Some Important Keys to Spiritual Growth and Holiness

All of us without exception are called to be saints but frequently we do not take this wonderful vocation and task seriously. We can fail to make it a first priority in our lives because of the incredible distractions and busyness of everyday life. Also perhaps we don’t see adequately the steps we must climb to reach the top of the mountain of holiness; we overlook one or more of the basic essentials for reaching the goal of deep holiness in Christ. In this context then let me try to spell out some of the basic keys to progress in holiness.

First: A strong desire and deep thirst for God: to know him, to love him, to enter into a profound communion and friendship with him. Without the thirst for God, an ever deeper and increasing thirst, one will never make any real progress in holiness and the spiritual life. As St. Catherine of Siena says: “If you would make progress, then you must be thirsty (for God). Those who are not thirsty will never persevere in their journey. Either weariness or pleasure will make them stop.” If one has little or seemingly no desire for God, that person should pray mightily for that thirst.

Second: A strong and daily persevering determination to become a saint. Nothing really worthwhile in life is accomplished without continual and strong effort, and this is true, above all, in dying to one’s sinfulness and disordered desires and putting on the fullness of virtues and love. Once, when someone asked St. Thomas Aquinas what was necessary to become a saint, this man of extraordinary wisdom replied simply: “Will it.” Saints are not born such; they choose every day to become holy.

Third: Development of an intimate and deep personal knowledge and love of Jesus. This means a consistent effort to know the Lord intimately and personally through prayer and meditation on the Scriptures, especially the gospels. Devotion to the passion of Christ and the Sacred Heart can be very helpful in this regard.

Fourth: A strong devotion to the Holy Spirit, begging him to help us grow into an every deeper knowledge of God and of ourselves. The Spirit is the interior driving force in our spiritual lives. The “spiritual life” is appropriately called “spiritual” precisely because it is the Holy Spirit who guides, motivates and inspires us in putting on the full stature of Christ.

Fifth: A deep appreciation, respect, and love for the Church and her teaching. Although somewhat ignored and disregarded today, the Church together with her instruction and guidance is essential for true growth in holiness. As the Fathers of the Church said: “No one can have God as father who does not have the Church as mother.”
Sixth: deep and substantial prayer. Prayer and growth in prayer are at the core of spiritual growth. It is not sufficient to pray now and then or when one feels like it. One must pray seriously each day and have a program of prayer. Moreover, it is very important to move beyond just saying prayers in a routine manner; one must learn to pray deeply from the heart. Mental prayer, both meditation and contemplative prayer, are significant paths to growing in an understanding and love of the Scriptures and making great strides in our knowledge and love of Jesus.

Seventh: A strong and fervent devotion to the Eucharist, the greatest of the sacraments, provides rich nourishment for growth in union with the Lord. Daily participation in Mass, if possible, with deep faith and devotion to the real presence of Christ and his sacrifice is a powerful means to holiness. Spending an hour before the Eucharist in adoration on occasion also serves well as an important path to holiness.

Eighth: Frequent and fruitful use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is important to find a wise and good confessor to whom one can confess regularly.

Ninth: A deep and abiding love and devotion to our Lady, who is the mother of the Lord and our mother in the spiritual life. In a very special and significant way Mary enables us to become united to her son. Devotion to the immaculate heart of Mary and the rosary serve well in increasing our knowledge and love of her son and our brother, Jesus.

Tenth: A serious commitment to social justice within one’s immediate community and in the wider community of city, state, and nation is important. We have an obligation to work for the rights of others in our society and to help refashion our culture so that it will foster and encourage authentic Christian and human development.

Eleventh: Serious mortification and denial of our disordered appetites, desires, and addictions is essential for spiritual growth. So many persons today are addicted to food, drink, entertainment, television, idle conversions, etc. These addictions form serious obstacles to purity of heart and the freedom we need to pray, work, and fulfill our responsibilities.

Twelfth: Last and most important for holiness is the doing of God’s will in all things, both large and small. This means keeping the commandments, fulfilling all of our duties, following God’s inspirations, and accepting in faith the trials and sufferings which are our lot.

Other elements for holiness could be mentioned but this is a good start. It is very helpful to study Fr. Thomas Dubay’s treatment of the key elements of spiritual growth in his excellent work, Seeking Spiritual Direction.

Robert Egan, S.J.