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The path to holiness passes through our everyday lives and ordinary activities. Most of us grow spiritually not by spectacular deeds but by meeting our daily responsibilities and finding deeper meaning in all we do. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete* *et Exultate* (*On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World*), Pope Francis makes this point in various ways. We “grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission” (n24). “This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures” (n16). “Every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love” and “every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness” (n31).

The teaching that ordinary life provides the path to holiness may not be immediately evident and is clearly difficult to practice. Life, with all of its demands and distractions, can seem more like an obstacle course than a path to spiritual maturity. It is possible to sleepwalk through the routines of everyday life, oblivious to their spiritual significance. We can be paralyzed by the false assumption that long hours in prayer are the only way to holiness and by the illusion that one of these days we will be less busy and harried so that we can attend to spiritual matters.

Pope Francis recognizes that “new gadgets” and “an endless array of consumer goods” can overwhelm us and drown out God’s voice. His solution, however, is not to withdraw from the world or give up on holiness, but to live a balanced life as “contemplative even in the midst of action” (n26). We need times when we halt the “rat race” and “recover the personal space needed to carry on a heartful dialogue with God” (n29). The pope reminds us that the daily routine that serves as our path to holiness must include not only family and work responsibilities but also prayer and reflection. A balanced life of praying to God and loving our neighbor creates a more reliable path to spiritual growth.

Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897), commonly known as the “Little Flower,” serves as a classic model of using daily activities as the path to sanctity. Therese Martin, the youngest of five sisters, entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux at the age of 15. As we know from her autobiography, *Story of a Soul,* she was a young woman of tremendous passion and high Christian ideals. She felt called to be “a fighter, a priest, an apostle, a doctor, a martyr,” performing “every kind of heroic action” for the love of God and “preaching the gospel on all five continents and in most distant lands, all at once.”

Restricted by convent life, however, Therese was tormented by her “unfulfilled longings.” In her frustration, she read from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “Set your hearts on the greater gifts. Now I will show you the way which surpasses all the others” (12:31-13:1). As Therese wrote in her autobiography, this passage helped her realize that charity was the “key to her vocation,” and that love is the “vocation which includes all others.” “To be nothing else than love,” she declared, is to be “everything at once.” She experienced a great sense of peace and restful calm as she realized she could fulfill her great dreams through the little way of everyday charity, “the beacon of love” guiding her like a lighthouse. “Love is all the skill I have,” she wrote, recognizing that her task was not to be a great missionary, but “to do the tiniest things right” for the sake of charity. Her true vocation was to live the law of love in the ordinary circumstances of her convent life, including simple gestures, such as a smile or kind word.

Therese understood the importance of prayer in following the “little way of charity.” She asked Jesus, her “first and only love,” to help her in her weakness to remain faithful to the ideal of self-sacrificing love as the path to holiness. Even when she fell asleep during the long hours of prayer or experienced no consolation, she counted on her Beloved to lend her eagle wings so she could soar toward the “Sun of Love.”

In her *Story of a Soul,* the Little Flower recorded examples of her little way of charity. In one case, she overcame her pride and reluctance and went out of her way to help a crotchety old nun get from the chapel to the refectory for meals. She tried to carry out this task with utmost care and compassion: helping her walk at an acceptable pace; getting her seated at table with as little pain as possible; cutting her food in manageable portions; and always concluding with a big smile at the end of this daily ritual. Therese could not preach the gospel in distant lands, but she could try to make life more pleasant for members of her small community. She remained a model of charity right up to her early death from tuberculosis before her 25th birthday, confident to the end that her beloved Lord would carry her to “the very center of love.”

In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared Therese a Doctor of the universal church, placing this young woman without a theology degree in a select group of 34 Doctors, including Augustine and Aquinas and two other women, Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, all who shed new light on the mysteries of the faith. Her “little way of charity” sheds new light for us today, inspiring us to find deeper meaning in the everyday demands of our noisy and busy lives.

Most of us can identify someone we know who has inspired us by the way they have lived their Christian faith on a daily basis. I will call my own spiritual hero “G L” as I highlight his everyday virtues without claiming an exaggerated perfection. G L, who was born in the United States, grew up in a large, poor, devoutly Catholic family (2 of his older sisters were nuns) of Czech immigrants on a farm near Pittsburgh. He was ambitious and hard-working and developed a passion for baseball and, later, other sports. He was the first male in his family to go to college, attending Duquesne University, where, as a freshman, he was the starting catcher on the baseball team. As a youth living at home, he courageously confronted his abusive father and put an end to his harsh treatment of his wife. Deeply affected by the sufferings of his mother, he vowed never to abuse others, a promise he kept in raising his own family, never even spanking his children as was then customary. In his everyday life, he insisted that problems be solved not by harsh language or sullen pouting but by civil discussion and reasonable compromise. By breaking the cycle of abuse, he made a truly significant, if generally unrecognized, contribution to the good of his family and future generations.

The need to support himself and his parents forced G L to cut short his academic and baseball career and to take a job with the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, which brought him to Toledo. Here he ran the coffee plant, met and married the love of his life and raised his family. He was dedicated to doing a good job managing the plant, working long hours to get the operation started and keeping it running efficiently for over thirty years. He demanded good work from the 15 or so employees, but was attentive to their individual needs. He used his managerial position to do good for others. Every week, he had a large package of free coffee set aside for the Little Sisters of the Poor and their ministry to the elderly. He brought two of his unemployed brothers-in-law from Pittsburgh to work in the plant so they could support their families. Part of his effort to create a healthy work environment was to make sure the female workers were respected by the men.

As a husband, G L did not rise much above the patriarchal patterns of the day, and early in his marriage pushed a well-intentioned, but disruptive and short-lived move to bring his mother into their home. Nevertheless, he did exercise virtue in his married life: making decisions typically intended to please his wife; always treating her with respect and never speaking harshly; being especially attentive when she was not feeling well or was overburdened; doing fun things together like enjoying picnics and athletic events; and becoming, over their 44 years of marriage, somewhat more dialogic and collaborative.

As a father, he instructed his children in the ways of Catholic faith mostly by his good example. During most of his adult life, even when working long hours, he attended Mass almost every day, highlighting the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic spirituality. His personal prayer centered on gratitude for his many blessings and petitions for his family and friends, suggesting a mature approach to prayer. In preparing the household budget, he began by setting aside money for the parish collection and for a number of charities, indicating proper Christian priorities.

His understanding of his Catholic tradition was open, generous and inclusive. He and his wife befriended a Jewish couple down the block, suggesting the value of Catholic Jewish dialogue. When some Catholics spoke negatively about a Protestant minister living in the neighborhood, he defended him as a good Christian man, anticipating the ecumenism promoted by Vatican II. In fact, he seldom spoke negatively of any person, including his own father and individuals who angered him, exemplifying an important Gospel mandate. When individuals made mistakes, even big ones, he typically supported forgiveness and second chances, giving witness to a central teaching of Jesus. Without naming it, he practiced to a high degree the virtue of “*epikeia,*” which enables one to know when and how to break the rules, implicitly indicating that the Catholic religion could not be reduced to keeping a series of laws.

I am deeply grateful to my father, George L. Bacik, for so many things: for serving as my prime example of using everyday life as the path to holiness; for heroically breaking the cycle of domestic abuse so his family could enjoy a peaceful life; for sharing with me his great appreciation for my mother and her marvelous qualities (for example, “Your mother is amazing at managing money” and when I was about 12, “Your mother looks as good to me today as the day I married her”); for modeling healthy role adaptations (for example, as an older parent he asked my advice on how to deal with my much younger sister growing up in a rapidly changing world); for teaching me a broad, open version of Catholicism that enabled me to survive the narrow legalism of my seminary education; and for encouraging me to look for the unique goodness of each person, which I have at least tried to do throughout my priestly ministry.