

Companions on the Journey

June 27, 2021

Dear Friends,

Sometimes our sins are not individual sins but have actually become habits. That poses a greater danger. And when we are in the grip of such habits of sin we sense it but we also sense that we cannot fix ourselves. There are five stages of such habitual sins identified by spiritual writers through the centuries.

Impairment— The habitual sin blinds us, our understanding. Yes, every sin produces blindness, and the more that sins are multiplied, the greater the blindness they produce. Thus, habitual sin leads to impaired vision and an impaired walk. Not seeing, the wicked stumble about and fall into a pit of their own making.

Indifference— After an evil habit is contracted, the sins that previously excited sorrow are now viewed with increasing indifference. (“It’s no big deal.”) We tend to grow increasingly indifferent and careless. Thus, as unrepented sin grows, not only does the sinner stagger about and fall into pits, he cares less and less about the foolishness of his ways. The sins that once caused shame, or the thought of which caused sorrow and aversion, either go unnoticed or seem normal—even attractive.

Incapacity — As sin deepens its hold, the willingness and even the capacity to repent decreases. Why is this? St. Augustine answers this well when he says, “When lust was served it became habit, and when habit was not resisted it became necessity.” (*Confessions*, 8.5.10). Sin deepens its hold on the sinner in this way.

Incorrigibility— As Scripture says, “*The wicked man, when he is come into the depths of sins, has contempt.*” (Proverbs 18:3). St. John Chrysostom commented on this, saying that habitual sinners, being sunk in the abyss of darkness, despise corrections, sermons, censures, Hell, and God; they despise everything. A bad habit gradually hardens the heart and the habitual sinner remains increasingly unmoved and mired in contempt for any correction or remedy. An evil habit gradually takes away all remorse and replaces it with angry indignation at any attempted correction. Then, instead of regretting his sins, the sinner rejoices in them, even laughing and boasting of them. Scripture says, “*They are glad when they have done evil and rejoice in the perverseness of evil.*” (Proverbs 2:14). Thus, they are incorrigible. They laugh at attempted correction and celebrate their sins with pride.

Indisposition— When the understanding is deprived of light and the heart is hardened, the sinner ordinarily dies obstinate in his sin. Scripture says, “*A hard heart shall fare ill at the end.*” (Ecclesiastes 3:27). Some may say that they will amend their ways before they die, but it’s very difficult for a habitual sinner, even in old age, to change his life. St. Bernard said, “*The man on whom the weight of a bad habit presses, rises with difficulty.*” Indeed, how can a sinner, weakened and wounded by habitual sin, have the strength to rise? Even if he sees the way out, he often considers the remedies too severe, too difficult. Though conversion is not impossible, he is indisposed because it all seems like too much work. In addition, his love has likely grown cold for the good things that God offers.

Thus, even on their deathbeds, many sinners remain unmoved and unwilling to change; the darkness is deep, their hearts have hardened, and their sloth has solidified. In these ways sin is like a progressive illness, a deepening disease; it moves through stages in much the same way that cancer does. Repentance at any stage is possible, but it becomes increasingly unlikely, especially by stage four, when the sinner becomes proud of his sin and joyful in his iniquity.

And so what are we to do? We ask others to pray for us—always. We choose to pray for those we see and recognize in the grip of habitual evil. We continue to care about them when they no longer care about themselves. We choose not to give up hope. AND. We remember that within the soul of those with habitual sins indwells the very Holy Spirit of God who alone can change and transform even the coldest and hardest of human hearts. Think of the good thief on the cross. While the sinner cannot change herself. Her heart can truly be changed by the powerful, life-giving and transformative grace of Jesus Christ. And so, we pray.

In the Peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry