

### Staying the Course, III

In this series of sermons, the topic to cover is so wide that much of it is not really suitable to a sermon. So with each sermon in this series will be a bulletin insert. Today's [insert](#) goes with this sermon. I hope you will take the time to read it.

When I last spoke, I was at pains to say that the first answer *we* – I mean we of OLMC – must give to the crisis in the Church is pursue union with God, by declining from evil and doing the good. I mentioned some specifics about declining from evil, but not about doing the good. What must we do?

First, get the forms right. If you want to play the sport of rugby at the #16 position, you have to learn how to tackle, how to lateral, how to manage a pop kick, a squib kick, kicking for touch, all on the run. To play well, you have to learn these basics by doing them over and over, which can be a bit dreary, even monotonous. But it is hard to think of any skill which does not require the same isn't it? That is the way we are.

The interior life is the same. Fr. Nolan spoke about these forms in his last sermon. There will be no progress in the spiritual life unless we have these forms. We need to know how to make the Sign of the Cross. We should have a blessed rosary on our persons at all times. We need holy water in our homes. We need to have our cars blessed, and so on. But all these things seem formal, even exterior don't they? Are they not the subject of ridicule by zealous, smiling televangelists who assure their audience that all they need do is to accept the Lord as their personal savior, and that we Catholics are trying to be saved by forms and works?" Well, yes, we are. To an extent. The forms come first. If you want to learn how to do anything well you need your basics, your fundamentals.

Let me relate an anecdote to reinforce this, and repeat something all your priests have said many times, since *repetitio est mater discendi*, or repetition is the mother of learning.

I was asked some time ago to give a talk to a group of high school kids preparing for confirmation, by a parish DRE or director of religious education. I told her "I don't think you want me." "No, we really want you to come." "No, I don't think you do." We went back and forth, and finally I agreed.

The talk was to be in the church, which I didn't want, but that's the way it went. I went in early to say some prayers in the front pew and the 90 or so *confirmati* came in talking loudly and laughing. I turned around to address them and then to say a prayer, but here were boys with their ball caps on all cockeyed or backwards; here is a girl putting on lipstick, here is a guy and a girl sharing a meal from Burger Queen, here is

a guy with his feet up on the pew in front of him chewing gum. The lesson I had planned to give was for that group, useless. By the way, some kids were obviously well-mannered and ready to listen, or so I thought.

So I said "Everyone outside." They were a bit confused, but did what I asked. And I slipped into a rather military mode of conduct, imitating my drill instructor. "Put away that food. Spit out that gum. Take your hands out of your pockets, put away the make-up. Now, since you don't know how to go into a Catholic Church yet, we are going to try again. I'll be behind you this time." After a little instruction they all got in and I said "Everybody outside." They were a bit irritated by this, but I said "You don't know how to genuflect yet. I'll teach you." So we practiced genuflecting and went in again, I observed them, and said "Everybody outside, you don't know how to make the Sign of the Cross yet. Some of you are just swatting gnats. That isn't a Sign of the Cross."

We came back in, I watched them and said "Everybody outside, you don't know how to sit in a church yet. You don't cross your legs and get comfortable when you are in the presence of a King; much less the King of Kings; you don't put your feet up on the kneeler. You sit up straight. Show some respect." After one hour, they did really well at coming into a church, genuflecting, making the Sign of the Cross. "Now you are ready to say a prayer." So that's all I accomplished, which wasn't very much. But with grave irreverence prayer is useless.

I am absolutely convinced that the lack of good manners in a church spells disaster for the interior life, and if the interior life is not being pursued, then everything, I mean everything is in danger, including the Rite of St. Gregory. So if you see in yourself any lack of good manners in church, from how you come in to how you sit to how you listen to the sermon, and you do nothing about it, then to some extent you are wasting the Lord's time when you come to Mass.

Now we know that the true service of God is a perfect freedom, where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. It is a freedom, not a servitude. But this is the case only of those who have long served the Master, and served Him well with good manners. At first, it *is* a kind of servitude. This is where the Prodigal Son must begin. "I am no more worthy to be called Thy son, make me as one of Thy hired servants." He said. Angels and saints in heaven are happy to do their religious duty without hesitation and with indescribable joy. As we sometimes sin almost naturally, so they obey the Lord spontaneously without thought or deliberation, in splendid, bright cheerfulness.

That is our destination; that is our goal. But at the commencement of the interior life, we must ask *What must I do?* We have a wide field of choices and we often do not know which path to take. The Church gives guidance on this, and says clearly you must go to Church on Sundays. So at first, don't excuse yourself except for a serious reason. Don't skip your rosary. Get up in the morning and make your bed and say your prayers.

This limits our efforts at first, but has the advantage of relieving the beginner of perplexity or indecision about what to do regarding the Faith. But at first, it is the most natural thing in the world to find that the doing of these forms does not make us better though we repeat them again and again. And many is the soul that does not find any pleasure in these duties, and he can hardly give his attention to them at first, so accustomed is he to receiving immediate pleasure and assurance in the pursuit of worldly acts.

The beginner then *is* like the hired servant "The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth." (Jn. 14:15) The servant is not in his lord's confidence. He is not yet a friend. He does not understand what the lord is aiming at, or why he commands this and forbids that. He does what is told him, but only *because* he was commanded. This is exactly like those who begin religious obedience. They do not see anything come of their devotions; they experience no immediate reassurance as they did from the things of this world. At best, they feel like a prodigal son in the condition of a servant. This is important to understand, because the repentant sinner might think he ought to rejoice in the Lord at once, and have high and profound experiences of prayer and devotion.

But the prodigal son knew better. He knew that he must start as a servant, and do the forms of religion. If there is any fault in this, it is not beginning the faith as a form but in *continuing* it as a form. Our clear duty is to study, to go deeper in understanding of the forms of the faith, such as the Mass, and in proportion as we understand them and then begin to love them, we will be gradually changed in heart from a servant into the sons and daughters of Almighty God. Then the forms will cease to be done from duty, and will spring from love.

And that will be the fulfillment of the great commandments, and that fulfillment will preserve the Mass, and our mortal souls.