

**February 20, 2005**  
**Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Already within the New Testament, we detect an appreciation that there are progressive "stages" in the life of divine grace, each with its own appropriate instruction. For example, the Epistle to the Hebrews distinguishes between grasping the "elementary principles of Christ" and learning those things that pertain to "perfection" (6:1).

In general the traditional ascetical literature of the Church, witnessed as early as Origen in the third century, grew fond of analyzing the Christian life in three "stages," which later writers described as the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way.

Since at every point the Christian life involves purgation, illumination, and union with God, there is something artificial about these distinctions if we think about them as consecutive stages. Nonetheless, those three adjectives do indicate discernible differences in the ongoing life of a Christian who grows in divine grace.

At the beginning of the life in Christ, the newly converted Christian strives to break his ties with worldly ways, gain self-control over his passions, stop indulging his secular appetites and curiosities, discontinue those associations likely to lead him back into sin, and take up the Cross daily in order to follow Jesus in the activities of his life. Such efforts are appropriately called "purgative."

However, as he learns gradually to perfect his conversion, the Christian becomes stronger in the Holy Spirit. He begins to discover the rich mysteries of the Sacred Scriptures. He starts to experience the blessings of prayer. He is given insights into the secrets of the Kingdom. These experiences deserve the name "illuminative."

After a long time at such effort, and relying entirely on the grace of God, the Christian at long last comes to know in his heart how good the Lord is. He intuitively senses the presence of the Holy Spirit in ways that greatly transcend any of his earlier experiences. He is united to the Lord ever more intensely and with ever greater joy. These experiences properly merit the name "unitive."

The first stage is very painful, because it involves a complete shift of perspective, as the mind turns from the values of the world. There is often a great deal of sheer humiliation at this stage of the life in Christ. The soul tastes the bitterness of its accumulated bad habits. The Christian learns by deep experience that "all is vanity."

The second stage, though perhaps less radical, is still full of struggle, effort, and the strenuous application of discipline. This is the stage in which the Christian acquires

certain important habits, cultivated disciplines, without which there will be no growth in the Spirit.

Finally (even in the sense that the Christian may have grown old by this time!), the soul starts to taste more intimately the joy of the Lord. The believer arrives at that perfect love that casts out fear and begins to do, as though by custom and habit, all those things that are pleasing to God, running with joy the race set before him.

Moreover, these three "stages" of the life in Christ, according to the ascetical tradition of the Church, correspond to the three Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible: Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon.

In the first book, Ecclesiastes, we perceive the soul tasting the futility of all things apart from God. This bitter taste is essential to the life of the soul, because it compels the mind to trust only in God and resolutely to eschew the values and standards of the world. The world, in short, is hopeless; it is "all vanity." This is the stern message of Ecclesiastes.

In the second book, Proverbs, the soul ascertains the disadvantages of laziness and apathy, the worth of discipline and hard work, the value of spiritual exertion and self-control, the habit of constant prayer. The believer employs great effort to attain the indispensable moral virtues. This is the robust message of Proverbs.

In the third book, the Canticle of Solomon, the soul learns the joys of intimacy with God, the gladness of the Kingdom, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is the mystical and deeper message of the Canticle of Solomon, interpreted in the light of the traditional doctrine that the union of wife and husband is an image of the believer's union with Christ. This is the comforting message of the Canticle.

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