



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

April 1986

SANCTITY

As we pursue the Christian life from day to day it is terribly easy to get bogged down in the details. Did I remember to say Morning prayer when I got up today? Do I have time to get in my meditation before supper? Should I volunteer to help out with the Church fair this year? Is my tithe up to date? I fear that I am not making much progress against my impatience when I am driving -- how can I improve there? And so on. We know that all this is important. Indeed, there is no Christian life without the details. Nevertheless, there must be more than mere details. We must not miss the forest for the trees.

We need to remind ourselves from time to time just where we are bound in the Christian life. This is especially true during Lent and immediately after. For during Lent we tend to concentrate on particular self-disciplines and can easily forget the larger situation, and after Lent we tend to forget self-discipline altogether. In both cases we need to form our Christian practice with the understanding of our basic goal in Christian life: to be made saints.

Too often we sell ourselves short. We look at our sins, the poverty of our prayer life, the apparently insuperable bad habits we have, the coolness of our love for God, and conclude that sanctity may have been possible for the saints, but not for us. We are simply not cut out for it. We are not holy enough to ever make it. So we give up on it as a goal. We settle for something rather lower as our Christian goal: being good enough that we will get into heaven eventually. We know that God will not fail us, that He will forgive us in the end, and so we presume upon that mercy to make up our defects.

The problem is that by giving up the goal that He has given us, we will fall even shorter than we otherwise would have. Being human and fallen, we will probably not quite attain our goal, and if we have accepted a low one to aim for, that does not bring us very far along. If instead we aim at sanctity, then even if we fall short, we will have come as far as possible.

More important, God calls us to be saints. He bids us to be holy as He is holy. An awesome calling! He calls us to heaven, where Jesus has gone to prepare us a place. Heaven is the intimate presence of God. Yet nothing that is not holy as God is holy can abide His presence. Thus there is nothing in heaven which is not holy as God is holy. Everything that is evil or sinful removes itself from His presence: that is the nature of God and evil. This means that if we would be in heaven, we must be holy as God is holy. Nothing less will suffice. Since we know we want to end up in heaven, then we want to be holy. If the one is possible so is the other.

But what exactly does it mean to be holy? It means, first of all, that we become little Christs. We are made in His image, and reborn as sons of God in baptism. As we grow into this, His image becomes ever clearer in us. We lose none of our individuality: that is perfected in us insofar as that is our God-given nature. As the sin is purged, and we are conformed ever more perfectly to God's calling for us (which is the same as the nature He planted in us when He made us), then we become Christ-like. His image will become clearer in us. To those in the world who can see it, something of Christ will be apparent.

Concretely, this means that our lives will reflect His. We will live in self-giving love, ready to accept the sufferings of this world as He accepted the Cross. His perfect obedience to the Father, His love for all people, His harmony with creation will all become increasingly evident in our lives. We may not notice it, for we are in the midst of things, and as we become holier we will be more sensitive to our failings. But it will be there nevertheless. We will be made by God's grace into individual and unique replicas of Christ: for He shows us what human perfection looks like. Sanctity is human perfection, as well as divine.

Sanctity also makes us most perfectly ourselves. We do not become someone else, as we sometimes fear when we begin our Christian lives. We may fear that when we are made holy we will not recognize or even like ourselves. We fear that holiness is something effete, something not quite up to our human dignity. These fears are temptations planted by our Foe. For as we become holy, we shed our sins and the residue of a lifetime of sins. But we lose nothing essential to who we are. Indeed, the whole process is one of allowing our true identity, the one God has given us, to be fulfilled by stripping away

all that is inconsistent with it. As we become Christ-like, we also become perfectly ourselves.

The other side of our goal in Christian life is the Beatific Vision: seeing God in heaven. Then we will see God face to face, whom we know now only obscurely. We will finally see the One who has made us and redeemed us -- the One we love. That love will finally be satisfied when we come into the presence of our Beloved, satisfied as we will never be on earth. That is the way He wishes it to be: that we abide forever in the intimacy of His love. So He teaches us here and now to desire that love. The desire grows as we grow as Christians. Our longing here on earth will be satisfied when we come into His presence to receive His love and to return it. Then we will know as we are known, and we will love as we are loved.

Some may well admit that all this is true -- but irrelevant. We should live our Christian lives, they say, not for the sake of the reward of heaven but simply because it is the right way to live. We shouldn't worry about what will happen then: there is enough to worry about now.

While it is true that we should not base our lives on "suffering now to be rewarded later" -- for then our hearts will not be in it -- this position misses the point. An understanding of heaven is essential for Christian life on earth. We will not understand how to live here if we do not understand where we are bound. Heaven is the end and goal of human life: it is therefore of decisive importance for how we live. For we must live now in the way that will fit us to live in heaven hereafter.

If we forget where we are bound, we will lose our bearings here. We will be apt to forget why we are doing everything -- the prayer, the discipline, the battle with sin. Unless we remember where we are bound, sooner or later, we will be tempted to give it up because it is all meaningless. Christian life has its full meaning only in relation to heaven.

In addition, by remembering that our true home is in heaven, we will be able to accept our trials and sufferings on earth. As St. Peter tells us (see I Peter 1:3-9; 4:12-14, e.g.), we are to share these with Christ, who suffered without railing against the injustice. These are our trials for the purification and strengthening of our faith, as silver is tried in the fire. If we forget this, our trials will be without meaning, and we cannot but resent them and rail against God, "Why me?"

The end -- heaven -- is the key to understanding the present. Life so often seems a puzzle, especially to those who lack Christian faith but still look honestly at the world. The vast goodness and vast evil of the world are baffling. The problem of human suffering,

so often undeserved, is insoluble apart from the understanding of our end in heaven. Some sense can be made of the world when we see the perfect man Himself suffering. His suffering then gives meaning to our suffering: we, sharing His suffering, are prepared to share also His resurrected life in heaven.

One of the dangers of Christian life is self-preoccupation, where we get so wrapped up in ourselves and overwhelmed with our mundane tasks and efforts. This danger can be largely avoided by a proper appreciation of the goal of our lives in heaven. For then we are not in this alone. We are not in the position of a solitary traveller wandering through difficult country without direction and never meeting another person. We are not in fact alone, and our life has direction. That direction is heaven. If we can lift our eyes from our present difficulty to see where we are bound, we will also see that our journey is not a solitary one. Jesus has made the journey first (the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, as Hebrews tells us), and now makes it at our side. Seeing the present in terms of the hereafter, we see ourselves not as alone, but as in God who leads us now and will be with us in heaven.

Undoubtedly the present has its tensions. This is only to be expected for those of us who have one foot in heaven. We are sojourners here. This does not demean creation or life on earth. Rather it exalts it by giving it transcendent significance. What happens here affects what happens in heaven. Earthly decisions do not perish with the transitory world, but bear fruit in heaven. The world is not bad, to be rejected and escaped. It is just insufficient by itself. It must be seen in terms of heaven: then it can be fully understood.

So we need from time to time to raise our eyes to heaven and see where we are bound. This will help keep us on course. We must desire heaven, and the holiness that goes along with heaven. We must be ready to shape our lives accordingly. God will give us a foretaste of heaven, in our prayer sometimes, or in the Holy Communion. This will refresh us as we return to the daily grind of Christian life (for so it seems sometimes). Then we will know in our hearts as well as in our minds that the present trials are nothing compared to the glory that shall be ours when our Saviour returns.

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