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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 nine-part 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

Four: Let Us Be What We Are

BY CLARENCE J. ENZLER

We have been intimating that heroism and holiness are closely related. And, indeed, they are.

No other group of men or women has been so noble of character as the saints. None has been so valiant and self-sacrificing. None has contributed so effectively to the happiness and progress of mankind. The greatest heroes and heroines the world has known, or knows today, are the heroic in holiness.

Yet not only the world but we of the Catholic laity seldom advert to this truth.

One can travel through the countries of Europe and the “heroes” we think of are likely to be such as Napoleon and Wellington, Beethoven and Mozart, Shakespeare and Goethe, Michelangelo and Rembrandt. All these, surely, were great in accomplishment. They stand a little larger than life size in the corridors of history.

But are they truly heroic as were Vincent de Paul, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, and Thomas More?

Even if accomplishment be the measuring rod, the “armies” of Ignatius have ranged farther and conquered more than

Napoleon’s ever did—and brought learning and peace with them rather than destruction and death.

And the legacy bequeathed to posterity by Vincent, Francis and Teresa undoubtedly contains seeds of happiness and growth unequalled by that, great as it is, that was left by Shakespeare and Michelangelo.

As for qualities of soul—courage, perseverance, self-sacrifice, humility, love—there can be no question where superiority lies.

So if we speak of heroism *and* holiness, it is precisely because it is *in* holiness that the truest heroism may be found.

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.

One of the points we have been striving to make in these articles is that this most genuine of heroisms is within the reach of all. Granted, all are not destined to be equally holy. But it is true of each of us that we are invited and called and urged to a perfection so far above what we are presently achieving that if we do achieve it we will be great saints.

Now if sanctity consists in being *someone* rather than in doing *something*—and if the someone each of us is called to be as a member of the Mystical Body is *unique*—then it follows that sanctity consists in being that *someone* in the most complete and best way possible.

“Let us be completely what we are,” said St. Francis de Sales. When he and others of like mind put forth this idea three and a half centuries ago, it was revolutionary for their generation. It is still quite a revolutionary idea today.

This is rather odd, surely, because the uniqueness of the individual member of the Mystical Body, and the consequent necessity of being completely what one is, was a keynote of early Christian spirituality. St. Paul, especially, drummed it into those he was instructing.

“Everyone has his own vocation to which he has been called,” he wrote to the Corinthians, “let him keep to it” (I Cor. 7:20).

There are “different kinds of service,” and “different manifestations of power” (I Cor. 12:4-6).

“God has given us different positions in the Church, apostles first, then prophets, and thirdly teachers; then come miraculous powers, then gifts of healing, works of mercy, the management of affairs, speaking with different tongues, and interpreting prophecy” (I Cor. 12:28-29).

“If a man is a prophet, let him prophesy as far as the measure of his faith will let him. The administrator must be content with his administration, the teacher with his work of teaching, the preacher with his preaching.

Each must perform his own task well...” (Rom. 12:6-8).

Surely, this expresses essentially the same thought as the phrase: “Let us be completely what we are.”

But somehow the notion gained credence that being completely what we are is not enough. Sanctity is so abnormal, it was thought, and its attainment so extraordinarily difficult that it is virtually impossible to achieve while living in the world. Thus by the fourth century some writers and preachers were urging everyone to practice continence and strict asceticism and to withdraw from the world, if they would be holy.

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Even before this, a similar error had been made by some who saw in the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom the sure road to sanctity. The desire to be a martyr is certainly a noble one, but it can also be a delusion. Though the Church encouraged no one to seek martyrdom and though St. Peter and St. Paul and the other Apostles took all reasonable means to preserve their lives, some souls, overly ambitious and even presumptuous, deliberately put themselves in the way of persecution. Under the torments inflicted, some denied Christ.

All through the centuries there have been those who, trusting unduly in their own powers, have vowed virginity and retired to monasteries or the desert; then finding themselves unfitted by nature to this life, many have not only missed their goal but eventually left the faith.

The error is not in desiring and striving to be holy. It is in seeking to be someone other than God intended; seeking holiness not in being completely what we are, but in forming ourselves according to our own mistaken notions.

There is no question but that, objectively, the religious state is more perfect than the lay

state; nor that holy virginity is higher than marriage. But it does not follow that one who is capable of achieving a certain perfection in marriage is capable of achieving a higher perfection in virginity. On the contrary, it is possible for the individual to be much less than perfect in the more perfect state when he could be far more perfect in the less perfect state.

The obvious fact is that most of us are called by God to marriage and life in the world. For us to disregard nature and seek another state of life because it is objectively more perfect is to misread our own capabilities and succumb to foolish ambition. It is not unlike the mother of James and John asking: “Here are my two sons; grant that in Thy kingdom one may take his place on Thy right and the other on Thy left” (Matt. 20:21).

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Surely we are not giving up the ideal of holiness when we strive to be what God intended. It is as possible to reach highest perfection in the world as in the desert or the cloister. To quote again St. Francis de Sales, “Perfection does not consist in not seeing the world, but in not giving oneself over to it inwardly.” This sentiment was strongly reinforced by Pope Pius XI, who said in his encyclical on the saint: “Francis de Sales appears given to the Church through God’s special decree so as to counter that point of view deeply rooted in his time and not overcome today which says that true saintliness...is so difficult to achieve that the majority of the faithful could not possibly attain it.”

We serve God best when we give back to Him as completely as possible what He has first given us; in other words, when we follow the sanctity that corresponds to our unique nature and circumstances of life. This is the milieu in which we are each to seek perfection.

What makes heroic holiness possible for all is *love*. This is beautifully described by St. Thérèse of Lisieux in her *Autobiography* when she tells of her delight in finding her “vocation,” the “niche God has appointed for me.” She had been tormented by unfulfilled longings, as if she could never satisfy the needs of her nature without performing for Our Lord’s sake “every kind of heroic action at once.” She found the solution in St. Paul’s famous passage on charity—“a way which is better than any other,” as he himself says.

“Charity is the best way of all because it leads straight to God,” Thérèse comments. “Now I was at peace; when St. Paul was talking about the different members of the Mystical Body I couldn’t recognize myself in any of them; or rather I could recognize myself in all of them. But charity—that was the key to my vocation... Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others; it’s a universe of its own, comprising all time and space—it’s eternal.”

There are, in other words, as many forms of sanctity as there are saints. But the common denominator of all is love—love of God and of God’s will. If charity is lacking, *all* is lacking. If charity is present, *all* is present.

But what precisely does it mean to be completely what we are? It means, first, to accept with the fullest consent of our will our present state in life, our personality with its physical and mental equipment, our general health, our assets and liabilities, and all our circumstances. These are what we have to give back to Him.

We must recognize that God does not wish us to be famous, rich, talented or popular at this time—unless we are. He does not wish us to be married at this time—unless we are. He does not wish us to give all our wealth to the poor, or to spend nights in contemplative prayer—unless these conform to our state and circumstances in life.

If we are parents, He does not want us to become so engrossed in social work, or church work either—and not even in our professions or businesses—that we flee from our family circle night after night to the neglect and unhappiness of spouse and children. He desires husbands and wives first and foremost to love each other and be the best husbands and wives they can. He desires mothers and fathers to guide their children with love and patience and be the best mothers and wives they can.

This does not mean, however, a shirking of responsibilities that come to us in virtue of our divided responsibilities. Though the primary responsibility of married persons is to each other and their family, this does not nullify reasonable responsibilities which they may have as employers or employees, as members of the parish, as citizens of a community, state and nation. All these responsibilities must be dovetailed according to our reasonable judgments.

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Being completely what we are means also seeking the virtues that are proper to our state and circumstances of life. Thus the home must not be made a monastery or a convent, for this is to introduce a way of life which is unsuitable. Devotions and pious practices which actually interfere with our calling are to be avoided.

St. Teresa of Avila bluntly contradicted a spiritual director who advised a woman that it was “better if she prayed instead of looking after her household affairs even if it made her husband unhappy.” And in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* St. Francis de Sales, notes not only that spirituality is exercised in different ways, “each according to his character and vocation,” but that it must also be adapted to “the strength, the employment, and the duties of each one in particular.”

Is it fit, we are asked, “that a Bishop should lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? Or that married people should lay up no greater store of goods than the Capuchin? If a tradesman were to remain the whole day in church, like a member of a religious order... would not such devotion be ridiculous, unorganized, and insupportable?... Devotion... when it goes contrary to our lawful vocation, then without doubt it is false.”

The religious has his rule of life. The husband, the wife, the mother, the father, the unmarried, each has his or her rule also: the duties of the particular state and circumstances in life.

Finally, being completely what we are means living what we are to the full; *really* trying to be the best husband and father, wife and mother we can; *really* trying to be the best employer or employee we can; *really* trying to be the best neighbor or parishioner or citizen we can. Isn't it true that we live most of our lives at about half capacity so that we're like a car chugging up a hill with half its cylinders misfiring? Are we really *trying* to be the unique someone God made us to be?

“Let us be completely what we are.” And we who are married, let us get forever rid of the puritanical notion that for two persons to be passionately in love is somehow to rule out their being even more completely in love with God. A powerful antidote to this poisonous fallacy is the life of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Of all the heroines of literature, of all the lovers of history, none loved more passionately than Elizabeth her husband; and she was a great saint. When her husband went off to the Crusade, Elizabeth went with him to the edge of the kingdom and had to be carried away almost by force. They loved so much it was painful almost to be out of each other's sight.

But when Elizabeth's husband died on the Crusade and, much later, she knelt beside his coffin, she offered a prayer that is a model

of devotion and conformity to the will of God.

“You know, O Lord,” she said, “that I loved him more than anything in this world, because he loved You and because he was my husband. You know that all my life I should have been glad to live with him in want and wretchedness, to beg my bread from door to door, only to have the happiness of being

with him. But as it has pleased You to take him to Yourself, I am perfectly resigned to Your Holy Will. And if by saying one Our Father, I could recall him to life against Your Will, I would not say it. Only this I ask: grant unto him eternal rest and to me grace to serve You faithfully until my last breath.”

Behold the prayer of one who was *completely* what she was.

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