

TOWARDS HOLINESS

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This is a translation of the text of a homily given on 26 November 1967.

When we listen attentively to that cry of St Paul: 'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess 4:3), our hearts are moved with a deep longing. Today, once more, I have considered this phrase myself, and want to remind you, and indeed all men, that our becoming saints is the will of God.

Personal sanctity is indispensable if we are to bestow an authentic peace, to transform this earth, to see God our Lord in the world and through the things of the world. In talking with people of so many countries and such diverse backgrounds, I am frequently asked: 'What do you have to say to us husbands and wives? To us farm workers? To widows? To young people?'

My reply is always the same, I have just one 'recipe.' I usually point out that Jesus Christ, our Lord, preached the Good News to everyone without distinction. The same 'recipe' and the same food for all: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to fulfill his work' (Jn 4:34). He calls each one to holiness, commands all of us to love, young and old, single and married, healthy and sick, learned and uneducated, no matter where we work, no matter where we are. There is only one way to increase our familiarity and confidence with God: by dealing with him in prayer, speaking with him, and showing him – heart to heart – our affection.

Talking with God

'Call upon me and I shall hear you' (Jer 29:12). We call upon him in the conversation we direct towards him. This is why we have to put into practice what St Paul exhorts us to do: '*Sine intermissione orate,*' pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). 'Not just from the heart but with all our heart'.¹

You will tell me that life is not that easy, that we all have our share of bitterness, pain and sorrow. St Paul again supplies the answer: '... neither death, nor

life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39). Nothing can move us away from a constant relationship with our Father.

Is such a continuous union with God so sublime an ideal that it is unattainable for the majority of Christians? It is certainly a high goal, but not an unattainable one. The path which leads to holiness is the way of prayer. Prayer ought to take root little by little in the soul, like a tiny seed that with time develops into a spreading tree.

Let us begin with the prayers which many of us repeated out loud as children. They are loving yet simple words spoken directly to God and to his Mother, who is our Mother as well. Every morning and evening I still say that offering which my father and mother taught me: 'Oh, my Lady, my Mother! I

offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial affection, I consecrate this day to you, my sight, my hearing, my tongue, my heart'... Is this not in some way the starting point for contemplation; a clear sign of our confident abandonment to God? For what do those in love say when they meet? How do they behave? They give what they are and what they have for the person they love. They sacrifice themselves.

First one brief heartfelt aspiration, and then another, and another... until our fervor seems to have become insufficient because our words are too inadequate. Then we face God without wanting rest and without feeling tired. We are then close to God, captivated and imprisoned. While we are doing all we are capable of and all that is expected of us, insofar as our shortcomings and limitations allow, our soul longs to escape. It is attracted towards God as iron is by the pull of a magnet. The soul begins to love Jesus more effectively, in a delightfully surprising way.

'I will release you from captivity wherever you may be' (Jer 29:14). Prayer will free us from slavery. We will feel ourselves free, soaring on the air of a joyous song, a song of love inspiring us to wish never to be separated from God. It gives new meaning to our footsteps on this earth, a divine, supernatural, marvelous meaning. It brings to mind the words of so many sixteenth century Spanish poets which each of us can best think about in our own hearts: "I live because I do not live: for it is Christ who lives in me" (cf Gal 2:20).

One accepts generously the need to work for many years in this world because Jesus has few friends here below. We cannot refuse the duty we have to live our lives in the service of God and of his Church, of wearing ourselves out, of squeezing ourselves dry.

This is how we are most free: "*in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei*" (Rom 8:21), "*qua libertate Christus nos liberavit*" (Gal 4:31), with the freedom of the sons of God which Jesus Christ has earned for us by dying on the wood of the Cross.

At the same time, it is possible that even from the beginning dark clouds may appear in our lives. The enemies of our sanctification employ a vehement and well-conducted strategy of psychological terrorism. This is an abuse of power which drags down to its absurd level even those who, for many years, have behaved better. The enemy's voice sounds like a cracked bell which was not properly cast in good metal and in no way resembles the tone of the shepherd's whistle. They so distort speech, one of God's most precious gifts to men for expressing thoughts of love and of friendship with our Lord and with his creatures, that one can understand why St James says that the tongue is "a whole world of malice" (James 3:6). It can cause so much harm: lies, slander, dishonorable utterances, swindles, insults and tortuous murmurings of discontent.

Christ made man

How can we overcome these difficulties? How can

we strengthen our resolve when it begins to seem unbearable? Let us take inspiration from the example of the most Holy Virgin, our Mother, who shows us a wide path which necessarily goes by way of Jesus.

To draw close to God, we have to go through Christ's sacred humanity. For this reason I have always recommended reading books on our Lord's passion. With sincere devotion, these writings draw our mind to the Son of God, a man like ourselves and yet true God, who loves and suffers for the redemption of the world.

Just look at one of the deep-rooted devotions among Christians – saying the Holy Rosary. The Church encourages us to contemplate the mysteries so that they can become engraved on our mind and in our imagination. Together with the joy, the sorrow and the glory of Holy Mary, we follow the astonishing example of our Lord during his thirty years of obscurity, his three years of preaching, the humiliation of his passion, and his glorious resurrection.

Follow Christ, that's the secret. Accompany him so closely that we live with him like the first twelve Apostles: so closely indeed that we become identified with him. We will not hesitate to affirm, once we have removed the obstacles to his grace, that we have put on the Lord Jesus Christ (cf Rom 13:14). Our Lord is then reflected in our behaviour as in a mirror. If that mirror is as it should be it will pick up the loving image of the Saviour without distorting or making a caricature of it, so that others can admire and be attracted by that image.

In the effort to identify ourselves with Christ I have distinguished four steps: to look for him, to find him, to speak to him, and to love him. Perhaps you are at the first stage. Look for him eagerly. Look for him with all your strength within your very selves. If you proceed with determination, I would even say that you have already found him and have begun to speak to him and to love him. Your conversation is already in heaven (cf Phil 3:20).

I ask our Lord that we make up our minds to nourish within our souls the only really noble ambition, the only thing that is really worthwhile: to accompany Jesus Christ with desire, denying ourselves, without neglect of any kind, just as his Blessed Mother and St Joseph the Holy Patriarch did. We will then share in the joy of the divine friendship with a deep peace which will be compatible with our professional and social duties. We will be thankful for the tenderness and clarity with which he teaches us to fulfill the will of our Father in heaven.

Let us not forget, however, that being with Jesus means encountering his Cross. When we abandon ourselves into God's hands, he frequently permits us to taste sorrow, loneliness, opposition, slander, defamation and ridicule. This is because he wants to make us in his own image and likeness. He even tolerates that we be called lunatics and be taken for fools.

That is the time to love those "passive mortifications" which may come hiddenly, or openly and

insolently, when we least expect them. The stones which ought to have been thrown at wolves are used to strike the sheep: the follower of Christ then personally experiences that those who ought to love him behave in ways that range from mistrust to hostility, from suspicion to hatred. He is looked upon with misgiving as if he were a liar, as if it were impossible to maintain a personal relationship with God or to have interior life. In contrast, those who are indifferent or who do not even believe in God — persons who usually are wayward and disdainful — are treated in a friendly way and with understanding.

Our Lord even permits that his followers be dishonorably attacked by personal slander produced by a massive smear campaign of criminal and biased clichés. For not everyone is endowed with good taste and sound judgment. There are people who uphold a wavering theology and a lax, unbridled moral code. They capriciously engage in doubtful liturgical practices. Their behaviour is like that of hippies and their mode of government is irresponsible. It is no surprise that such persons spread jealousy, suspicion, false allegations, insults, ill treatment, humiliation, gossip and outrages of all types against those who speak only of Jesus Christ.

This is the way Jesus fashions the souls of those he loves. At the same time he gives them interior calm and joy. For indeed they understand very well that even with a hundred lies the devil is not capable of making one truth. Moreover, Jesus impresses on their very lives the conviction that they will be at ease only when they make up their minds not to take it easy.

When we admire and truly love the most sacred humanity of Jesus, we will discover each of his wounds one by one. In those fruitful times of passive suffering, bringing bittersweet tears which we try to hide, we need to put ourselves in each of our Lord's holy wounds to be purified and strengthened, rejoicing in his redeeming blood. We will take shelter in his wounds like those doves of the Scripture (cf Cant 2:14), who weathered the storms in the fissures of the rocks. We hide in that refuge to find intimacy with Christ. We will find his conversation soothing and his countenance comely (cf Cant 2:14). "Those who recognize his voice as soft and pleasing are those who receive the grace of the Gospel which makes them say: 'You have the words of eternal life' ".²

Let us not think, however, that our passions have been finally tamed in this path of contemplation. We would deceive ourselves in supposing that either the anxiety of looking for Christ, or the reality of meeting him and talking to him, or even the sweetness of his love, could ever make us incapable of sin. Even though you yourself do not lack this experience, nevertheless let me remind you that Satan, the enemy of God and of man, does not give up nor does he rest. Rather he keeps laying siege even when the soul burns ardently with love of God. He knows that it is then more difficult to fall. However, if he can get us to offend our Lord, even slightly, he can cast over our conscience the serious temptation of despair.

If you wish to learn from the experience of a poor priest who does not speak of anything other than God, I can give the following counsel. Once the flesh tries to recover its lost rights, or worst still, when pride rears up and rebels, then I would urge you to rush to shelter in those divine wounds of Christ's body which were opened up by the nails which fastened him to the Cross and by the lance which opened his side. Go as the spirit moves you and unburden in those wounds of our Lord, all the human and divine love you bear in your heart. This is what it is to crave for union, to feel that you are a brother to Christ, related to him by blood, the child of the same Mother because it is she who has led us to Jesus.

The Holy Cross

Be eager to adore. Be anxious to make amends quietly and calmly with suffering. Then that phrase of Jesus will take on life in your lives: 'he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me' (Mt 10:38). Our Lord will appear more demanding; he will ask for reparation and for repentance until we experience the fervent desire of wishing to live for God, nailed on the cross close to Christ (cf Gal 2:19).

But 'this is a treasure which we keep in vessels of clay' — fragile and breakable vessels — 'so that we may recognize that the greatness of the power we feel within us is God's and not ours' (2 Cor 4:7). 'We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems but never despair; we have been persecuted but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed; always wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus' (2 Cor 8:10).

We may imagine that our Lord does not hear us; that we are being deceived; that all that is heard is the monologue of our own voice. We see ourselves without support on earth and abandoned by heaven. Even so, we would react with a real and effective horror to sin, even venial sin. With the stubbornness of the Canaanite woman, we would kneel at our Lord's feet as she did, adoring him and imploring: 'Lord, help me' (Mt 15:25), and the darkness would vanish, overcome by the light of Love.

This is the time to cry out: remember Lord the promises you have made to me to fill me with hope. Please console me and fill my life with strength (cf Ps 118:168).

Our intellect is apparently inactive, but with God-given clarity we understand beyond the shadow of a doubt that since the Creator takes care of everybody, even his enemies, how much more will he take care of his friends. We are sure that there is no evil nor contradiction that does not turn out for good. Joy and peace are rooted in our spirit with a firmness that no merely human motive can shake. For when our Lord 'visits' he always leaves something divine of his own. Let us then praise the Lord, who had done wonderful things for us (cf Job 5:9), and let us understand that we have been created with the capability of possessing an infinite treasure (cf Wis 7:14).

The Blessed Trinity

We began praying with the simple and attractive vocal prayers which we learned in our childhood and which we would certainly never want to abandon. Prayer, which started out with this childlike simplicity, now develops into a broad, calm stream because it follows the course of friendship with him who said: 'I am the way' (Jn 14:6). If we so love Christ, if with divine daring we take refuge in the open wound made by the lance in his side, then the promise of the Master will be fulfilled: 'if anyone loves me he will keep me my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home with him' (Jn 14:23).

The heart needs, then, to differentiate and adore each of the divine Persons. It is a sort of discovery that the soul makes in the interior life, just like that of a little creature opening its eyes to the world around him. The soul finds itself in the company of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It readily submits to the action of the enlivening Paraclete who, without our meriting it, gives us his gifts and supernatural virtues.

We have run 'like the deer who seeks out the source of the fountain' (Ps 41:2), thirsting with parched lips. We want to drink from that fountainhead of living water. Without doing odd things we dwell all day in that abundant and clear well of fresh water which springs up to eternal life (cf Jn 4:14). Words are superfluous because the tongue cannot express itself. Our understanding is still. It does not need to think, it just takes it all in. The soul once again breaks into a new song because it feels and knows that God is watching lovingly at all times.

I am not talking about extraordinary situations. They are, and can very well be, ordinary happenings within our soul. It is the madness of love which without being spectacular or extravagant, teaches us how to suffer and how to live because God gives us wisdom. How calm and peaceful is 'this narrow way which leads to life'! (Mt 7:14).

Asceticism? Mysticism? It doesn't matter. Whether it is asceticism or mysticism is of no consequence. It is God's mercy. If you try to meditate, the Lord will not deny you his assistance. Faith and deeds of faith are all that matter.

Deeds are important because, as you have known from the beginning, and as I have emphasized from time to time, the Lord demands more from us each day. This is contemplation. This is what union is. This is the way a Christian should live. Although he may not realize it, each one develops along his own spiritual path — there are an infinite number — in the midst of his activity in the world.

Our prayer and deeds will not take us away from our ordinary activities. They allow noble worldly ambition to lead us to our Lord. When we offer up our work to God, then we are making the world divine. I have reminded you so often of the myth of King Midas who turned all he touched into gold. We can convert all we touch into the gold of supernatural merit despite our personal failings.

This is the way our God does things. The prodigal son returned, having spent all he had living riotously, and worst of all having forgotten his father. In spite of this his father said: 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have fattened and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration' (Lk 15:22-23). God, our Father, draws richness from our misery and strength from our weakness when we go to him with repentance. What will he prepare for us if we do not leave him, if we visit him each day, if we talk lovingly to him and confirm that love with deeds? What can he do if we ask him for everything, trusting in his power and mercy. If he would prepare a banquet on the return of a son who proved disloyal, what will he prepare for us who have remained always by his side?

Let us not dwell on the memories of how we have been offended, of the humiliation we have endured, no matter how unjust, uncivil or unmannerly it has been. For it is not right that a child of God should draw up a list of grievances. We cannot forget Christ's example. Our Christian faith cannot be changed like an article of clothing. It can only be weakened or strengthened or lost. With this supernatural life, our faith is invigorated and our soul becomes sensitive enough to be terrified at how miserably naked human nature is without God. The soul pardons and gives thanks. My God, when I look at my poor life I can only find abundant reason to live a humble and contrite life. I know very well that service is the best form of nobility.

Lively prayer

"I will rise and go through the city;
In the streets and in the squares
I will seek him whom my heart loves"
(Cant 3:2).

And I will run not only through the city but through nations and towns, through highways and byways, to find peace of soul. And I will discover this peace in the cares of each day, which will not disturb me. On the contrary, they are the means and the reason to love more and more and to unite myself more and more to God.

When we are waylaid and assaulted by the temptation of discouragement, opposition, struggle, tribulation or by another dark night of the soul, the psalmist puts on our lips and in our minds these words: 'I am with him in the time of adversity' (Ps 90:15). Jesus, compared to your cross, of what value is mine? Alongside your wounds, what are my scratches? Before your immense, pure and infinite love, what is the value of that poor little burden that you have asked me to bear upon my shoulders? Your heart and mine are filled with holy eagerness, affirming with deeds 'that we are dying of love' (cf Cant 5:8).

A thirst for God takes hold of us. We become anxious to comprehend his tears, to see his smile, his face. I think that the best way of expressing it is to repeat what Scripture has to say: 'As a doe longs for

running streams, so longs my soul for you my God' (Ps 41:2). The soul goes forward hand in hand with God, sharing God's nature. The follower of Christ becomes a thirsty traveller who opens his mouth at the water fountain (cf Eccles 26:15).

With this self-giving, our apostolic zeal is enkindled and grows each day. The zeal spreads to others, for goodness is self-diffusing. It is impossible for our poor nature, when close to God, not to hunger eagerly to sow peace and joy throughout the world, not to desire to irrigate all with redeeming waters which flow from the open side of Christ (cf Jn 19:34), nor to begin and finish everything for Love.

I have spoken to you of sorrow, suffering and tears. I do not contradict myself if I state that, for a disciple who looks lovingly for his Master, sadness, pain and affliction taste differently. They fade into insignificance when they are truly accepted as the will of God; when his plans are followed lovingly by faithful daughters and sons. This is so even when our nerves are at the breaking point and the pain seems unbearable.

An ordinary kind of life

I should like to confirm once more that I am not talking about an extraordinary way of Christian life. Let each one of us meditate on what God has done for him and how he has responded. If we are courageous in this personal examination, we will be able to perceive what we have yet to do.

I was moved yesterday on hearing about a Japanese catechumen who taught catechism to others who did not yet know Christ. I felt so ashamed. We need to have more faith, much more faith, and with more faith, more contemplation.

Calmly ponder that divine remark which fills the soul with disquiet and at the same time is sweet to the ears: "*Redemi te, et vocavi te nomine tuo: meus es tu* – I have redeemed you and called you by your name, you are mine" (Is 43:1). Let us not take back what is God's own. He is a God who has loved us to the point of dying for us, who has chosen us from all eternity before the creation of the world so that we may be holy in his presence (cf Eph 1:4). He continually offers us occasions to purify ourselves and to give ourselves to him. If we were to doubt at all, we receive another proof from his lips: 'You have not chosen me. It is rather I who have chosen you so that you go forth and give fruit and that this fruit' of your work as contemplative souls 'may abound' (Jn 15:16).

What is necessary then is faith, supernatural faith. For when faith weakens one tends to look on God as if he were far away and had no concern for his children. Religion then becomes something added on when there is no other explanation. Without any justification, one expects to find ostentatious manifestations and unusual events. In contrast, when the soul is moved by faith, one discovers that the footsteps of a follower of Christ do not deviate from the ordinary habitual pattern of life, and that the great sanctity which God

demands of us is enshrined right here and now in the little things of every day.

I like to talk of a path, for we are travellers on a journey to our home in heaven. But remember that in spite of having bad stretches, having to skirt rivers or pass through dense woods, paths are normally ordinary things that hold few surprises. The danger lies in routine, in imagining that, because it is so simple and ordinary, God is not present along the way at each instant.

The two disciples on their way to Emmaus were walking along just like many others. Quite casually, Jesus turned up and walked along with them. His conversation helped make the journey more pleasant. I can well imagine the scene just as dusk was falling. A gentle breeze blew softly. All around there were fields ripe with wheat, and old olive trees shimmering in the failing light.

Jesus is there on the path. Lord, you are always so majestic. But it moves me even more when you condescend to walk along with us, to look for us in the bustle of each day. Lord, give us a childlike spirit, unsullied sight and clear ideas so that we will be aware of you when you come without any outward sign of your glory.

The journey came to an end on reaching the village. Without realizing it, the travellers have been deeply stirred by the words and love of God made man. They were saddened on his wanting to leave. Jesus, however, appeared to be going further (cf Lk 24:28). This Lord of ours never imposes himself on us. He wants us to call him freely when we have discerned the purity of Love which he has placed in our soul. We have to detain him forcibly and plead 'stay with us for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over' (Lk 24:29), night has fallen.

That's how we are: a little diffident perhaps because of insincerity, or perhaps out of modesty. In the bottom of our hearts we think: stay with us because our soul is surrounded by darkness and you are light. Only you can calm the anxiety which consumes us. For 'among good and beautiful things let us not forget what is foremost: to possess God forever'.³ Jesus will remain with us. Our eyes will be opened as those of Cleophas and his fellow-traveller were when Christ broke bread. Even when he disappears again from our sight we will be capable of undertaking the journey again in order to talk to others about him, because so much joy cannot be kept in one heart alone.

The road to Emmaus: Our Lord has filled that name with sweetness. The entire world is Emmaus because our Lord has opened up all the divine ways of the earth.

With the holy angels

I ask the Lord that, while we are on this earth we may never deviate from this divine way. To ensure this we have also to increase our friendship with the Holy Guardian Angels. We all need company, company from heaven and company on earth. Have devotion to

the Holy Angels. Their friendship, while very human, is also very divine, like our life, which is both human and divine. Don't you remember what our Lord says? 'I have not called you servants but friends' (Jn 15:15). He teaches us to have confidence with those friends of God who already dwell in heaven as well as with those people who live with us, even when they seem far from God, so that we can bring them back to the right path.

I will conclude by repeating what St Paul said to the Colossians: 'We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and undertaking' (Col 1:9). This wisdom will make possible prayer, contemplation and the infusion of the Holy Spirit in the soul.

'So you will be able to lead the kind of life the Lord expects of you, a life acceptable to him in all its aspects; showing the results in all good actions you do and increasing your knowledge of God. You will have in you the strength based on his own glorious power never to give in, but to bear anything joyfully, thanking the Father who has made it possible for you to join the saints and with them to inherit the light. Because that is what he has done: he has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the kingdom of his Beloved Son' (Col. 1:10-13).

I pray that the Mother of God and our Mother too would protect us so that each one of us can serve the Church with the fullness of faith, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and with a contemplative life. With the

fulfillment of our own personal obligations in our work or profession and of our state in life, each one of us will joyfully honor our Lord.

Love the Church, serving it with the conscious joy of one who has known how to be decisive in this service for love. Moreover, if we see that anyone is walking along without hope, like the two travellers of Emmaus, let us draw them close through faith – not in our own names but in Christ's name – and so assure them that Jesus' promise will not fail them. For he always watches over his spouse, the Church. He will not abandon her. The darkness will pass away because we are children of light (cf Eph 5:8), and have been called to an everlasting life.

'He will wipe away the tears from their eyes, there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone. Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: 'Now I am making new the whole of creation.' He said: 'Write this: that what I am saying is sure and will come true.' And then he said: 'It is already done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give water from the well of life for the thirsty to drink freely; it is the rightful inheritance of the one who proves victorious; and I will be his God and he will be my son' " (Apoc 21:4-7).

REFERENCES

(1) St. Ambrose, *Expositio in Psalmum CXVIII*, 19,12. (2) St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica Canticorum*, V, (PG 44, 879). (3) St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Epistulae*, 212.