

## The Law of Gradualism

Over the years as a priest, and also over my lifetime like all of us, I've known many people who have been frustrated at the choices others have made.

Let's start with ourselves. Suppose you had access to a DMC DeLorean and the plutonium required to get the nuclear reaction allowing the flux capacitor to work so you could time travel. And suppose you could somehow go back and talk to your old self. My guess is there would be a few moments where you would say to yourself "what are you thinking" and encourage yourself to make some different decisions.

My own story is not one of some "huge conversion," but I can say that as I look back I'd certainly do some things differently; or that it took time for me to have my eyes be opened a bit. For instance in high school, I began questioning my Catholic faith as I met kids from other Christian denominations. What if Catholicism had gotten it wrong, I thought. So I explored a bit. Other times as I got older I was convinced I was called in one direction in life when that just wasn't the case in terms of vocations or relationships. Eventually though as college wound down I discerned the call to priesthood, and entered seminary in the fall of 2001, and, as they might say "it all worked out." Or perhaps a better way of putting it is that it's "working itself out," for I am still striving to grow in holiness and become a better man and priest as my life unfolds.

With other people, every priest talks to family who have family members who make some bad choices. They are raised Catholic, and then their teen or adult kids just stop going; or move to another denomination. Or maybe you have a friend who is in a similar situation. Or perhaps you know someone who is just angry at the Church for one reason or another.

On the flip side, you probably know people who go to Mass regularly, and are models of the faith; perhaps they've gone their whole lives, or had a conversion or "re" version experience. And it begs the question, how does one get to that point? It's kind of like looking at a photo of someone who's been going to the gym and on a good nutrition plan for a year. It doesn't happen overnight, but happens gradually.

This week in our Gospel from Matthew, Jesus speaks of the seeds that fall on various types of ground; some dies quickly, some is eaten up by the birds, but some grows and bears fruit. Next week, Matthew's Gospel will continue and we'll hear about how the seed is growing in the field, but then some weeds grow with the wheat because an enemy comes along. The master tells the servants to not pull up the weeds for they might pull up the wheat too, and to let them grow until the harvest comes and then collect the weeds.

They are great readings and invite us to think about how fruit can be born, both in ourselves and in the lives of others, and the answer to that is gradually.

The “law of gradualism” was something my moral theology professor would often speak of. He’d speak of it in relation to gradualism of the law which is what we don’t want. The law of gradualism means change takes time. You gently have to come along and help others to do the same. Even someone who has a big conversion has to learn the faith; remember Paul after being blinded by the light gets his vision back but then goes off for a while to learn how to become an apostle. Much like a person trying to get healthy doesn’t drop 50 pounds in a week, the same is true spiritually. So how can we make this a way of life?

The starting point is prayer. You may remember the “Gold’s Gym” shirts that were popular in the 80s with some fitness people. Well Mass is kind of like “God’s Gym.” Here we pray, we receive the Eucharist, we hear the Word of God. And in our private lives, we connect to God more deeply so He can help us as we try to change for the better and help others to change too.

Second, there is mercy. When we are trying to change, we must remember we will fall. We will relapse. We will say “what was I thinking?” This is why we go to confession, and make an act of contrition, and reach back out to God asking for forgiveness knowing we are loved.

Third, we strive to live out mercy. This includes forgiveness, but think of mercy more as a way of a life of love. Of “growing up” spiritually and thinking not as a child but as a grown-up like Paul. Here we make better choices; the adult realizing gee I have a family now and have to think of my spouse and kids; or I’m going to work hard to help out my loved ones or volunteer as a way of living out my faith. The more we do acts of love, the stronger we become.

Fourth, we learn our faith. Why do we believe what we believe? A young child may do something at first because mom or dad say so, but then they get older and learn why mom and dad said so. So it is with the faith. Do we think about the faith and learn about it using the catechism or good resources like apologetics books and websites so we can deepen our knowledge of it?

Fifth, we evangelize. Sometimes a person can be really frustrated with a friend or a family member, or the world at large when so many seem to “not get it.” But are we doing our part? I think of the last election cycle, when there were constant pro-abortion ads all the time. Remember that last summer? Where were the pro-life ads explaining why we care about the unborn? If we are too afraid to talk about what we believe as Catholics we are never going to change anyone or educate. Jesus did not say complain at home or in the church parking lot - he said “go” and baptize and make disciples of all the nations. So lets get to work.

Lastly, we are patient. How frustrating it is when we stumble, but also when you talk about the faith and hear “yeah ma, I know” or “I’m just too busy” or “can we talk about something else” or get indifference. Don’t give up. Keep inviting people to Mass. Keep bringing up the faith in different ways in conversations. Keep setting a good example.

Those mustard seeds do get planted and will one day bear fruit. Even after we die, God can continue to do amazing things to help the seeds harvest!

I recently joined a gym, and there on one of the mirrors is a saying “when you think about quitting remember why you started.” I like the motto; I actually saw it when I had done a few machines and various reps and was a bit worn out, but had a few more to go. How true that saying is in the spiritual life. God doesn’t call us to spiritual mediocrity; He calls us to greatness. He has planted the seeds, so let us work with Him to bring them to harvest, both in ourselves and within one another.

Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul