

Lent, II

If you're having difficulty finding out what your predominant fault is, don't give up! Keep searching! Ask God to shed light on the fault. Ask yourself, "Towards what do my ordinary inclinations tend when I get up in the morning or when I'm alone? Where do my thoughts and desires go spontaneously? What is generally the cause or source of my sadness and joy? What is the general motive of my actions – especially when I'm resisting grace, and this resistance goes on for days and leads me to omit my spiritual exercises? What temptations does the enemy send us most frequently, as if to exploit this weakness in my soul?"

Once you find the fault, and then find out what its opposite virtue is, then set about building that virtue. To do this, get a good definition of the virtue. If you need to build up the virtue of chastity in the soul, you'll need a blueprint, a plan for the construction. If you're going to build a house, don't just drop by the hardware store and buy some lumber a hammer and a box of nails – put some thought into it first and draw up a plan.

At the top of the plan should be a good definition of the virtue. Normally one can find several definitions from different saints, but these tend to harmonize.

Next, psych up and realize you're in for a fight. The predominant fault (if I may personalize it) is not going to give up its nest in the foliage of the tree of your soul (cf. my last article) without a fight. It has a particular repugnance to being unmasked and challenged, because it wishes to dominate, to reign in its small kingdom.

Now it's time to pray. Prayer is the first and most important means to overcome the fault. I mean daily prayer. And what prayers should we say?

First, let's not underestimate the Sign of the Cross. This mysterious action is part and parcel of what it means to be a Catholic. The Sacrifice of the Mass begins with it, and we should take it from the sacred liturgy and use it in daily life. It is an essential prayer of a Catholic, because we go to heaven by the Cross and by no other path. We don't trace the descent of the dove over our heads; no other sign is quite like it.

I call it mysterious for several reasons. 1) "Since our knowledge of God is limited, our language about him is equally so. We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking." (CCC I, IV, 40) 2) you've probably noticed that the words of the Sign are

grammatically incorrect; "Name" is singular, and "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" is plural. But if the priest said, "In the Names of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" to make it correct, he would commit a heresy. The Name of God refers to His essence, which is one. There cannot be more than one essence. Similar mistakes of grammar occur several times in the Mass, since the language of man will always fall short of the mystery.

The Sign of the Cross is an essential prayer of a Catholic, because we go to heaven by the Cross and by no other path. St. Patrick of Ireland made the Sign of the Cross hundreds of times a day. It must be made well; St. Bernadette of Lourdes made it so well that others, upon seeing her make it, learned much about how to pray well (she learned how to make it from the Blessed Virgin of Lourdes, so no wonder she made it so well).

What did Our Lady teach her? We don't know precisely, but I'd wager that she taught St. Bernadette to make the Sign slowly.

"St. Francis deSales said, 'Haste is the ruin of devotion.'" Peace, calm serenity, these are the true atmosphere of piety. Haste does not leave us the time to become recollected before prayer. Haste agitates, disturbs, and obscures us during prayer. Haste leaves us preoccupied, discontent, and weakened after prayer. Bl. Edward Poppe

Simple, calm, reverent Signs of the Cross throughout the day can do wonders in overcoming the pesky predominant fault. They do wonders in evangelization too, if you make it at the local pub before eating or drinking.

And if you really want to make progress, make short prayers frequently with some passion, like St. Nicholas of Flue did: "My Lord and my God! Take everything from me that hinders me from Thee! My Lord and my God! Give everything to me that will bring me to Thee! My Lord and my God! Take me from me and give me wholly to Thee."