

## Spiritual Habits Talk: From Physical Vice to Spiritual Virtue

For those who do not know or remember me, I'm Chris. I'm from Columbus, Ohio, and graduated high school in 2019. I came to OU to study meteorology and did so for three years before graduating with a degree in not-meteorology. I graduated summa cum laude in 2022 from OU with a BA in Religious Studies and minors in mathematics and meteorology. The January before I graduated, I applied to seminary. From late April until the end of May, I saw my first tornado, graduated, turned 21, went on vacation, got accepted into the seminary, and watched my bishop get ordained. I just finished my first year of pre-theology (philosophy) studies at the Pontifical College Josephinum, which is in Columbus. It is the only pontifical seminary outside of Italy, and rather than being subject to any diocese, is subject to the Holy See. This upcoming year, I will complete my second and last year of pre-theology before, hopefully, moving on to theology. (They also changed all the words for seminary, so if you want to listen about those, listen to my podcast, *Returning to Tradition*.)

All right, onto the talk.

### **Introduction**

As Catholics, we believe that the human person is a body-soul composite. The body exists for the benefit of the soul, as without the body we would not be able to gain knowledge. In the book of Matthew,

“Someone told Jesus, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with you.’ But he said in reply to the one who told him, ‘Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.’”<sup>1</sup>

This should not be surprising; the disposition of our soul toward God matters more than the disposition of our body toward God. Our engaging in meditation and contemplation WITH God matters more than our rattling off a list of petitions and talking TO God. This is not to say that our bodies don't matter – they do. Nor that we shouldn't list petitions to God – we should. Rather, as Jesus suggests, we need to change our way of thinking from the ways of the body and worldly things to the ways of the soul and heavenly things.

Fulton Sheen comments:

“When the woman in the crowd praised the Mother of Our Lord, He turned the praise to spiritual motherhood, and said that she who did the will of His Father in heaven was His mother.”<sup>2</sup>

And Mary said yes, so She is also His Mother using the spiritual definition. Sheen continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12:47-50. See also Mark 3:31-35.

<sup>2</sup> Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is Not His Own*, 248-9.

“Relationship was here lifted from the level of the flesh to the spirit. To beget a body is blessed; to save a soul, is more blessed, for such is the Father’s Will.”<sup>3</sup>

Ok, so the body and the soul are related; and while they are united, they also must work together. Archbishop Coakley recently wrote about this in his Pastoral Letter *On the Unity of the Body and the Soul*. If you haven’t read it, I encourage you to do so because it addresses the reality of gender dysphoria and how to accompany those who experience it. His letter, like this talk, rests upon Catholic anthropology. Archbishop Coakley notes that “We don’t have bodies; we are bodies enlivened by souls.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that we treat our bodies as if we have them. As if they are our possession. Coakley goes on to say that:

“We fill ourselves and our lives with work, the desire for power, sex, alcohol, the internet, and constant noise in a futile attempt to satisfy the aching in our soul, or alternatively, as a way of numbing the pain of not finding satisfaction.”<sup>5</sup>

Coakley essentially lists six common physical habits. So I am going to begin by addressing all six and then propose seven spiritual habits to replace them with. Each of the six can be easily associated with one or two of the seven deadly sins. Any of the seven virtues can replace any of the six vices. It is no surprise that there are six vices (the number of imperfection) and seven capital virtues (the number of perfection).

### **First Vice: Work (Greed)**

The first physical vice he lists is work. Our bodies were built to work. After all, one of the consequences of the Fall is that we have to work the earth. Certainly, there is a sin for lack of working just as much as a sin for overworking. As with all of these potential vices, the virtue lies in the middle. For college students, the sin likely would fall in overworking one’s self. So the question is: why do you work? Is it for money? Is it for good grades? What do you want to gain by working?

It is easy to get caught up in the process engrained in us since childhood: get the best grades, to go the best school, do the best you can to get the best job, that pays the most money, and you can have the best family and be happy.

This is not happiness. This is perfectionism and, if not a greed for money and success itself, a greed for doing well to please others. I think that we think that if we make a misstep along the way, that’s the end of our hope. But there are two things that are misplaced in the way we work today: happiness and hope. To be sure, you can obtain happiness from work. You may enjoy your work or enjoy your classes. But that is not true joy. What our souls desire is the joy of being in heaven with God, not the happiness or satisfaction from completing a task.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Coakley, *On the Unity of the Body and the Soul: Accompanying Those Experiencing Gender Dysphoria*, (April 30, 2023), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

And then there is hope: we do well in what we do for the sole or primary purpose of accomplishing this step to continue along the journey of worldly success. The will of society is for us to follow this path. What is the will of God?

Before concluding on work, I need to mention something that we think we do enough, but we don't do correctly. We see that we, or more commonly, our parents, sacrificed a lot for us to get to where we are today. To thank them, we feel the need to do our best, and indeed we should. However, sometimes we take this to the point of overworking, either at their command or of our own accord. Certainly we should not be wasteful of what our parents have given us and sacrificed for us to do well. But we should not overwork our bodies for the sake of that. We should do the best we can without getting caught up in the work we do.

A spiritual solution to work is holy leisure.

### **Second Vice: Power (Wrath, Pride)**

The second physical vice that Archbishop Coakley lists is power. There is a natural desire for power, especially among men. Once we have a taste of power, we want more. Once given a job and offered a promotion, we take it. And we take the next promotion. And we take the next promotion.

But there is great importance in the restraint that we show in obtaining power. According to someone who works for EWTN's "The Journey Home," the number one reason that ministers of non-Catholic ecclesial communities convert is due to a lack of governing power.

Like work, power is good but only in moderation and for the right reasons. With power, I think there are two major sins that one can fall into: wrath and pride.

The more that one obtains power, the more that one thinks they can control others, have things always go their way, and have others subject to them. If used improperly, the leader of a company or a group project or any one in position of authority (like a dad over his household) can be susceptible to sin. Those subject to the one in power look up to him and follow him blindly. When one rebels without just cause, the one with power answers with wrath, which ends up hurting the people closest to him that he depends on. So, part of having power is realizing that you are dependent on those on whom you depend.

In a similar way, pride. It is good to be prideful in your work, in who you are, and in your successes. You should care that you do well and care that you've fought to get to where you are. But, like wrath, this prideful power becomes sinful when you use it to put others beneath you. Essentially, so long as you see yourself as above others, rather than someone who has been entrusted to care for others by God, you can be susceptible to pride.

A spiritual solution to power is service to others.

### **Third Vice: Sex (Lust)**

The third physical vice that Archbishop Coakley notes is sex. No doubt, this is an issue in society – both before and during marriage. We know that we require physical connection with other

humans. I would hypothesize that we have cut ourselves off from having connections with so many people that it becomes “easier” for us to apply our whole connection in one big way to one person, rather than in small little ways to many people. It is easier to hook up than to make friends.

This is not helped by our innate desire and attraction to sex. When not properly ordered, it becomes lust. What it leads to is a path of destruction. Watching pornography and masturbating turns the physical relationships we SHOULD have with other in on ourselves. It subsequently impacts how we look at other people: not as people but as objects to induce pleasure. What makes this so difficult is that we don’t consciously think: I want to see to gain pleasure. Hooking up with people likewise takes an act that is SO GOOD and turns it into a release.

The vices associated with sex go beyond hooking up. You might love your boyfriend or girlfriend. [They might even be the same sex as you.] The natural inclination seems to be an if-then statement of: if I experience love, then I have sex. This is disordered. There is no if-then statement for love or sex. Our brain may work in if-then statements, but that’s not how God built our souls. You can love your partner and still lust for them. And this is a vicious if-then statement: if I experience lust, then I have sex.

At the end of the day, the real problem with lustful sex is that it mimics what love is without our realizing what it is doing. The proper ordering of sex does not end with marriage. Rather, the proper ordering of sex begins NOW with the friendships you make with other people. Therefore, a spiritual solution to sex is fostering friendships.

#### **Fourth Vice: Alcohol (Gluttony)**

The fourth physical vice is alcohol, with which I will add food. Again, there is nothing wrong with alcohol or food in and of themselves. For all people, food is used as a tool to grow in community with other people. For some, alcohol is used for this same purpose, or to have fun.

Food, when not consumed enough (and assuming no mental health concerns) can be sinful. But both alcohol and food, when consumed to excess are sinful and is termed gluttony.

Drinking underage and drinking too much at parties are two of the most common ways this applies to college students. I’m not going to say what you should do; so instead I will highlight the concern that drinking too much raises. Remember, our bodies must be respected, and drinking too much; just like eating too much or smoking too much, has health impacts on our bodies.

A spiritual solution to alcohol is fasting.

#### **Fifth Vice: Internet (Envy)**

The second to last physical vice Coakley provides is the internet. This is a somewhat new concern to the human condition – and arguably the most concerning one. The rise of the internet and social media has no doubt contributed to a rise in mental health concerns among users. Likewise, the internet has caused people to more liberally perform the four previous vices:

- a. People can work more because they can work from anywhere. Even in your pocket, even at home – in some cases FROM home. There is an upside to this: humans are more efficient, and it may help if trying to juggle work and raising a family. The problem is that we are bad at setting boundaries in our lives.
- b. People can act like they have more power than they do behind the anonymity of a screen. Even if using an account with your actual name and photo on it, people say things that they would never say to a human sitting in front of them. This is essentially a disregard for the other person, a lack of love, and a showing of power.
- c. People can access an endless amount of sexual and sexualized content. AI can develop pornography suited to your specific wants. Advertisements and videos are filled with content that either promote sex or enhance sexually-oriented content. TV shows and streaming sites are packed with sexual references.
- d. Like sex, people can view an overwhelming amount of alcohol and drug-related activity. This is shown most clearly in TV shows and ads, which normalize excess consumption. Subconsciously, when viewing this, we may know it to be bad, but eventually we become numb to it and it becomes “normal.”

So, a lot of our internet usage that turns negative can be chalked up to seeing people on the internet doing better than us, or being more successful than us, or having more fun than us. In sum, the internet can lead to envy. A spiritual solution to the internet is scripture.

### **Sixth Vice: Constant noise (Sloth)**

Another concern associated with the internet is our need for constant noise. Our obsession with noise leads to a lack of silence. All this stems from a lack of diligence (slothful inactivity) on our part. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we watch videos, listen to podcasts, and blare music in our ears. This has two major consequences.

First, our need for constant noise leads to a reduction in interactions with others. The more we fill ourselves with noise, the less inclined we are to talk to others. When we walk on campus with our headphones in, it makes us appear unapproachable and we certainly are not inclined to approach other people. When we exclusively play the radio in our cars instead of having conversation with the other occupants of the vehicle, we miss out on the opportunity to grow in friendship.

Second, our noise-filled lives make it difficult to have silence, either for others to approach us or for God to speak to us. I will discuss this more as a virtuous strategy here shortly. Therefore, a spiritual solution to constant noise is silent meditation and contemplation.

### **From Vice to Virtue**

Ok, so we have the six vices: work, power, sex, alcohol, the internet, and constant noise. These vices primarily take control over our bodies, therefore inhibiting our body from virtue. Vices remain in the realm of the physical in that they operate based on biology. If we find something pleasing, we continue to do it. When we attempt to turn those bad habits into good ones, we have

to realize a change. The instrument of the habit is still our body. And, like bad habits, good habits impact our soul. The difference is that virtues operate based on spirituality.

In all habits, the body is the means of the habit and the soul is the object of the habit (the thing that is effected by the habit's action). In bad habits, the body is also the agent. But in good habits, the soul is the agent. Coakley quotes the Vatican II document *Lumen Fidei*, which states:

“Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.”<sup>6</sup>

So, since the body and the soul are related, how can we move from a sinful physical habit to a holy spiritual habit? First, we have to realize our biology. Our body MATTERS. We need our body to build habits, as it is how we obtain knowledge. When we do something that feels good, several hormones are released. Primarily, this releases dopamine.

We work, that gives us pleasure, we work more for a bigger dopamine hit.

We get power, that gives us pleasure, we get more power for a bigger dopamine hit.

We have sex, that gives us pleasure, we want more sex for a bigger dopamine hit.

We drink alcohol, that gives us pleasure, we want more alcohol for a bigger dopamine hit.

We use the internet, that gives us pleasure, we use it more for a bigger dopamine hit.

We have constant noise, that gives us pleasure, we fill our ears with it for a bigger dopamine hit.

Do you get it? This is an endless cycle of more more more. This is why disconnecting from the world for a few days feels so good – because we are cleansing ourselves. Consider making a silent retreat for a week, or not using your phone for a few days. Silence and fasting are two powerful tools to end these cycles. But truly, vicious habits are rooted in our biology. *Therefore, moral culpability is reduced for sinful habitual actions.* The Catechism states:

“responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.”<sup>7</sup>

I would imagine that MOST sins we commit are either out of habit, inordinate attachments, or other psychological or social factors. That does not necessarily mean your culpability is reduced, it probably does, but consider finding a spiritual director or priest to talk about that with if you are concerned. The Church gives us this prayer to begin Mass toward the end of Ordinary Time:

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<sup>6</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen Fidei*, 60. See also Coakley, *On the Unity of the Body and Soul*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1735.

Almighty and merciful God,  
in your goodness take away from us all that is harmful,  
so that, made ready both in mind and body,  
we may freely accomplish your will.<sup>8</sup>

Why did I spend half of a talk on spiritual habits on vices? Because you need to know which spiritual habits to build based upon the habits you currently have. For example, you masturbate because you are filled with lust. The root issue is not lust, it is boredom or tiredness or stress. Find that root issue and address the root issue with a spiritual habit suited to that issue. If boredom, build friendships; if tiredness, holy leisure; if stress, meditation.

So, the reason you're here: let's unpack seven spiritual habits, three of which I just mentioned and all of which can be used to replace any of the six vices I talked about.

### **First Virtue: Sacraments (Patience) – Overarching**

The first and most important virtue is patience. The way that we can make patience a habit is through the Sacraments. At every Mass, our venial sins are forgiven. Every time we receive the Eucharist, the same occurs. It is for this reason that we must be patient with ourselves when we sin. As Pope Francis remarks, “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”<sup>9</sup> This is based in St. Ambrose's understanding that “I must receive it always, so that it may always forgive my sins. If I sin continually, I must always have a remedy.”<sup>10</sup> The Book of Proverbs states: “Though the just fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble from only one mishap.”<sup>11</sup>

We let the Devil win when we beat ourselves up over our shortcomings. We must be patient with ourselves to overcome sins. They, especially when they are vicious habits, DO NOT go away overnight. Therefore, we must be patient as we win. Take the habit one day at a time. Go to confession often. Receive the Eucharist often.

### **Second Virtue: Holy Leisure (Charity) – esp. Work**

The second virtue I wish to speak about is charity. When you think charity, you usually think helping others, but that, I think, falls better under the next virtue. Instead, I want to consider the best way that you can be charitable to yourself: holy leisure.

Father Steven Beseau, friend of Archbishop Coakley and the Rector-President of the Pontifical College Josephinum identified that the time we attribute to leisure is the time when grave sins happen.<sup>12</sup> True, holy leisure, occurs when we pray, study, use food and drink for fellowship,

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<sup>8</sup> *Roman Missal*, “Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time,” Collect. See also Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1746.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 47. Cf. Ambrose, *De Sacramentis*, IV.6.28: PL 16, 464.

<sup>10</sup> Ambrose, *De Sacramentis*, IV.6.28: PL 16, 464.

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 24:16.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Beseau, “Holy Leisure,” (First-Year Class Formation Conference, Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, February 6, 2023).

listen to good music, read, and being outside and playing sports.<sup>13</sup> The highest form of leisure, he says, is contemplation, which is the last virtue I will discuss.<sup>14</sup>

“A second time, the king sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those invited: Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast.’ Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business.”<sup>15</sup>

How silly! Instead of going to a party (read: participating in holy leisure), these men chose to work.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say don’t be prudent about which parties you go to, be prudent about that. Rather, when a party is thrown by the King of all Creation, it is something you drop everything for. That is, every Sunday and for holy hours throughout the week. Working is not a problem. Prudence is important. However, the issue arises when the weekend becomes our focus instead of Sunday.<sup>17</sup> When the things of the world (such as Friday night high school football, Saturday college football, and Sunday NFL football) overtake the things of God. So be charitable to yourself, be charitable to God, and create time for holy leisure.

### **Third Virtue: Service to Others (Humility) – esp. Power**

The third virtue, associated with service to others, is humility. I think that service to others is best described as humility because to serve others, you really have to think of yourself as a servant to a master. The servant is completely subjected to power, so it only makes sense that this type of humility is an antidote to power. Jesus says:

“Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here immediately and take your place at table’? Would he rather say to him ‘Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished’? Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”<sup>18</sup>

This parable reveals the truth about the way we volunteer and serve others rather than how to govern and subject others. So, when we serve, we should not help someone in one moment and then at the next expect to be served. This is where pride comes in. To curb the pride of expectation of return for our good works, Jesus suggests that:

“when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 22:4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Beseau, “Holy Leisure.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 17:7-10.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 6:3.

Practically speaking, how can we serve others? We can help at food pantries, at nursing homes, ask the pastor or office manager if anything needs done around the church. We can also offer our Communion at daily Mass for those who do not come to Sunday Mass or those who need special prayers. We can help FOCUS and Campus Ministry when they table on campus. We can go out on our own on campus with a sign saying that we want to pray with people. We can have ‘blessing bags’ in our car to give to the homeless people that we drive past. We can pray for those homeless people. There are so many ways!

#### **Fourth Virtue: Fostering Friendships (Chastity) – esp. Sex**

Before I get into the virtue that combats habitual sex, which is chastity, I want to offer a word of consolation, although I’m not sure how consoling it will be. Almost everyone has a sex problem in one way or another. I want to refer to what I stated above that habits lessen the culpability of a grave matter. Therefore, some theologians argue that it is unlikely that if you are addicted to pornography or masturbation or sex that you are committing a mortal sin with every occurrence. You should still go to confession often and know you are committing a sin of grave matter, but you lack full consent due to the hormones associated with the habit.

This is where the first virtue of patience makes a reappearance. It takes about a year of abstinence from any sort of immoral sexual habit to overcome the habit. The whole process can take over two years to go from constant practice to abstinence.<sup>20</sup> Monsignor Stephen Rohlf, a priest of the Diocese of Peoria and a spiritual director at St. Paul Seminary, states that the addiction to porn must be dealt with before the addiction to masturbation, since porn is a deep memory in that it is stored for over ten years.<sup>21</sup> There are a number of resources for overcoming this including *Covenant Eyes* and generally having an accountability partner. The resource that some seminaries use, for those interested, is a group program called *The Augustine Way*. *The Augustine Way* highlights the psychological elements involved within the addiction as well as ways to overcome it.

My suggestion for helping to build chastity is primarily by setting boundaries with everyone. These don’t need to be explicit, except in some cases. For example, when in a relationship with someone, I’d highly suggest having explicit boundaries because not only will it enable avoiding the near occasion of sin, it also improves communication which helps the relationship.

The best way, in my opinion, to set boundaries is through fostering friendships. Primarily, if not exclusively, this must come through the formation of community with people of the same age AND the same sex as yourself. This is important because with this group you can have holy leisure and (at some point) accountability. How you form friendships should be gradually and organically. In particular, going to Mass together and sharing meals together helps. Prayer and food are the two hinges of any relationship. (I just made that up, but it sounds good.)

#### **Fifth Virtue: Fasting (Temperance) – esp. Alcohol**

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Rohlf, “Four” (Celibacy Conference, Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, November 5, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The virtue that combats gluttony is temperance. As I mentioned earlier, virtue lies in the middle. When it comes to dealing with food and alcohol, this is most true. Although the spiritual habit that I'm suggesting to deal with gluttony is fasting, it is worth noting that fasting is not the end-all-be-all. Like I said, virtue lies in the middle. But fasting during a period of temptation is a great method of receiving grace and avoiding that temptation. Jesus commands that:

“...when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to others to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden.”<sup>22</sup>

Like serving others and almsgiving, we should not use pride to make our good works obvious to others. Thomas Aquinas states that temperance deals with the desires of sensible pleasures.<sup>23</sup> Rather than shunning all these pleasures, the temperate man shuns those that are immoderate and contrary to reason.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, moderation is what is important.

Moderation should be the normative consumption of things. From time-to-time, for the sake of offering our sufferings up with those of Christ, we should suffer fasting. Our physical fasting is meaningless unless accompanied by the spiritual avoidance of sin. It is for this reason that fasting is a spiritual habit. In the early Church, fasting occurred on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as from midnight until Mass. Before Vatican II, there were also four Saturdays a year that had special fasting associated with them. Today, abstinence (or some other form of penance) is to be practiced every Friday in memory of the crucifixion.

### **Sixth Virtue: Scripture (Kindness) – esp. Internet**

The best idea, in my opinion, to defeat the internet is by moving from screen to sheet. From the internet to The Book (the Bible). In doing so, we are practicing the virtue of kindness to ourselves, by familiarizing ourselves with God's word. The most common way that this is done is through *lectio divina* or a bible study, in which close attention is paid to a passage of scripture. Some people find it helpful to read through the Gospels.

When reading the Bible, Father Brett Brannen, a priest of the Diocese of Savannah, well known for his priestly discernment book *To Save a Thousand Souls*, suggested to the seminarians in a talk last year:

“Imagine that your Bishop sends you mail marked ‘Personal and Confidential.’ Upon receiving the letter, you would open it and read every word very carefully. Every page of the Bible is marked by God with the words ‘Personal and Confidential.’”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 6:17.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.59.4.

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.34.1.

<sup>25</sup> Brett Brannen, “Lectio Divina” (Spiritual Conference, Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, November 28, 2023), paraphrased.

Not only is the reading of scripture kind to ourselves in that we hear God speak through His Word to us today, but it is also kind to God, as a sort-of thanksgiving to Him. Spending time with scripture “will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.”<sup>26</sup>

If you find reading scripture difficult, you can listen to a Catholic podcast or read another spiritual book.

### **Seventh Virtue: Silent Prayer and Meditation (Diligence) – esp. Noise**

Ok, the last virtue at first seems opposite to the idea of reading scripture, or at least listening to a podcast. Remember, one of the bad physical habits was constant noise. Therefore, a good spiritual habit is silent prayer. Ideally, silent prayer involves spending time in meditation and contemplation with God. Essentially, it is being silent and allowing God to speak to you. There is no activity of intercession but there may be repetition of simple prayers that lead into meditation, such as the Rosary or the Jesus Prayer.

Contemplation, at first, seems to be a sort-of mundane activity. In fact, it is the most fruitful form of prayer. “Contemplation is re-creation rooted in the celebration of God.”<sup>27</sup> That is, God recreates us by our celebrating Him. Spending time in such silence is difficult, not only because our culture surrounds us with noise, but also many elementary teachings on prayer focus exclusively on telling God what we want from Him rather than listening to what God wants from us.

Deacon James Keating, the director of Theological Formation at the Institute of Priestly Formation, says that “contemplation is not continuous pleasure, it is continuous presence... it is suffering the presence of God.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus commands that:

“when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.”<sup>29</sup>

By inner room, this means that you should be most pious when others are not watching. And when others are present, to be aware of that. In other words, avoid public displays of piety like public displays of affection. This is not the same as avoiding public displays of worship, just like you should not avoid public displays of love.

In this secretive time, we are not supposed to pray to ‘get stuff’ in the same way that we are not supposed to receive the Eucharist to give us ecstasy. Rather, it keeps us spiritually alive.<sup>30</sup> So, “stop trying to achieve something in prayer. Let God love you.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the International Congress Organized to Commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation ‘*Dei Verbum*,’” (International Congress, Castel Gandolfo, Rome, September 16, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Beseau, “Holy Leisure.”

<sup>28</sup> James Keating, “Three,” (Recollection Conference, Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, January 29, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 6:6.

<sup>30</sup> Keating, “Three.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

The best way to do this is to start small. Give God maybe 15 minutes of silence, then the next month 30, and slowly work your way up to a holy hour. As you increase the time, you can spend some time on scripture and spiritual books, so long as the focus remains on contemplating God. Never go into a holy hour with a list of boxes to check off.

### **Suggestions and a Note of Love**

I just gave a few suggestions of the spiritual life, but it is important to remember that “there is no external metric of the spiritual life.”<sup>32</sup> The best way to acknowledge your progress is through a spiritual director, being honest with him or her and yourself. So a few closing notes:

1. Show up.<sup>33</sup> You can’t grow in a spiritual habit without practicing it.
2. Have a sense of humor.<sup>34</sup> If you aren’t laughing, even at yourself, you’re letting the devil win.
3. Pray. “Ask [for a special grace] and it will be given to you... for everyone who asks, receives.”<sup>35</sup>
4. Love. “God created humanity in love to share in love.”<sup>36</sup>

If you are present, laugh, pray, and love, it will be much easier to grow in spiritual habits. Although, as I mentioned, there is no metric for the spiritual life, you will notice that if you are doing well spiritually, the body will in turn improve its habits.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Brett Brannen, “Fundamentals of the Spiritual Life,” (Spiritual Conference, Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, February 27, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 7:7-8.

<sup>36</sup> Coakley, *On the Unity of the Body and Soul*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Sheen, *The Priest is Not His Own*, paraphrased.