

Sunday After the Feast of Holy Cross
September 21, 2014

My Top Ten list of favorite movies includes *The Godfather*. I am sure that most have you have seen this tale of Michael Corleone, the son of a Mafia don, who morally separates himself from his family by going to college, by volunteering for the military during World War II and by receiving medals for courage in combat. The movie depicts how he gradually degenerates from this outstanding young man into a Mafia don, a killer and a liar, driven by a thirst for power. I am especially intrigued by the fact that as the movie goes on, I know in my heart that this is a bad man, and yet I find myself cheering him on, always hoping for his good fortune and perhaps his redemption. Why do I do this?

In today's gospel the Lord asks rhetorically, "What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?" The Greek original uses the word "psychi," meaning "soul." What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? At the end of *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone is at the top, the head of his own Mafia family, and the most powerful gangster in New York. His wife confronts him about the accusation that he has ordered the murder of his brother-in-law. Angrily he responds, "Don't ever ask me about my business," but then he relents and says, "Go ahead, ask... just this once." She asks; he lies, denying his responsibility in the murder. The movie ends with Corleone surrounded by his associates and his wife looking from afar, wondering where is the man that she married.

I think people go to the dark side incrementally. They are more likely to fall away from God gradually rather than suddenly. When given a choice between heaven and hell, no one chooses hell. We do so in the small choices of life, rather than in the dramatic. And if this is so, what can we do to protect ourselves?

One answer is to feed the soul often. We need to feed the image of God within us. The light or the divine fire within us, the one that that lifts us up, needs to be fed and fed often. This is why attendance at Sunday Liturgy is so important and why daily prayer and Bible reading are so necessary. Prayer is food for the soul; Bible reading is a form of prayer, when one reads with the understanding that God is speaking through the Bible. There is an American proverb, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." It isn't true. There is a Greek proverb stating the opposite, "Eyes that don't look at each other quickly forget." This one is true. A fire in your fireplace does not get better when you neglect to add wood. As the gaps in time between feeding our souls grow larger, love for God grows cold. It was perhaps with this in mind that St. Paul wrote, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It's a tall order, but nonetheless a worthy goal.

There is another proverb from the early days of the computer age, "Garbage in; garbage out." If what we feed our souls comes more from the pop culture of television than from holy sources, we are feeding them garbage. What do we expect to come out? One of the Pre-Communion

prayers says, "It is good for me to cling to God and place in the Lord the hope of my salvation." As a baby clings to its mother, so we need to cling to God.

The other answer is to examine one's life on a regular basis. Many of the spiritual writers and fathers have recommended that every night a person mentally go back through the entire day and examine every action, every conversation and even every thought with the question, "Was I doing right or wrong, serving God or not?" It takes effort to do this, but the results are beneficial. Another form of self-examination is the sacrament of Holy Confession. In Confession and, in preparing for Confession, people examine themselves. Priests can provide perspective or some coaching, but the examination comes from the individual. It is a key element of Confession. Another form of examination is to listen to our loved ones, at least those on higher spiritual ground than we are. Michael Corleone should have listened to his wife, not his brothers. No one likes criticism, but criticism offered in love is often a gift coming from God by means of a loved one.

Why do I find myself cheering for Michael Corleone? I think that it is because he started out as such a good person, a person who saw his family for what it was and wanted no part of it. Theologically speaking, we say that God loves humanity both because He created it and because He placed His image in us. He knows how good we can be, but He lets us live as we see fit. I am sad for good people who slowly lose the path of godliness.

In short: (1) Feed the soul often. (2) Examine one's life on a regular basis. In the words of the Prophet Micah (6:8), "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" May we always walk with Him humbly.

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Text: Mark 8:34-38; 9:1

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."