Columns
Spirituality



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When does the past end?

Several years ago, in my early days of fervor, I told a good friend that my double dream was to be really thin and holy. To be a person who is able to become morally and spiritually excellent. It would take some effort but I thought it was worth a shot. She replied with authority that I should "concentrate on really thin. Holy is not likely in the cards for you."

I don't always act the way I believe. And for centuries that has been called sin. I don't know who came up with that word. I was taught that it was a transgression against God's divine law, that is what God wished for us to avoid. Demanded of us. Whenever I thought I sinned in the past I felt it in my gut. Knowing what I knew, sorrow sometimes followed. But not always. Sometimes just fear.

In grade school we memorized the Baltimore Catechism to make sure that we knew who made us and why God made us. To make sure that we knew all of the sins to avoid even though we did not understand some of them.

When fear of damnation resulted — easy — go to confession on Saturday and if you are sincere, sin is forgiven. Gone after five Hail Marys and five Our Fathers! Slate wiped clean. I was free to do it again after paying the great price of ten short prayers. With a promise of course not to do it again. But I often did.

As a child, transgressions were minor. Venial sins. If I died before confession — purgatory. Fought with brothers. Lied to parents. Forgot my evening prayers. As a teen, with nerves on edge, "I had impure thoughts, but Father, but I did not enjoy them." He was in my classroom every week. Did he recognize my voice? Those thoughts easily erased. Next time I will enjoy them. As an adult, still going to confession. More serious transgressions. Mortal sins. If I died before confession — hell. Ate meat on Friday, but by mistake. Missed Mass one Sunday because I was just too tired. "But only once, Father."



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Who came up with this idea? Why did I give this man that kind of power over heaven or hell? The power to secure salvation for me. Or not. ...

Then I woke up. Father did not need to know. Ten short prayers were not healing. There must be a better way.

When does the past end?

So, what makes us holy? After many long years with a Catholic conscience, I admit I am no expert on holy. But I have learned a few things along the way.

Perhaps holiness is simply happiness that is filled with "yes." Happiness that stems from being moral and spiritual. Happiness that leads to peace within. Happiness that isn't needy. That pushes what is inside out. That answers "yes" to the world. That answers "yes" to a neighborhood at a time. To one person at a time.

Forget judgment. Affirm neighbors. Speak softly. Notice others. Give comfort. Lend a hand. Kindness, yes. Indifference, no.

"*Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.*"

—*Matthew 7:12*

Share who you are. Share what you have. Share your time. Share your bread. Generosity, yes. Selfishness, no.

"*Your light must shine before others.*"

—*Matthew 5:16*

The sun, moon and stars. The face of a baby. The sound of a symphony. The roar of the ocean. The flight of a bird. The wrinkles on an old face. The work of an artist. The sunflowers in bloom. The words of a poet. The memories held dear. Beauty, yes. Ugly, no.

"*Observe how the lilies of the field grow.*"

—*Matthew 6:28*

Do not walk alone. Share dreams. Pray. Embrace. Discuss. Debate. Stand in solidarity. Community, yes. Isolation, no.

"*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.*"

—*Matthew 18:20*

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Open your arms. Open your heart. Be not afraid. Love, yes. Hate, no.

"*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

—*Mark 12:31*

Use your voice. Be informed. Vote. Stand up for yourself. Stand up for others. Courage, yes. Cowardice, no.

"*But don’t be afraid of those who threaten you.*"

—*Matthew 10:26*

No more war. No more hunger. No more poverty. No more racism. No more guns. No more homophobia. No more greed. Hope, yes. Despair, no.

"*If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it.*"

—*John 14:13*

No grudges. No envy. No hate. No vengeance. No spitefulness. Forgiveness, yes. Revenge, no.

"*Forgive and you will be forgiven.*"

—*Luke 6:37*

The list goes on. Everything yes can be found in the life of Jesus.

When does the past end? Perhaps it has.

Catechism gone. Words of Jesus embraced.

Thin doesn't really matter. *Yes* absolutely does.

Note: I checked seven parishes in my area for confession schedules. All were the same — one hour once a week.

It seems Reverend Father, as though you may have been dismissed.