. I am still so self-centered and offend him too much.’ If this is your thought reach out to him in contrition for your sins and dare to call him Beloved anyway, in the hope that He will purify your love for Him and fulfill this desire which He himself inspires. Your Beloved was nailed to a cross for your sins, and from His pierced heart He pours out His love as purifying blood.”

I will speak briefly of the different positions priests may have. The parish associate or curate, while having a certain necessary independence in the fulfillment of the duties assigned him by the pastor, should gladly exercise a filial supernatural obedience to the pastor, readily and promptly, with the conviction that in doing so he is obeying Christ. St. Paul says that all authority comes from above, and Jesus says, “He who hears you, hears me.” At the same time, in matters in which his contacts give him knowledge he may frankly say to the pastor, “I will be glad to do this, however if I do this, I foresee that such and such will happen.” If the pastor then changes his instructions, fine. If he does not, the curate should follow his pastor’s wishes, so long as in doing so there is no sin.

The pastor should give a Christ-like example to his curates, and particularly if they are fresh from the seminary. In that case, he should realize that they are assigned to him for ongoing training and the best training is through his priestly example. The pastor should remember the words of Christ, “The pagans make their importance felt, but it shall not be so with you. He who wishes to be the greatest should be the least.” That is, the pastor should cultivate fraternal relations with his associates and listen to them with patience and understanding and help them in the fulfillment of their duties while giving them the freedom necessary to properly accomplish them.

Priests who are in retirement should realize the opportunity that this has given them to contribute to the Church’s welfare by their prayer and self-sacrifice and by the daily offering of their Mass and the divine office, helping out with parish activities as their condition permits and the pastor’s desires indicate. Their usefulness may be even greater in retirement than when they were more actively engaged in the ministry.

Priests who are specialized in scholarship or service, such as psychological counseling or teaching, should realize that their spiritual progress is their most important activity, one which will give enlightenment to their specialized activities and serve the welfare of the Church and its people. They should cultivate thinking with the Church and should uphold and explain the Church’s teaching. Those who are engaged in works of social justice should keep in mind that neglect of the spiritual program of prayer, spiritual reading, self-denial, and the sacraments will lead to burn-out, as experience shows. Their ability to contribute in this necessary service will depend on their fidelity to the spiritual

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program as well as to their competence in their work. If they remain companions to Jesus during their days and nights, He will help them in their endeavors.

For all priests, no matter in what occupation they are engaged, fidelity is of paramount importance. All are chosen servants of Jesus Christ who says, “Without me you can do nothing.” Therefore, abiding in Christ is our first calling, and the key to perseverance. This is true for all but especially for us priests.



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