

HOLINESS: WHY IS IT SO HARD? PART II

Walt Kelly created one of my favorite comic strips called Pogo. Set in the Okefenokee Swamp of the southeastern United States, the strip engaged in social and political satire using the adventures of its amusing animal characters led by the humble philosophical possum named Pogo. The large cast of characters included among many others: the dimwitted and egotistical Albert Alligator, the hound Beauregard Bugleboy, the local minister Deacon Mushrat, the mercenary fox Seminole Sam, and the self-serving politician Congressman Frog. On one notable occasion, the animals were hunkered down behind the barricades as shots burst around them. Then Pogo entered making this startling announcement, "We have seen the enemy and he is us!"

This quotation aptly introduces the third and the fiercest of the enemies that make holiness hard - the flesh. It is the cause of a great interior battle that we all experience. St. Paul describes this struggle in his letter to the Romans:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... So, then it is no longer I [my best self] that do it, but [the attraction to] sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh [the attraction to evil]. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it [by myself]. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of [the attraction to] sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:15, 17-19, 21-24).

As the result of Original Sin, we find ourselves wounded in three areas. Our intellect is diminished, our will is weakened, and our passions, feelings and emotions are unruly¹. Together they are the greatest contributor to the "hard" of holiness. Jesus acknowledged our diminished intellect from the cross when he prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Note, however, Jesus did not say, "Father, forgive them because they are innocent." Culpability is the painful reality of our sins that we must face. Sometimes, when I recall my past offenses that offended God and hurt people I love, I exclaim to myself, "How could I have been so stupid; how could I have been so blind?" Yet, that was the tragic reality. Then I can lament with David, "My sin is always before my face" (Ps 51:3).

Jesus also warned about the danger of weak wills when he warned Peter:

¹ The theological term concupiscence (from the Latin *concupisco* – I strongly desire) is used to describe "the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of human reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the 'flesh' against the 'spirit' (Gal 5:16, 17, 24; Eph 2:3). Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man's moral faculties and without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sin" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 2515).

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat [that is, severely test you], but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again [repented], strengthen your brethren.” And he said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death’ [we are all brave away from the field of combat]. He said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you three times deny that you know me” (Lk 22:31-34).

Peter loved Jesus, but he was not yet formed of the stuff from which martyrs are made. So, what does this say about our faithfulness?

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul portrays two extremes that give us an objective standard of where we stand in our relationship with God. In this passage he draws out the battle lines. First, he describes the negatives, the evil fruits that exude from the flesh:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. ... Now the works of the flesh are plain: *immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like*. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:16-17, 19-21).

Then, in contrast, the Apostle depicts the habitual actions of those who live by “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6):

“But the fruit of the Spirit is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*, against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:22-24).

Now we arrive at critical question. Where do we stand? Obviously, if we are fully living according to the flesh, there is no holiness in us. Then, our vital focus must be on repentance, for we are warned “that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21). Therefore, Jesus began his preaching with the call to conversion, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17). However, I suspect that most of us are not living in the flesh, but we are unwilling to claim all the virtues that flow from living in the Spirit. We recognize that we have not yet crucified our flesh with its passions and desires. So, to use the poker term, how do we get *all in*?”

Insightful books have been written on this important topic.² Here the focus will be two areas: the relationship of love and feelings, and the use of the present moment. Love, true love, has nothing to do with feelings. That is a major problem in our society, because so

² The most important book is the Bible. Then we can add, among others: *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Jean-Baptiste Chautard, and *The Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*, 3 vols, by Alphonsus Rodriguez.

much of what we decide is based on feelings. The feelings of love are like fool's gold, you can mine tons of the stuff but it has no value. Real love resides in the will, and its authenticity is demonstrated by what we choose to do, not how we feel. Jesus proved this when he proclaimed amid his agony, "not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Therefore, authentic love has two essential qualities: self-sacrifice and commitment. The perfect love God gives and demands in return has the same two essential qualities, but the self-sacrifice must be total and the commitment absolute.

Standing against our desire to embrace authentic love, much less perfect love, is the fortress of our feelings. What happens when we are feeling: depressed, insecure, hurt, unloved, abused, rejected, self-centered, indulgent, lazy, unappreciated, lustful, attached to things, tired, sick, frightened, angry, and sad? These are the emotions that hold us back. In his great autobiographical poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, Francis Thompson goes to the heart of the struggle when he wrote, "Though I knew the love of Him that followed [Jesus, the Heavenly Hound], yet I was so adread, lest having Him I might have naught besides." It's hard to give up our hurt feelings, sufferings, anxiety, desires and anger. We are afraid to abandon our false loves and our indulgent attachments.

At these moments of truth, we must face the tough inner challenge to ignore our negative feelings and free-fall into God's loving arms – to be *all in*. Anyone who thinks this is easy has never attempted it. So, how is it possible? St. Paul gives us the solution. After he laments his inner struggle, he asks, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Then he gives the answer, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:24-25). "With God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26); yes, even making saints out of sinners and the lukewarm.

In the ultimate analysis, it is amazing how little God asks of us to receive an astoundingly great reward: "a hundred-fold now in this time ... and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk 10:30). We are invited to die to self, so we can be captivated into complete love. It's the best exchange ever offered. Yes, sacrifice is painful and commitment in the face of difficulties is irksome. Love makes it bearable and, as we embrace perfect love, it becomes a joy even amid our suffering.

How, then, can we start to be *all in*? The simplest way is to utilize the gift of the present moment. The past is no longer ours, God has taken it back, and the future is not yet ours. The present moment with its mundane activities is the only gift we can return to God with love. In this way we live in peace, avoiding the sadness and depression that comes from excessively focusing on the past and avoiding the obsession about our anxiety of the future. The key is offering our trivial tasks to God with great love. Then driving to work, cooking, shopping, mowing the lawn, folding laundry, supervising the children, and all the other humble tasks that make up our day become a gift of love. Here I am reminded of something Kimberly Hahn said many years ago, "I am winning the world for Jesus, one diaper at a time." Best of all, as we lovingly give today's present moments to God, we are well on our way to giving him the rest of our life – one moment at a time.

Then, at the end of our life we can say with St. Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*” (Gal 2:20).