

Three Stages of the Spiritual Life

Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., was one of the great theologians of the 20th century, a man of encyclopedic knowledge. He taught at the Angelicum in Rome for 51 years. He had an intense interest in the mystical tradition of St. John of Cross, which brought him into contact with his most famous student, a young Polish priest by the name of Karol Wojtyla. He became the director of the future Pope's doctoral thesis, *The Doctrine of Faith According to St. John of the Cross*.

Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange's masterpiece is his two volume work, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*. In this monumental work he not only explains precisely in what sanctity consists, but he successfully defends the reality that all Christians are called to holiness. The basic idea of the three stages of the spiritual life is drawn from St. John of the Cross's classic, *The Dark Night*. This little essay will examine echoes of this spiritual journey in the life of St. Peter with an application to us.

Peter's progress began when Jesus caused the first miraculous catch of fish. With it came the grace of awareness that he was in the awesome presence of holiness. Peter exclaimed: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. Jesus responded by saying, 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.' So when they [Peter, James and John] had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him" (Lk 5:8,10-11).

Conversion begins with the recognition of our sinfulness, which is never greater than Jesus' ability to forgive us. The process of holiness begins when we are purged from sin. That process can't start until we acknowledge our sinfulness. It's the first step. Recognizing our sinfulness is no easy process. Our ability to rationalize and avoid looking deep into ourselves is common. Peter needed help, so do we.

The next insight is found in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 16:18-19) when Jesus renamed Simon giving him the name Peter or Rock because he will become the prime minister upon whom Jesus will build his Church. From that moment Jesus began to tell the disciples about his Passion and Death (Mt 16:21). However, Peter responded: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Mt 16:22).

Earlier Peter was thinking of himself as too sinful to even be in Jesus' presence. Now Peter was thinking of himself as too powerful and insightful. The disciple presumed to teach the Master. He was tempting Jesus to follow the disciple's plan and not the Father's. Jesus replied: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt 16:23). Self-confident pride is a deadly enemy.

During the Last Supper the apostles debated which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24). Surely Peter made his case on the basis that he was the head of the apostles. Subsequently, Jesus warned Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have

you, that he might sift you like wheat” (Lk 22:31). Peter boasted: “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death” (Lk 22:33).

It’s easy to be a hero in comfort removed from the field of battle. In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter would undergo an agony in miniature, but unlike Jesus who relied on the Father, Peter relied on Peter. When Jesus found him sleeping, he said: “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mk 14:37-38). On the field of combat a servant girl challenged Peter. He ended his third denial of even knowing Jesus with an oath and swearing (Mk 14:71). At this juncture Jesus intervened.

St. Luke informs us that at that very moment “the Lord turned and looked at Peter” (Lk 22:61). Peter was illuminated. He understood Jesus’ words: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Now he truly understood the blackness of his sinfulness and the amazing depth of God’s love and mercy. St. Luke tells us “he went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:62). Peter recognized how sin strikes the gentle heart of Jesus. Peter’s life would never be the same. St. John narrated the change on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias.

Jesus said: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” [The Greek word *agape* is used. It means unconditional love characterized by total committed self-sacrifice.] “He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” [Peter uses Greek word *phileo*, which is the love of friendship, but is not unconditional. Peter is no longer boastful and self-confident as he was on Holy Thursday.] “He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love [*agapao*] me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love [*phileo*] you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” [*phileo* – This time Jesus is asking Peter if he even has minimal love for him.] “Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [*phileo* – Lord you know that at least I have minimal love for you.] Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:15-17).

Now for the rest of the story! This amazing illumination in the light of Christ changed Peter. The crucible of his weeping and suffering purified his love. Peter surrendered to his Lord and Savior. With the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Peter will be drawn in to a deep union with his Jesus. Thus, Jesus said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. And after this he said to him, “Follow me” (Jn 21:18-19). Peter would die a martyr’s death during the persecution of Nero. He would be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die in the manner of his Jesus. Would that every life could end so gloriously!

Union occurs when we are so closely one with Jesus that our thoughts, actions, love, and aspirations become his thoughts, actions, love, and aspirations. Each stage in the spiritual journey passes through deeper experiences of the death to self. St. Paul wrote: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Suffering is the forge that burns away selfishness and perfects us in the oneness of love. As in everything else Jesus paved the way in his human nature: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience [love] through what he suffered; and *being made perfect* he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey [love] him" (Heb 5:7-10).

In our society suffering is often viewed as the worst of tragedies. The saints, however, rejoiced when they suffered. They considered it great blessings, because suffering helped them become more like their crucified Lord.

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