

# ave maria CLASSICS

**PUBLISHER’S NOTE:** Clarence J. Enzler was the author of many Catholic books and booklets, including *My Other Self* (1957) and *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* (1970). His series of Lenten reflections, published under the title “Heroism and Holiness,” first appeared in the *Ave Maria* magazine in February, March, and April of 1963.

## Lenten Reflections

*Week One: All Are Called*

BY CLARENCE J. ENZLER

Most of us who read these pieces are both of the Faith and faithful to it. We try to live good lives. From time to time, caught up by the urgings of the Holy Spirit, we strive to raise ourselves toward a deeper love of God and of neighbor. We wish to be alive with faith, buoyant with hope, on fire with charity. Rather than daily offering to the all-loving God a few stray thoughts, we would, following St. Paul, “pray without ceasing.” Rather than giving the all-generous God a few scattered moments, we would give Him our whole lives.

But how? We find ourselves at a loss as to what to do. Our good impulses, like the good seed, are choked by the cares of this world. Our puzzlement at times threatens to become discouragement because of the seeming stagnation of our spiritual life.

We are tempted, indeed, to fall back on a fallacy of long-standing that where heroic sanctity is concerned we of the laity (especially the married) are simply not big-league spiritual material. True, we can go to heaven. But to achieve here below a high order of perfection? We forfeited that by

remaining out of religion (and especially by choosing marriage).

This, or course, is not only ridiculous; worse, it constitutes a temptation to mediocrity and to discouragement which St. Francis de Sales considers the devil’s most potent weapon against souls who truly desire to love God.

The truth is that God implants in every soul the seed of greatness—the ambition to be *somebody*—the aspiration to heroism.

I like the way the late Father Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., put it (in *In the Likeness of Christ*): “St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, when told contemptuously by her brother that she

### *Everyone’s Way of the Cross*

Clarence Enzler’s perennially popular *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* was first published by Ave Maria Press in 1970 and has since gone on to sell over 3.6 million copies, in both a [regular](#) and a [large print](#) edition. Ideal for either private devotion or public Stations of the Cross, Enzler’s meditation booklet urges us to carry on Christ’s “unfinished business” and unite our will with His.

was of no worth, resolved at least to be ‘great’ in humility, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, unable to accomplish the great feats of mortification of the other saints, would at all costs be *great* in love.”

We know that the Spanish soldier-noble pride of Ignatius Loyola led him to ask himself whether he was “great” enough to compete with the saints in austere asceticism. He was.

Since God made us thus, it is not wrong for each of us to thirst for greatness. Only we must seek it where it truly exists, and by God’s means.

Where we fail is not only in misunderstanding the nature of greatness, but in remaining miserably ignorant of *how* great God has made us to be. To be His adopted sons and daughters—to be loved by Him as Jesus is loved—to possess His own life—to be in the eternal, omniscient, omnipotent God and He in us—what other greatness that we can conceive is even faintly comparable with this?

It is impossible to read the Gospels, the Acts, and Epistles without feeling almost as a physical force the intensity with which the Lord desires *all* to be heroically great by being heroically holy. Speaking in His name, St. Paul in particular invites, exhorts, entreats, almost coerces his disciples to accept the goal of perfection.

“You must be clothed in a new self...sanctified through the truth,” he tells the Ephesians.

May the Lord “confirm your hearts in noble-minded holiness,” he prays for the Thessalonians. “What God asks of you is that you sanctify yourselves.” And again: “The life to which God has called you...is a life of holiness.”

To the Hebrews: “Brethren and saints, you share a heavenly calling,” he writes. God comes to us to “give us a share in that holiness which is His.”

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St. Peter is no less emphatic, “You must be holy in all the ordering of your lives.”

“Your mortal life must be ordered by God’s will, not by human appetites.”

And in one surpassingly beautiful passage he thus describes spiritual progress: “And you too have to contribute every effort on your part, crowning your faith with virtue, and virtue with enlightenment, and enlightenment with continence, and continence with endurance, and endurance with holiness, and holiness with brotherly love, and brotherly love with charity.”

But it is Our Lord, of course, Who says it best. “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.”

If this means anything, it means that sanctity for the sincere Christian should be as normal as “growing up.” We plant a seed and it becomes a bush; this is nature’s law of growth. A child is born and becomes an adult; again, the law of growth. In Baptism we are endowed with supernatural life and an almost limitless capacity for the spiritual growth.

What adulthood is on the physical level, sainthood is on the spiritual. Sanctity should be “normal.” To be a spiritual baby all of our lives, a petrified dwarf, this is *abnormal*.

Why is it that we do not grow to the holiness to which God has called us? It is because we do not apply to our spiritual life the kind of exercise it requires. How does an athlete develop his physical powers? By pushing himself to the limit of his abilities, and by this means constantly developing a little more strength, a little more spring, a little more speed.

How does a student extend the capacity of his mind? By progressively harder mental exercise.

Someone once asked St. Thomas Aquinas how to become a saint. He answered in two words: “Will it.”

And someone once asked St. Francis de Sales how to learn to love God. He replied in three words: "By loving Him." When his questioner persisted, St. Francis said in effect: "That is the only answer and the only way. We learn to love God by loving Him, and each act of love causes us to love Him more."

Just as the athlete learns to run a four-minute mile by running to the limit of his present ability, so we learn to love God like saints by loving Him to the limit of our present ability. The difference is that while few can ever be capable of the four-minute mile, everyone is capable of sanctity.

When we act in accordance with the full degree of love that is in our soul, God gives us more grace and we grow in holiness. When we act with less love of God than is habitually ours, we prepare the way not for growth in love but for the decrease.

And what is loving God? It is simply doing what He wants, and being what He wants, because He wants it. Because *He* wants it; that is the key. It is not true that most of the good deeds we perform, we do because *we* want them; because we expect praise, reward, or at least a feeling of interior satisfaction? The difference between the saints and us is that God's will for the present moment was their rule of life. Whether they worked or played or prayed, they were not so much working or playing or praying as they were doing what they believed God wanted them to be doing at that moment.

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They did what we do; but they did it for God. And we, too, must learn and practice doing just what we normally do, only not because it is our will but because it is His.

But still there persists that nagging doubt that heroic sanctity is actually not for us.

But it *is* for us. And it is by no means unknown among us. While only God knows

who among the living or newly dead are His saints, it sometimes happens that our lives are deeply touched by persons who, so far as the human eye and mind can discover, are truly heroic in holiness. I am thinking of such a person.

She was not without evident faults, among them possibly the failure to curb properly a glib and witty tongue. The desire for the bon mot sometimes had the better of her and now and then this left wounds.

Though she undoubtedly tried to curb these faults of the tongue, they remained with her almost to the end. But as St. Francis de Sales said of the struggle to root out another kind of imperfection, "happy, indeed, shall we be if we attain to this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die."

She was remarkably generous, not only in donating clothing, food, books and money to the needy, but in expending her time and energies. She never learned to drive a car, but she would walk all over town to do an errand for a friend, relative or neighbor. Her conception of the spirit of poverty caused her to go all her life without a modern kitchen, dishwasher, disposal, clothes dryer and other dear-to-the-modern-woman's-heart conveniences. For a long time she held out against television. Yet hers was a comfortable life. She just made it a point to remain detached and to bring home to her children from time to time that fact of the existence of poverty and the Christian's obligation to seek to relieve it.

She was active in her parish and its organizations. As a younger woman, she belonged to the Catholic Evidence Guild in Washington and made a number of talks on religious subjects in the public parks.

From all this it is evident that she led an exemplary life. Whether or not it was one of heroic love, however, God alone knows. But in the last 10 months of her life, she bore a trial with such fortitude and cheerfulness that it seemed certain she was proving herself one

of God's heroines. You could tell that by the fruits.

It came about in this way. She fell ill quite suddenly. Surgery was performed. Cancer. So far advanced, no hope of recovery remained.

This was a racking shock to an active, healthy, energetic woman of 49, mother of seven children. The doctor came in the morning after surgery to tell her the sad verdict. She had guessed the truth.

They talked a while and as the doctor went out he said kindly, "This is the time when women who have learned what I've just told you have a right to cry. Go ahead."

There were a few tears. But never, then nor later, was there one word of complaint. Never did she ask, "Why? Why did this happen to me?"

Very soon the glib, witty tongue took up the burden of lightening sorrow for her dear ones. There was laughter in room 515 during the weeks that followed; more laughter in all probability than in any other room in that large hospital.

Many persons came to visit, and returned again and again. They came to bring comfort. Instead they found themselves comforted, inspired and challenged. And they departed better men and women. That's why they returned; not to console but to be consoled, not to give but to take. They returned because it is a rare and precious blessing to meet a heroine of holiness and there they received such a blessing. Coming there killed for them, temporarily at least, the fear of death that lurks in us.

Among the literally hundreds of priests, Sisters and Brothers who came or wrote, many were praying for a miracle. She thanked them, but refused to ask herself. What God wanted, she wanted. No more, no less.

Though she was dying, her thoughts were of others who were dying; others without family and friends, some without faith in God. For them, she offered herself.

Through almost all of her illness she refused drugs, even sleeping pills. So long as anyone was with her, the bright smile, the quick retort, the little quip were standard. It was only when you came on her unexpectedly that you saw the face drawn in pain, the jaws set, the eyes oozing tears.

Was this not heroic? Our Lord said that those who should give up home and brothers and sisters and husband and children should reap reward a hundredfold. Was not this ready acceptance of the divine will also a leaving of home, of husband and children, brothers and sisters?

In His priestly prayer to His Father, Our Lord exclaimed: "I have exalted Thy glory on earth by achieving the task Thou gavest me to do." Could not she echo this. Had she not achieved the task He gave her in the past, and was she not beautifully and heroically achieving in the present this crowning task?

After 10 months she died. And after her death the beauty of her life became more evident. How many times had she risen in the night to feed and care for her children—a thousand, two thousand, five thousand? Many of those times, no doubt, she nursed or fed a little one with the loving awareness that in a mystical but real way she was doing what Mary had done 20 centuries earlier—caring for Christ in her little one, doing it to Him because she did it to the least of these.

How many times was she Martha preparing meals for the Christ Who dwelt in her husband and children. How many times Mary kneeling at His feet after receiving Him in the Eucharist. How many times Veronica wiping His face in consoling the sorrowful. How many, many times Mary, the Mother, as she fed and clothed and comforted and petted and punished and taught and inspired her children. How often she must have looked down on the little face of the baby or child in her arms and, seeing there with the eyes of faith the indwelling Lord of the

universe, breathed, “Thank You, my God, for letting me do You this kindness.”

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Today, more than a year after her death, the nurses still speak of her as one they can never forget. Only recently one of the Sisters pronounced this epitaph, “She taught me many things. But most of all, she taught me how to die.”

A saint? Only God knows. If a saint, will she ever be canonized? Humanly speaking, the odds against it are astronomical. But it isn’t important—unless God wishes to mark her officially as a model of heroic holiness.

What is important is the eloquent testimony of an “ordinary woman” that greatness is our common inheritance. We, too, can be heroic in holiness—if we will—if we will.

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