Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
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09.19.08: The Human Pillar and the Heroes of Our Faith.

When we consider the human and pastoral pillars of discernment, we find that we are involved importantly and immediately with two extremely practical elements of our spiritual growth, namely the identification of those components specific to an authentic Christian character, and the means whereby we might realize this in our day-to-day lives. Now, much ink has been spilled concerning the definition of Christian character, the virtues that are central to it and the beautiful activity that flow from these — the entirety of St. Thomas’s second part of the *Summa Theologiae* is dedicated to these issues. Yet, from our perspective as discerners, our concern at this stage is not primarily to engage writings like these in a sustained, dedicated, and detailed fashion. Instead, our concern is far more practical, namely how we might acquire those virtues definitive of Christian character right now.

To put a finer point on this, surely it is a wonderful exercise to consider the “moral” part of Thomas’s *Summa*, to revel in the wisdom it contains, to contemplate the details of happiness, the principles involved in a properly human act, descriptions of the emotions, the theological and moral virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and other matters all importantly relevant to our progress in and perfection of the Christian life. However, not everyone is blessed with the time, the leisure or the interest to engage St. Thomas in this way. Nevertheless, in our commitment to God, we need to understand what is specific both about the Christian character, and those actions in which we must engage so that we might realize the person of Christ in our lives and honor the image of God in which we were made. While it is true that over time we will, God willing, grow both in our understanding of such matters, and into the maturity of authentic Christian character, and that we must, therefore, be patient, nevertheless this hope can at times appear to be little comfort when faced with the hard task of being Christian right now.

This is a perennial problem, one that is not specific to the religiously minded, but rather characterizes the life of any young person who desires to live an authentic human life. Thus, in short, how do I, as a young person, act right now as an authentic mature human person, or more specifically, how do I, as a young person, embody in my character and actions right now the fullness, beauty and authenticity of being Christian?

The answer to this is quite direct, namely to model our lives and actions upon those people who exhibit the very maturity, beauty, and authenticity that we seek, in the hope that through our imitation of them we might initially participate in that which we recognize in them to be good, holy and true, with the goal that we might eventually acquire these for ourselves.

There are two very practical ways by which this has been done. First, through a reading of the biographies of the saints who offer us valiant efforts in the imitation of Christ to which all Christians are called. In this regard, the saints are the heroes of our faith who have afforded countless Christians, throughout the ages, real and varied human efforts to respond to the great gifts of God’s grace in their lives as they struggle with the practical elements of their Christian calling. We are fortunate in our day to have our reading extended to include the beautiful depictions of the saints’ lives that exist in video form (the finest example of this, in my view, is *A Man*...
For All Seasons starring the recently deceased Paul Scofield as St. Thomas Moore. If you haven’t seen this film, please do so soon. Make sure you see it with a group of like-minded and “like-hearted” people, and don’t forget your kleenex). Whether we expose ourselves to these stories through the printed or visual media, we are brought face to face with a most powerful and effective way to anticipate the maturity of the authentic Christian life in our lives right now, namely through the imitation of their examples.

Second, through a reading of those treatises especially written for the very purpose of helping us to anticipate the mature of the Christian life. In this genre, there are very few treatises more effective than An Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francis de Sales. This beautiful work offers guidance in the ways of establishing a solid Christian character, the recognition of and advancement in those virtues central to the authentic Christian life, and very practical ways by which we might realize these things in daily life.

Here are some links to the texts mentioned above. Enjoy!

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Biographies of the Saints

http://www.cin.org/saints.html (This is a very convenient collection of the lives of the more well-known saints)

http://www.ewtn.com/vlibrary/search.asp (drop down library menu: “Mary and Saints”; insert in author field: “Butler.” This will yield 180 different entries for the more well-known saints treated of in Butler’s “Lives of the Saints” an old, but popular, collection of biographies of the saints)

http://www.archive.org/details/texts (insert in search engine: “Butler’s lives saints.” This will return several complete versions of Butler’s “Lives of the Saints” in different formats for your reading pleasure)

http://magnificat.ca/cal/engl/main.htm (This page offers short descriptions of the lives of the saints for each day of each month throughout the year)

An Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francis de Sales

There are many versions of this work available on the web. Here are three of them:

http://www.catholicapologetics.info/library/onlineLibrary/devolife.htm

http://books.google.com/books?id=d8kCAAAQAQAAJ&printsec=titlepage&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0

http://www.catholicity.com/devoutlife/