

Being Catholic Today

Fr. Laurence Kriegshauser
(frlaurence@priory.org)

Lecture 3: Prayer and the Spiritual Warfare

The basic question being addressed on these evenings is how can we renew our own understanding and love of Catholicism so as to show others its attractiveness? How can we help people understand Catholicism as the offer of abundant life, genuine life, and of joy? I am presenting some ideas, but they are to challenge your own thinking, so that together we can work to a better evangelization of our relatives, friends, and contemporaries. I value your contributions on what I have said, your questions, disagreements, alternative insights—this is a common endeavor. I'd especially like your feedback on the following points from the first two talks.

Our religion is rooted in the personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Faith is an acceptance of him as Lord and Savior. Do you accept this as the basis of our faith, or is the basis something else? I recently heard the expression “automatic Catholic,” that is, a church-going Catholic who's never thought much about it but considers himself a Catholic. Other Catholics don't know what you mean when you talk about a relationship or encounter with Christ. Yet Scripture presents us with folks who were amazed and joyful at the experience of Christ or the Good News about him preached by the apostles, and who freely chose to acknowledge him as Lord in faith and baptism. Is this not a pattern for believers down the ages? Is not some personal acceptance of Christ, a Yes to him, necessary for being Catholic? What are your views? What different forms might the encounter with Christ take? Is it

possible that the Church provides a structure for learning about God so that in the course of life's experiences a person may come to internalize what at first was merely external?

Secondly, why would a person stay outside the Church when it offers eternal life, healing from sin, the experience of being loved by one's Creator, genuine joy, and eternal union with God and all mankind? Do people not feel the need for these things, see them as gifts satisfying their deepest yearnings? Why would a person raised Catholic drive his parent to Mass, go home, and pick him up at the end of Mass, without feeling that he was missing something? Has our affluence smothered any sense of need?

Thirdly, do we agree on the relative strengths of Protestant and Catholic Christianity?

Do not Protestant Churches attract people with:

- dynamic and relevant preaching
- multiple programs for different ages and groups
- a warm welcome at the door and an outreach to neighbors in trouble
- an emphasis on Jesus as one's personal savior and the ability to talk about that
- professional music at services, or emotional singing
- love of Scripture?

Do Catholic offer complementary gifts like:

- the assurance that God himself touches us in ordinary signs (sacraments)
- a line of authority going back to the apostles whom Jesus promised to be with
- union with the worldwide Body of Christ
- a certain comfortableness with sin (since we trust not in our virtue but on the forgiving presence of Christ in the Church)

- a long tradition of mystical prayer
- the Virgin Mother of God as friend, intercessor, and exemplar
- the saints as companions, examples, teachers, and fellow-worshippers
- a universal teaching voice that can challenge the vagaries of culture
- extensive charitable works and institutions (schools, hospitals, orphanages)
- the witness of consecrated celibacy?

Would it be fair to say that the existence of these Christian values found in different churches underlines the need for us to be one? Do we need one another?

Fourthly, do you relate to the three Persons of the Trinity in the ways mentioned in the New Testament (e.g., Romans 8), the Catechism, the definition of the Church by Saint Cyprian, the image of C. S. Lewis? Do you relate to the Father as one above or in front of you, to Christ as a brother standing at your side, and to the Spirit as a power dwelling within you, uniting you to the Father and the Son in the Church? What do you think of God's plan as a Quaternity?

Fifthly, how do you understand the statement "Outside the Church no salvation"? What does it mean? What does it not mean? What criteria are there for salvation outside of explicit membership in the Church? Does this mean we don't need to try to bring people into the Catholic Church? Why ought people to be Catholic? Does it offer a fullness?

Sixthly, does the term "salvation" have any meaning for people today?

[discussion of these]

Tonight's topic follows directly on from that of the previous lecture. If Catholicism is communion with the three Persons of the Trinity, a share in the divine nature itself, why do Catholics not look divine? We don't always show the face of Christ or the joy of the Holy Spirit. Have we really been divinized, or is that just a figure of speech, wishful thinking, a delusion, religious talk? We all fall short of our vocation to allow ourselves to be transformed by the love of Jesus. And it is a vocation: what was Jesus' commandment the night before he died: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). And how did he love us? He immediately spelled it out: "Greater love than this no man has than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), and this is what he proceeded to do the next day on the Cross. He is calling us, commanding us, to show that kind of love—that is our vocation. His humbling himself to wash the feet of his disciples was a sign of his laying down his life for us and an example for us to follow. We need to grow into the readiness to give our life for our friends, which for Jesus included even our enemies, whom he told us to love as God loves them, even when they do not love us in return (Matt 5:44-46).

Is the Lord asking the impossible? That would be true only if he did not give us the power to fulfill the command. But on the very same occasion that he gave the new commandment, he gave us the means of assimilating his life, his very own self, his holiness, his love, in the Eucharist. By eating his body and drinking his blood we are made one with him, we put on his attitudes and mind. In Jesus' own words: "As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me" (John 6:57). If we are living by the life of Jesus freely given, we will be living out his love in the practical circumstances of our daily lives. We will be icons of

Christ's love. That is our great dignity and joy as Christians, to live daily the charity of Christ in our own particular context. It is not a burden but the free exercise of our new life as a child of God. The Law enjoined on us is not the law of a stern taskmaster or punishing judge but the gift of one who shares his divine life with us and shows us our true dignity.

We have all experienced the joy of living by that love, the joy of giving and serving. But don't we sometimes experience a resistance to the demands of that love, a sluggishness in responding to it, a preference for our own comfort, or glory, or control. We say with Saint Paul, "In my inmost self I dearly love God's Law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! In short it is I who with my reason serve the law of God, and no less I who serve in my unspiritual self the law of sin" (Rom 7:22-25). That is the classic statement of our common experience of sin. Something in us despite our best intentions and resolutions does not want fully to surrender to God's love poured into our hearts. We say with the Israelites in Jeremiah, "I will not serve" (Jer 2:20). This refusal of love wars against the new life given us by Christ, and Christ alone can overcome it. The question then becomes: how can we use the power of Christ's life that comes to us through the sacraments to tame our rebelliousness and bring our lives into full conformity with the Son of God and the Father's will? How can we become responsive to the power of the Holy Spirit in us?

Let us look again at the passage from Romans. The translation was that of the Jerusalem Bible, in which Paul calls the

part of himself that wars against the law of God his "unspiritual self." That accurately represents Paul's thought, but the actual word he used is "my flesh" – "in my flesh I serve the law of sin." Elsewhere he says "the flesh lusts against the spirit" where the JB has "Self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit" (Gal 5:17). The JB is trying to avoid a possible misunderstanding of the word "flesh" that would make it identical with the body and suggest that the body is bad. But Catholicism teaches the goodness of the body, created by God, taken up by the Son of God, and now glorified at the right hand of the Father. Through his risen body Christ is transforming our lowly bodies into copies of his glorious body (Phil 3:20-21). For Catholics salvation comes to us in a bodily way and issues in the resurrection of the body. If the Word became flesh and flesh is good, how can the flesh lust against the Spirit?

The Hebrews did not, like the Greeks, think of man as a composite of body and soul. For them man was a unity: a being open to the world through his flesh, prone to weakness and decay, but animated by a spirit open to God. When the New Testament refers to the "flesh" as a principle of evil, it is referring to the whole man as dominated by the flesh, the weakest part of him. Flesh is "the concrete human person in all his fragility, mortality, and proclivity to sin" (J. Meier). "Because it is weak, flesh easily comes to stand for moral weakness. It is that aspect of a person that is most easily invaded by sin and in which sin most readily establishes a bridge-head" (C. Moule). To live "according to the flesh" means to live "in a purely secular way, without reference to God, self-centredly, selfishly" (Ibid). Flesh is "human existence self-enclosed, self-regarding and hostile to God" (B. Byrne). "To be 'in the flesh' means to be turned in upon oneself, to rely on one's own resources to the rejection of the power of God. To be 'in the Spirit' means to be

open to the pervasive power of God in human life” (D. Harrington). Briefly “flesh” is selfishness (Moule), the human opposition to God (C. Osiek), the refusal to submit to God.

Yet it is precisely in that voluntary subjection of ourselves to God that man finds his fulfillment. We are creatures, dependent on God for existence itself and everything else we have. As Saint Paul says, “What do you have that you have not received? And if you have received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor 4:7). All that is asked of us is to acknowledge freely that dependence: to accept his gifts gratefully and try to conform to his plan for us, not preferring our own way as did Adam and Eve. According to St. Thomas, original sin consisted in the “withdrawal of the subjection of the human mind to God” (*ST Ia IIae 82, 2*) a refusal to “cleave to God” (*IIa IIae 104, 3*). “Insofar as we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to him, and in this consists its perfection” (*IIa IIae 81, 7*). In heaven man will be “totally submitted to God” (*Ia IIae 68, 6*).

The basic attitude of sin can therefore be described in several ways: it is a refusal to submit to God, a rebellion against him, a refusal of love, a preferring of self to God, a worship of the creature rather than the Creator, a lie that denies our dependence on God. All these elements of sin are found in the Bible. It is this human defiance of God which the Lord came to heal by his obedience even to death on a cross. He has reestablished the right relation between creature and creator in making us children of God living with his Spirit. All that remains after his sacrifice is that we actively appropriate this new humanity which he won for us. That is the chief business of our life on earth: to cooperate with our new life in putting to death the old self, the sinful urges that remain in us.

The first thing in this ongoing program is to realize by faith that the power to live a holy life is already within us. We don’t have to achieve it by superhuman efforts or a relentless striving for perfection. It is a free gift which floods us when we say Yes to Christ by faith and receive him in the sacraments. We start with all we need, the infinite power of grace. That is why Saint Paul called Christians “saints” –they have been consecrated by God.

The second step is to be constantly mindful of that new life within us. Saint Paul and Jesus himself told us to “pray always” (Luke 18:1, 1 Thess 5:17). They meant that we should be continually aware of our dignity as children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Then when we experience the “old man” or the “old self” asserting in us his rebelliousness, pushing us to seek our own way against the way of God, we can call upon the name of the Lord, call on him urgently as the disciples did in the boat when he was asleep, call on him to rise and help us, to fight against the enemies within, enemies which the ancient monks referred to as demons. This spiritual alertness is called keeping watch over the heart. It means discerning the attack of evil forces or disordered passions with a view to enlisting God’s help against them. The early monks reduced these sinful temptations to eight principal vices: they are gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, despondency, sloth, vainglory, and pride. Saint Gregory the Great changed the number to seven by removing despondency and substituting envy for vainglory, leaving us with what we know as the seven capital sins. They are a convenient list for identifying the various areas in which sin makes itself felt. Behind each of them is a common preferring of self to God.

Spiritual growth is a warfare against the demons. The ancient monks forged ways of combating the inner demons by

constant prayer, understood not just as remembering the loving presence of God but actively summoning his aid when sin attacked. For John Cassian, the great Western spiritual writer, the monk's continual prayer should be the verse from the psalms: "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me." In the East a different formula was preferred, known as the Jesus prayer, a combination of several passages in the New Testament: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." The primary source of this prayer is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: the latter visits the temple but stays afar off and not raising his eyes to heaven says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). The first formula concentrates on the need for help, the second on the need for mercy. Both are fundamental spiritual needs, and prayers for both are on the lips of people in the Gospel who cried out to Jesus in their need. We need, on the one hand, the blotting out of our sin and the correcting of our vices, and on the other hand, the strength to obey God's Law and carry out his will: a power against and a power for. Probably our brief darts of prayer will be a mixture of both petitions: "Lord, help! Jesus, mercy!"

The practice of this prayer is thus a warfare. Prayer becomes the weapon that defeats sin and establishes virtue. Here is how the ancient monks explained it: "When you notice thoughts arising and accosting you, do not look at them, even if they are not bad; but keeping the mind firmly in the heart, call to Lord Jesus and you will soon sweep away the thoughts and drive out the instigators—the demons—invisibly scorching and flogging them with this Divine Name. Thus teaches John of the Ladder, saying: with the name of Jesus flog the foes, for there is no surer weapon against them, either on earth or in heaven" (Gregory of Sinai in *Philokalia: The Art of Prayer*). Or again with different imagery: "As sticks are thrown into the fire and are

unable to resist the power of the fire but are burned up at once, so also the demons, seeking to wage war against the man who has received the Spirit, are burned up and consumed by the divine power of the fire, provided only that the man is always clinging to the Lord and has trust and hope in him. And even if the demons are strong as mighty mountains, they are burned up by prayer, like wax by fire" (Macarius, Homily 43).

Another text illustrates this warfare with respect to the sin of pride: "As soon as grace notices a trace of self-opinion beginning to appear in a man's thoughts, as soon as it sees that a man begins to think highly of himself, it immediately allows temptations to grow and gain strength against him, until he realizes his weakness, and runs to clutch God in all humility. Thus a man comes to the measure of manhood by perfect faith and trust in the Son of God, and is elevated to love. For the wonderful love of God for man becomes manifest when he finds himself in circumstances which destroy his hope. It is here that God shows his power in saving him. For man can never learn the power of God in ease and freedom..." (Isaac of Nineveh).

All these descriptions of the spiritual combat are simply developments of what is said in Scripture. Saint Peter warned the first Christians: "Be calm but vigilant, because your enemy the devil is prowling round like a roaring lion, looking for someone to eat. Stand up to him, strong in faith..." (1 Pet 5:8-9). But the classic text is the end of Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians: "Finally, grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of his power. Put God's armor on so as to be able to resist the devil's tactics. For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the Sovereignities and the Powers who originate the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens. That is why you must rely on

God's armor, or you will not be able to put up any resistance when the worst happens, or have enough resources to hold your ground. So stand your ground, with truth buckled round your waist, and integrity for a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to put out the burning arrows of the evil one. And then you must accept salvation from God to be your helmet and receive the word of God from the Spirit to use as a sword. Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion" (Eph 6:10-18). The enemy is the sinful impulses in the old man, the false self, played on by the demons who seek to drag us down with them. The only effective weapons against them are faith, prayer—in particular the invocation of the name of Jesus, the word of God, and the sacraments. Through prayer we gain access to our true self abiding beneath the powerful urges of temptations.

Thus the life of holiness, which is simply the flowering of the Christ life within us, is both our doing and God's doing. It is primarily God's doing because without Christ we can do nothing, like a branch cut off from the vine, but we must cooperate with his grace within us, put it to work, call upon it. So our salvation becomes a work of synergy, a working together of God and man. Saint Paul can say in the Letter to the Philippians: "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling," and then go on immediately to say, "It is God, for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you" (Phil 2:12-13). When Christians were wondering how much of our salvation is our work and how much is God's work, Saint Augustine replied that the whole work of salvation is God's work, and the whole work of salvation is our work. We are God's cooperators in the work of sanctification.

If you put together these two poles of our sanctification, you will see that our principal work is prayer, since it is prayer that invites Jesus into our darkness and gives him permission to work in us, engages his help. A spiritual giant of the fifth century, Macarius, a disciple of Saints Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, put it this way: "The sum total of all good actions, the highest of all our works, is perseverance in prayer, through which we can each day acquire all the virtues by asking God for them. Prayer wins for those who are judged worthy, communion with the holiness of God, with the energy of the Holy Spirit, and union of feeling with the mind of the Lord in ineffable love [do you hear the three persons of the Trinity in that summary?]. The person who daily makes the effort to persevere in prayer is consumed by the spiritual love of a divine 'élan' and burning desire for God, and receives the grace of sanctifying perfection" (Homily 40). These writers in the golden age of the Church Fathers laid the foundations of a spiritual theology that has guided the Church ever since.

Is perfection important? Is it something we should be yearning and striving for after what we said about our being a Church of sinners? We have no choice in the matter if we want to be Christians, since Jesus commanded, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5: 48). And he left no doubt what he meant: the heavenly Father is one who "makes his sun shine on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest alike" (Matt 5:45), so we must love all alike, friends and enemies. Once again we are back to the basic principle: we can only be holy, only be perfect, only be compassionate as our Father is compassionate, if Jesus is free to live his life in us, if we are endeavoring at each moment to surrender to him. I will leave the last word to everybody's favorite modern saint, Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who gave us the secret of her endless good

deeds: “It is not possible to engage in the direct apostolate without being a soul of prayer. We must be aware of oneness with Christ, as he was aware of oneness with his Father. Our activity is truly apostolic only in so far as we permit him to work in us and through us, with his power, with his desire, with his love. We must become holy, not because we want to feel holy, but because Christ must be able to live his life fully in us” (*Something Beautiful for God* 65).

In our spiritual warfare it doesn't really matter if we are successful. In fact, we won't attain perfection. The saints only became more and more aware of being great sinners: Paul called himself the greatest of them (1 Tim 1:15). But we must nonetheless keep up the warfare knowing that where sin abounds, forgiveness abounds even more. When we ask forgiveness we simultaneously experience new strength for the battle. That is why we must never fear to confess our sins, both at Mass and in personal prayer, and from time to time in the sacrament of reconciliation. But that's another topic.

Next time we will look at the vocation of the laity in the Church. If you need homework, read slowly and meditatively the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, of the Second Vatican Council. You should have your own copy of the documents of Vatican II, or you can download specific documents from the Vatican website.

We meet on the last Monday of January. I wish you a blessed Advent.