

## **PRACTICAL PIETY**

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Robert Lax's statement about being a saint, to Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is as instructive as it is mundane: We become saints, pious, because we want to. It cannot be simpler, or more satisfying, than that. If we are followers of Jesus Christ through repentance, faith and baptism, and by God's grace have received the Holy Spirit, *we want to be holy*. The Holy Spirit inspires the hunger for holiness. The Paraclete promotes a passion for piety. If the Christian has no interest in holy living, in spite of our pronounced peccadillos, we have every reason to question our life in God by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

### **Visioning Piety**

What does piety or saintliness look like? Bishop Robert Barron suggests that "saints are extreme and impolitic." Saint Antony of the Desert asserts, albeit more broadly, that saints will at times look insane. Within certain denominational circles, saints are "holy fools" whose lives upset our common assumptions about how life is and must be. Other people envision saints as people whose lives exhibit extraordinarily exemplar attitudes and actions. And, to be fair, there are some saints that do exhibit these exemplary characteristics, these unusual qualities.

But the vast majority of saints do not. Living piously, living a holy life, is quite pedestrian in its practicality. Although we may have exaggerated ideas about piety involving ecstatic experiences that radically alter our disposition and direction, holiness and piety are as extraordinarily ordinary as doing what we need to do when we need to do it --- for the sole glory of God. Sanctity, piety, is as mundane as doing the laundry and exercising mercy. This is what it is. This is what we and the world need to see. A poem I recently wrote highlights this perspective. It is called "I Seek Saints."

I seek saints  
not thin ascetics  
or the legions of extremity

Saints without halos  
laboring over laundry  
and whose prayers are  
as pedestrian as the exercise of mercy

Saints who ascend  
by descending  
into Christ's full humanity

### **Visiting Piety**

When we read the writings of Saint Paul, we will frequently encounter his oft-repeated admonition to "put off" and "put on." Very briefly, we are called and challenged to "put off" the old self and the old mindset and "put on" the new self and the new mindset. We are, according to Saint Paul, to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds."

But the renewing of our minds begins with the transformation of our hearts. Heart-change precedes head-change. Similarly, with some exceptions, head-and-heart-change precedes hand-change. By God's grace, head, heart and hands are dynamically transformed when we encounter the Living Christ and we seek to live in dynamic fellowship with, in and through him --- by the Holy Spirit. And then, of course, comes the work --- the working out of our own salvation with hopeful fear and tenacious trembling.

### **Vocational Piety**

Piety is the solitary vocation of the Christian. Being saints is our calling. Leon Bloy once wrote that life's greatest sorrow is not to be a saint. If we are not living our calling, it is a very sad thing indeed! Sainthood is what we are made for. Sainthood is what we are chosen for. Sainthood is what we are called to. But, while not being a saint may be our greatest sorrow, it is also our greatest struggle and our greatest suffering. It requires work.

Without going into too much detail, but capitalizing upon the "put off" and "put on" references I made above, *piety is advanced through Baptism, Eucharist, and Practical Prayer*. Piety is advanced through *Baptism* because our Baptism makes us part of God's family and implies living according to the family standards which God has set. Upon Baptism, we renounce "the world, the flesh and the devil" and we embrace the Christ-centered commands about loving God and loving neighbor and loving enemies. Similarly, faithfully participating in the *Eucharist* requires rigorous self-evaluation according to God's standards in the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment, setting aside sin, seeking reconciliation, and receiving God's mercy and forgiveness. And, to be clear, Christians seek to live the mercy and the forgiveness they receive. Finally, piety is advanced through participating in *practical prayer*. Saint Thomas More once prayed these words: "The things that we pray for...give us the grace to labor for through Jesus Christ our Lord." The Christian life is a prayerful life that is rooted in Christ-centered Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist - consciously and committedly – and always through Jesus Christ.

### **Victorious Piety**

We will fail. At times we will fail miserably. We are, and always will be, People of the Imposed Ash! I once heard that the victorious Christian life is getting up when we have fallen down. Although this is rather simplistic and unsatisfying, there is a measure of truth associated with it. Being a saint, therefore, requires living in and through and by the victory of Jesus Christ ---- living according to *his* suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. Piety is Christ's mercy which is applied to us who are his people. In *Colossians 3*, one of Saint Paul's classic references to "put off" and "put on," he summarizes everything in verse 14, *Above all put on love, which is the bond of perfection*. If we are truly interested in practical piety, Christian holiness, being saints, it cannot be simpler: Love must be our priority ("Above all"), our practice ("Put on") and our path ("bond of perfection"). The path from our hunger for holiness to purity of heart is always through mercy.

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