

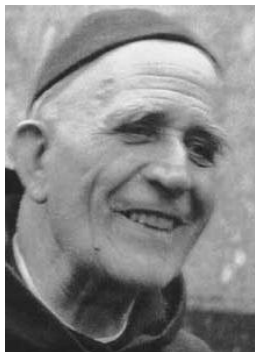
Skills for the Contemplative Disciple: Our Imperfections? (Part III of III)

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Skills for Contemplative Disciples: Our Imperfections? Part 3 of 3

Does this sound like anyone you know? A man shared his story with me. He was a scientist, and became very angry with God for the apparent inconsistencies in Catholic doctrine. When he studied Church documents, which he did with an admirable zeal, he only dug in his heels deeper in confusion and became angrier with God. When I suggested relaxing and finding God by admiring beauty, he threw up his hands because he felt he was wasting time and falling behind others on the spiritual journey; he desperately wanted to truly experience God's love but he doubted this was possible.

Maybe your struggle looks different than this man, but you still become discouraged with your own shortcomings and quality of prayer when you seek God. You know you are called for something important but you find yourself lacking vitality in the journey and falling into the same bad habits over again.



The Venerable Carmelite Father Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus writes, “The Spirit of Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve us, after conquering His apostles by love, gladly disappears behind their personality and their action.”^[i] You may ask, “What does it mean to have Jesus conquer me with love? Would Jesus want to disappear to act through me?” What is keeping me from living the Christian life more fully? After saying Yes to Jesus, we have to determine how to work with ourselves and seek Him in the midst of all the struggles of daily life. Our call as disciples is to cultivate contemplative union with Him but how?

God seeks to give us “radical healing” from all that would limit Him from living in us and through us and tries to eradicate the entrenched self focus that is part of our fallen human nature. As Father Thomas Dubay, S.M. describes in [Fire Within](#), “The earnest practice of virtue [good habits] directly causes a deepening prayer, and...as prayer develops, so does one find it much easier to be humble...”^[ii] We want to “tame the horse” so our passions (joy, hope, fear and sorrow) can be guided by the bridle of our reason and the Holy Spirit. God conquers us with love by leading us to address our imperfections.



This involves a very particular conversion process. We each have areas of our personalities that are redeemed, or functioning in sync with grace, and areas of our impulses and choices that need to be brought into the light. Just as our initial faith conversion was a process and involved stages of growth and choice, when Jesus desires that we address our broken places, he draws us to trust His love and our lovability. He graces us so we are open to the possibility of His action in us so we can seek His healing. We then have to actively practice right choices which dispose us to receive God's grace in a short time.



What good habits should today's disciple focus on? St. John of the Cross provides us with a list of seven imperfections to consider. Review this simple list to see which one is an Achilles tendon for you. Here, self-knowledge truly is a gift of grace.

Spiritual pride: Some disciples, when God strengthens them with warm experience in the season of spring start to feel pleased with their progress. They may want to be seen as holy by others, including their director.

Spiritual avarice: We can equate this with spiritual possessiveness—the unbridled desires to take in spiritual talks, read religious books, or collect religious objects of devotion. I am remembering one staff person at another parish who begrudgingly shared a statue with me in my temporary office even though her desk was covered with them!

Spiritual lust: We may, at times, avoid praying when sexual fantasies, feelings, or desires crop up in the middle of our prayer or surround important spiritual relationships. We are an integration of body and soul. In direction, one woman told me that she dreaded praying because thoughts about her young pastor would surface.

Anger: As God changes the spiritual season of our soul, we may become angry with Him. Where did He go—and *why* did He go? We also can be impatient with our own or others' spiritual progress. Ask yourself, isn't it easier to be upset over someone else's faults rather than our own?

Spiritual gluttony: Sometimes we may seek God for the consolations He brings rather than seeking purity of heart and discretion in our appetites. Here we may secretly be saying, “Keep the candy coming Lord.”

Spiritual envy: This vice causes some to feel sad about the spiritual progress of others. We may notice a not so subtle sense of competition among parishioners. Be leery when you want to measure up to others spiritually.

Spiritual sloth: In the spiritual life, it is possible to take on more than our resources allow. We over-tax ourselves and become worn out and bored in spiritual pursuits. Likewise, sometimes we don't hold ourselves accountable for follow-through.

Rather than beat ourselves with this list, which would be a subtle sign of spiritual pride and anger, take these items to prayer. Ask God to grace you with honest self-awareness and then make resolutions to amend your ways by picking one vulnerability at a time. We are after balance and want our personalities to be enlarged by the presence and animation of the Holy Spirit!

[ii] Venerable P. Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus, O.C.D., *[I am a Daughter of the Church: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality](#)*, Christian Classics International, Westminster, Maryland, 1953, p.664.

[iii] Dubay, Thomas, S.M., *[Fire Within](#)*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1989, p. 115.

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Art: Mirror of *Venerable Père Marie-Eugène de l'Enfant-Jésus* [Henri Grialou (1894-1967)] from <http://www.carmel.asso.fr/-Marie-Eugene-de-l-Enfant-Jesus-.html>, used with permission. *Praying Hands* study for an Apostle figure of the “Heller” altar (*Betende Hände*), Albrecht Dürer, ca 1508; *St. John of the Cross*, Francisco de Zurbarán, 1656; both PD-US, Wikimedia Commons.

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