

## Growing in Holiness

- Good evening, brothers! The topic tonight is growing in holiness. This is something we undertake during our physical life in this world to prepare us for our eternal life in the next.
- There are many spiritual gurus in the world. A few seem to have reasonable approaches to becoming a more spiritual person. I certainly am not a spiritual guru. I can only offer my experiences of life that have helped me and others that I know.
- I have adopted the reasoning of St. Ignatius of Loyola for growth in spirituality and holiness. While he was the author of The Spiritual Exercises, which is a systematic way of seeking closeness to God and choosing His will, St. Ignatius encouraged people to find God in everything they do rather than spend long blocks of time in prayer in search of God.
- So what does it mean to grow in holiness? There are probably as many slightly different answers to this question as there are people who have given it some serious thought.
- It is clearest for me to understand growing in holiness as deepening an intimate friendship with God, as far as humanly possible. But this is a friendship like no other. So how is this friendship different from all others? Let's answer by characterizing friendships in general.
- At this point in our lives, most of us have made thousands of friends over the years. The nature of these friendships spans a wide spectrum. There are casual friendships with people we connected with just briefly. There are really good friends we have lost touch with over the years after going different ways. And there are good and faithful friends of all types in the community we live in now.
- Many of my friends past and present have had or still have specific and sometimes significant influences on my well being and my outlook on life. I have some friends that really know how to make me laugh; and some who make me think critically. I have a few trusted friends who are always there for me to confide in; and a few others who are important mentors.
- A really important circle of friends are those I have known nearly all of my life. These friends are like family. In fact, some of them are my family members. These friends have helped shape me to be the person I am and the person I am becoming. These friendships are the deepest and most intimate that I have, with the exception of one.
- That one is my friendship with Nancy. There is no one else in the world I am as intimate with, as friendly with, and as neglectful of as my wife.... Maybe "neglectful" is too strong a word for my tendency to often take Nancy for granted.
- She is my number one priority, though. If ever she is in crisis, has a great need or celebrates a big milestone, I will now sacrifice everything else to be there for her. However, while she is my number one priority, there are so many other people and activities that seem to distract us from each other.

- If we didn't regularly come back to reconnect with each other a few times every day, that would be true neglect. It is somewhat easy and natural for us to reconnect with each other regularly because we live together and see each other a few times throughout most days.
- Neglect of a friend is harmful to that friendship. However, given the number of friends we make during our lives, it is bound to happen. Allowing our friendships to fade is a natural consequence of our limited capacity as humans.
- But there is another exceptional friendship we all have, unlike any other, that we should not let fade. This, of course, is our friendship with Jesus.
- He is the best of all of our other friends combined into one person and he fulfills many roles for us. As our creator, he knows us intimately and knows best how to influence us to become who we were created to be. He is the friend who can make us laugh, comfort us in our anxiety or sorrow, enable our accomplishments, and help us to remain humble.
- In addition to being our friend, he is also our King. We are ultimately accountable to him. He has the power to always forgive us even if no one else will. He is Ultimate Wisdom who guides us after our own judgment falters. When we are at our weakest, he moves mountains for us. He is Infinite Love and continuously fills us up as we empty ourselves.
- It is really hard to fathom that the all powerful King of the Universe also wants to be our most intimate friend. Maybe there is some tension between honoring him with reverence as our King and truly knowing him as our dear friend. Yet, he is a friend who is always silently present with us, waiting for us to turn to him.
- But we too often neglect this important friend for most of the time that he is with us. Why is that? Well maybe it is an unconscious denial that the King of Kings could also be our best friend. Or, more than likely, we are unconscious of our own personality traits and distractions that keep us from turning to him.
- For me, these are many of the same personality traits and distractions that keep me from being connected with Nancy for a good part of most days. However, it is understandable that Nancy and I are disconnected from each other throughout most days because we are very often not physically with each other a lot of the time.
- Yet, Jesus is with us all the time, is he not? How is it we don't acknowledge him in all our encounters and activities throughout the day or ask for his thoughts on issues we confront?
- I believe the answer to this question is that our lives are often out of balance. We depend a lot on the physical and intellectual aspects of ourselves and we frequently forget about the spiritual aspects.
- This happens because we are living in a physical world and our lives are now largely manipulated by intellectual inputs. We react to the physical and intellectual nature of all that we encounter with the physical and intellectual aspects of ourselves.
- We too often do not remember to call on our spiritual resources, the most powerful being our friendship with Jesus who is ever present in our hearts. But not only is he always present

in our hearts, he is also always present in every heart that has not purposefully rejected him. If we give our full attention to each person we come across, in the moment of our encounter, there is a high potential that we will recognize Jesus quietly present among us.

- Knowing and embracing this helps deepen our friendship with him and allows him to influence all the encounters and wonders of our lives. This does not move his friendship to be our number one priority, though. Our priorities too often change. Instead, this is making his friendship integral to our very existence. This is growing in holiness.
- So, how do we do this? There are two primary ways. First, we encounter Jesus in personal prayer, worship and adoration. Second, we look for and encounter Jesus in all the people and activities of daily life.
- When we are alone in prayer with him and in our church environment to worship or adore him, we are purposefully calling on him. Our spiritual awareness is heightened and we are more in balance. We are likely closer to being the person he created us to be.
- But we are not made to live with him alone or to only live within our church community. We have to go out into the world. So we have to find a way to maintain this heightened spiritual awareness as we part from our active prayer, worship and adoration.
- But, out in our chaotic world, we are often on guard making it more challenging to encounter him regularly. So what tends to put us on guard? There are some concerns about physical safety in a few places we travel to, but those conditions are very rare.
- From my own life experiences and observations, I believe we are most often on guard to protect our egos. Our egos allow us to survive and sometimes thrive in the world of business meetings and situations where others have an expectation of us to be problem solvers.
- Egos are necessary sometimes in the heat of debate or in leading others to take action on behalf of a greater cause that we champion. But these types of situations are also very infrequent on most days. Yet, we leave our spiritual world of prayer and worship and step into the physical world ready to call on our egos at a moment's notice.
- Instead, after private and community prayer, we should consciously step back into the physical world of action and intellect with our ego placed some distance behind us. We should enter the world in a state of vulnerability with Compassion walking on our left and Jesus walking on our right.
- These are our companions from our spiritually enriched world of prayer and worship. They walk with us ready to point out goodness, truth and beauty. They help us to encounter sorrow, pain and suffering. In this chaotic world we live in, they help us to connect both of these extremes, giving us hope for unity and peace for everyone we encounter.
- Everyone has needs of one kind or another. For most people, their basic needs are met, so their true needs are not readily visible. Most people's needs are emotional in nature.

- These needs are hidden within the gaps between body, mind and spirit. We occasionally see an emotional outburst from someone who is angry, sad or frustrated. This is a clear signal of someone in need of a friend.
- However, most of us in this world are out of balance to some degree most of the time, but we do our best to hide that from others. It is one of the ways that we protect our egos...sometimes people are embarrassed to ask for help or seek a friendly connection. They want to remain inconspicuous, but they likely need an understanding friend. Their wants and needs are at odds with one another.
- We won't see this through a superficial encounter with people. We have to encounter one another with sincerity, focus and compassion. When we are spiritually in tune with Jesus, we will be able to sense his suffering in these people who are keeping their needs hidden.
- There are likely people with emotional needs closer than we realize. We should consciously approach everyone with our compassion at the forefront and our ego in reserve. Only then will we have the opportunity to see Christ suffering in them.
- There are times and places for polite and brief encounters, especially in crowded forums where a deeper encounter is not practical. But as Christians, we are true friends of Christ and we need to circle back to those we suspect may be in need of emotional support. If we can find out why they are out of balance, there may be something physical we can help with.
- You may be wondering why I am bringing up this concern for people with hidden needs. I am a member of the Society of St. Vincent DePaul. We regularly engage the poor whose needs are quite visible. We also see that the needs of the poor are a barometer for the well being of society as a whole. I see trends in the needs of the poor that shout a warning to us that we should also be purposefully tuned in to the well being of our entire community.
- Last fiscal year SVDP formed 126 home visit teams to visit the needy and poor. That was a 47 percent increase from the year before. We are only 4 months into this fiscal year 2023-2024 and we have already formed 70 home visit teams. This trend is likely to continue through the year, which means we are likely to form about 230 teams total over this fiscal year.
- Our inflated economy has made everything more expensive making it difficult for all people to maintain the standard of living they are accustomed to. We have seen a significant uptick in the number of our neighbors who are struggling to stay in their homes and pay their bills. Economic conditions are placing a lot of stress on all families, not only the ones that we encounter through St. Vincent DePaul.
- Another issue to be concerned about is the ramping up of the political campaigns for the 2024 election year. Our country and our local communities are already divided over the controversial political issues that our divided and ineffective government cannot seem to make progress on. The political campaigns are guaranteed to stir up even more controversy over these issues in very negative ways in an attempt to discredit opponents. This will certainly add another significant degree of stress to people of all walks of life.

- The stresses always present in just everyday working and living are exacerbated by these additional global stresses of a difficult economy and an ugly campaign cycle. We should expect that many people may fall under this stress, leading to poor decisions impacting their ability to thrive.
- We should be sensitive and attentive to our neighbors' hidden needs so that we can be supportive before their problems get out of hand. It is better to help address emotional needs and small physical needs before they become too big for anyone to help with.
- Granted we cannot expect to encounter every person in our community, but maybe a new proactive attitude of connecting with our friends and neighbors nearest to us will serve as an example for all people to follow. Let's see if we can make compassion culturally contagious.
- Talking to someone who is in a negative situation is not that difficult for a caring heart. By using the gifts God has given us, we can do his work; even if it is sometimes stressful and exposes us to suffering. This brings us closer to God and helps unify our community. This is what God desires from all of us.
- We all have many gifts from God; everything from our skills and talents to our education and life experiences. We are called to share the gift of ourselves with the rest of society. We have everything we need to help others if we lead from our hearts, letting God's love work through us.
- Our less than polished personal abilities, our discomfort and the suffering are all secondary to the gift of love that we bring when we are attentive to others' needs. What is of primary importance is that we decide to share our love with those we meet by listening and then letting our hearts and minds be moved.
- We have heard many times in our lives that it is better to give than to receive. Why is it better to give? Because giving produces a lasting joy when we give out of love. This genuine joy comes from God. He is pure love and is the source of all genuine love we show others.
- Likewise, God's joy is pure and eternal. When his love is pouring through us to other people, we can feel his eternal joy. God desires us to empty our love onto others so that he can fill us back up. It is the flow of love through us that brings a constant flow of joy from him.
- Can you imagine the joy God must feel in all that he gives to mankind? I don't know that we can begin to imagine what infinite, pure joy feels like, but that is our goal; or should be. That is the nature of the beatific vision of heaven...sharing in divine love and joy for eternity. That is why we desire to grow in holiness while living in this world.
- I hope for you that you are able to see God at work in most everything you do, not just in ministry work, prayer and worship. I am certain that God is patiently walking with me through this life waiting for me to turn to him. And being an infinite and ever-present God, I know that he is walking with each of you as well.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett