

## 051009 VIA NEGATIVA—VIA POSITIVA

(Sculptors, gardeners, mothers and God Almighty  
have something in common.)

Over in Florence in the Galleria Della Academia is the great Michelangelo statue of The David. It is huge. It stands eleven feet tall and has been placed on a three foot pedestal and so it looms fourteen feet in the air. It has been placed at the end of a long corridor. You can see the statue as you look down the corridor but it does not dawn on you right away just how massive and magnificent it is until you start walking closer. Along the corridor are unfinished blocks of marble that Michelangelo had been working on when he died. You see a square block of marble perhaps five or six feet high, three feet by three feet with an arm beginning to emerge from the block or another where three faces are beginning to take shape. How did he know that those faces and that arm were in there? Sculptors work primarily by means of what is known as the Via Negativa, the negative way. They work by cutting away the pieces that do not belong. They chip and they chop—not that piece, not that block. And from that Negative Way, from that chipping away at what does not belong, the beautiful form of the statue begins to emerge. It is only then that the sculptor can begin to use the Via Positiva, the Positive Way. The Positive Way is the filing and the sanding and the polishing in such a way that the inner beauty of the marble can now begin to emerge into its own magnificence.

Not many of us are sculptors however. On the other hand, many here today are gardeners and gardeners too work very much from the Via Negativa and then from the Via Positiva. Gardeners remove the weeds so that the flowers and the vegetables and the grapes and the olives can grow. They also prune—they look and say to themselves: not that branch, not that cluster, not that node, not that leaf. And although the cutting would seem to be counterproductive and detrimental and destructive actually it helps to increase the yield and the growth—more grapes, more olives, more roses. But the Via Negativa has to be augmented by the Via Positiva by the gardener too. The Via Positiva means that there must be the turning of the soil and the watering and the sheltering and the mulching that the growth and the beauty need. It is the mixture of the two approaches that proves successful in the end.

Mothers can only be mothers by working both the Via Negativa and the Via Positiva. Mothers spend their entire lives with their children saying—not that action, not that way, not that attitude, not that mindset. Mothers are constantly pruning back their children to enhance their children's growth into productive adulthood. Many mothers grow weary of the Via Negativa approach because they feel like they have failed. They grow weary from the combat and the confrontation, with dealing with the immaturity and the deceptions. And yet the

Via Negativa is a fundamental part of motherhood. And it is balanced in most mothers by the Via Positiva whereby she encourages and supports and tends and drives and stands with her children and trust even when trust is not very easy to give. Both are necessary. Both are vital. Prune. Tend.

And then there is the Father in heaven whom Jesus refers to as the vinedresser tending the vine which is his son. It is a grapevine with grape clusters that is being referenced here by Our Lord. You and I are now part of the vine. Through baptism we have been grafted onto the vine and now we are being tended by the Lord so as to grow into the best we can be and become something truly beautiful for God. What we do not realize is that God uses the Via Negativa and the Via Positiva himself in dealing with us. In the beginning of the new creation there was no need for a Via Negativa because there was no sin. It is only that which is sinful which must be removed from us, pruned away so as to allow our own inner beauty to emerge and so as to become something truly fruitful for God.

When does God prune us and how does it work? God prunes us when we find ourselves challenged—not that viewpoint, not that habit, not that judgment. They must go. They are not of God nor do they reflect a godly way of being. It is painful for us to undergo these prunings and we do not like it when it happens but in the end we are more than we would have been without them and we are better than we would have been without them. God uses health, family, job, friends, neighbors, faith as areas in which he prunes. It is not because God does not care that he does this or because He hates us. It is precisely because God desires our best growth and development that He prunes.

But God too also uses the Via Positiva. Again, God works through people, situations, circumstances to encourage us, love us, assist us, grace us. We bristle with resentment sometimes when we do not grasp what is really going on and it is not uncommon for us to resist the very positive and gracious things God does for us especially as they come to us through people. But God is always at work, always with our truest and best selves in mind. A thought: “Lord, when you are pruning me help me to know it and to realize what is really going on. Lord, when you are encouraging me and supporting me let me know it and accept it and not be so resistant to that work which will enable me to flourish and to thrive.”