

## HOLINESS: WHY IS IT SO HARD?

The movie, *A League of Their Own*, presents a Hollywood version of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League during WWII. In one dramatic scene Dottie Hinson, the best player (portrayed by Geena Davis) is torn between playing in their first World Series and returning home to Oregon with her wounded veteran husband. Her priority was family and she recognized that baseball is “only a game.” When challenged by her manager Jimmy Dugan (played by Tom Hanks) she lamented, “It just got too hard.” Dugan retorted: “It’s supposed to be hard. If it wasn’t hard everyone would do it. It’s the hard that makes it great.”

The “hard” in baseball comes from the unique skill it takes to hit major league pitching or to pitch successfully at the major league level. My friend Walt was a terrific third baseman who played triple-A ball in the Boston Red Sox system. During one spring training, he was brought up to the big team and went into the batter’s box to hit under the watchful eye of his idol, Ted Williams. Afterwards, he approached Ted and asked, “What do you think Mr. Williams?” Ted shook his head and replied, “Slow bat, kid, slow bat.” Walt realized that his dream of playing major league baseball was over. As good as he played the game, Walt simply lacked the extraordinary hand-eye coordination needed to hit major league pitching. So, is the “hard” of holiness similar in that it is the discovery that very few of us are spiritual prodigies like the canonized saints?

The answer is a resounding, “NO!” In the first place, there are no spiritual prodigies who have the innate exceptional skills they can develop into major league holiness. Be sure of this when Jesus declared, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), he meant it. So, in one sense we are all spiritual weaklings – yes, including the saints. The marvel of their lives does not rest on how they developed their natural gifts, but on what they allowed God to accomplish in them. Left to our own abilities, we can’t get to heaven much less become saints. God alone is the master artisan.

So, on the one hand most of us are aware of our spiritual ineptitude. We probably think that real holiness is as personally unattainable as successfully playing major league baseball. Nonetheless, the Church affirms, “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is buttressed by Jesus who commanded us during the Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). In its discussion on holiness the Catechism adds, “The way of perfection passes by way of the cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle.”<sup>2</sup> The theme of *Renunciation* and *battle* thrusts us face to face with the “hard” of holiness. It is a lifetime struggle in which we must defeat three unrelenting foes: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The flesh is internal within ourselves,

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (henceforth CCC), # 2013 citing Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 40, 2.

<sup>2</sup> CCC, # 2014.

which will be the focus of next months' essay. Today the emphasis is on the persistent external enemies, the world and the devil.

In the New Testament the word "devil" is synonymous with the fallen angel called Satan, which in Hebrew means "accuser" or "adversary." He is *dia-bolos*, the one who "throws himself across" God's work of salvation to obstruct it.<sup>3</sup> During the temptation of Eve, he is described as a cunning reptile (Gen 3:1). In the Book of Revelation, he is depicted as a huge "red dragon" (Rev 12:3) and the "ancient serpent" (Rev 12:9). He is also identified as the "Evil One" (Mt 13:19) and the tempter (1 Cor 7:5). St. Paul alerted us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light in order to deceive vulnerable humans (2 Cor 11:14). Jesus concisely described his character:

"He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44).

The devil is the ruler of this world (Eph 6:12), which is the domain captive to sin (Jn 12:31, 14:30, 16:11), as well as the prince of demons (Mt 12:24-32). His deceitful influence is frequently exercised through the world, that is, by those who spread his false values by word and example because they have wedded themselves to him by mortal sin.<sup>4</sup> This does not imply that all those who have fallen into mortal sin are intentionally the allies of the devil. In most cases they are hoodwinked through deceit, Satan's favorite tactic. The best way to defeat his enticements is to quietly beg God for help. "Dear Jesus, this temptation shows the sins I would commit were it not for your help. I am capable of any sin. Please, be merciful to me a sinner." If the temptation persists ignore it and peacefully repeat the same humble prayer. God is incapable of resisting humble prayers, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet 5:5; Jas 4:6). The frustrated devil will soon flee as he recognizes that his temptation is the occasion that brings you closer to God.

It is critical to understand this harsh reality, there is no neutrality for noncombatants in spiritual warfare. Jesus made this explicitly clear when he affirmed, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Lk 11:23). Tragically, mortal sin is never simply a personal issue that only adversely impacts the perpetrator. It is also a diabolical virus that spreads the spiritual pandemic of error, sin and death. Ultimately, it fosters an environment that defines evil as good and good as evil, which leads to the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> CCC, # 2851.

<sup>4</sup> Based on its gravity, sin is divided into mortal (Latin *mortis* - "deadly") and venial (Latin *venialis* - "pardonable"). The biblical basis for this distinction is found in 1 Jn 5:16-17 "There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal." To commit a mortal sin three requirements must be met: 1) It is a sin of grave matter; 2) It is committed with full knowledge of the sinner; and 3) It is committed with deliberate consent of the sinner.

<sup>5</sup> God will forgive any repented sin, but once a person has redefined sin as good and good as evil, he has blocked himself from repentance and the desperately needed mercy awaiting him.

The world identifies the realm of evil that rules the lives of sinful humans and creates a culture of excess, tyranny and death under the false banner of unbridled freedom. The world hates those who oppose it. Therefore, it is to be expected that the world especially hates faithful Christians because it first hated Jesus (Jn 15:18; Jn17:14-16)). When warning his followers of the world's persecution Jesus reassured us, "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

The great danger the world poses is found in its glamorization of the allurements that seduce us in three areas of pride, sensuality and possessions. These tactics were successful against Eve (Gen 3:1-6). They subsequently proved victorious against many of her children. Consider the following three biblical examples.

Cain was puffed up with pride, which fed his envy and drove him to murder his brother (Gen 4:1-8). The allure of material possessions seduced Lot to separate from Abraham and settle comfortably in the evil city of Sodom (Gen 13:10-11), only to end huddling in a cave overlooking the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah where he was sexually assaulted by his two daughters that he previously offered to the men of Sodom (Gen 19). David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22), yet his sensuality made him susceptible to commit adultery with Bathsheba and then murder her husband to hide the evil deed (2 Sam 11).

We are all vulnerable to similar temptations. Thus, the proverb, "There, except for the grace of God, go I." Jesus overcame these enticements (Mt 4:1-11), so we would have the strength to successfully resist them. Regarding Jesus, Paul wrote, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." Therefore, the apostle urged us, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15-16).

The devil's temptations lead us to acts of jealousy, evil thoughts, scruples, critically judging others, inflated egos, prejudice, anger, violence, hatred, greed, and envy. The world creates an environment of evil that seeps into our values like breathing polluted air corrupts our lungs. Therefore, the key to combatting this world's evil influence is the correct programming of our thoughts and values. Here the habit of prayer is uniquely important, as it offsets the constant secular bombardment that says God is irrelevant, money and power are the things that matter, and in the realm of sexual morality anything goes with consenting adults. The world either explicitly denied God's existence or else ignores him as if he is irrelevant. The secular world undermines the family and utterly deforms the concept of marriage.

In thwarting this evil influence, the frequent meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary is particularly powerful because it convicts us of the truth of the whole Gospel. For example, at his birth in the squalor of the Bethlehem cave, Jesus teaches us the irrelevance of wealth and worldly power. At the marriage feast in Cana, we learn of the sacredness of

marriage and reminded of Mary's admonition, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). At the foot of the cross we learn the indispensable lessons of God's love for us, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). In the mysteries of Mary's Assumption and Coronation we are reassured that we, too, will one day be bodily assumed into heaven where we will become princes and princesses in the palace of the King of Kings.

Prayfully reading the Bible is a mighty defense against the pernicious false values of this world. Just meditating on the Sermon on the Mountain can be life changing. The New Testament, in particular, is a marvelous defense against this world's numerous fallacies. Finally, reading the lives of the saints are particularly encouraging, because they show us how God can transform those who trust in him. Yes, holiness is hard. The good news is that we all have enough time to achieve it, if we are willing to be all in as we declare, "I'm all yours," and mean it. St. Dismas, the good thief, had very little time left to his dissolute life, but he heard the wonderful words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). Why not all of us?