Note: It is easy to become discouraged or despondent, faced with the refusal of family members or friends to return to the practice of the Faith, or to enter the Catholic Church. The holy abbot of Bricquebec, Dom Vital Lehodey, OCSO, (1857-1948) writes on the subject in his spiritual masterpiece, *Holy Abandonment*.

Chapter 8: On Abandonment in the Spiritual Varieties of the Common Way: Failures and Faults

Article III: Want of Success in Dealing with Souls

In the exercise of zeal for souls, as in all other occupations, we must do everything that depends upon us with a wise and constant fervor, but in peaceful abandonment to the good-pleasure of God. What He requires from us is not success but the conscientious discharge of our duties. And our first duty is to learn to love souls in God. In proportion as the fire of Divine love increases in our hearts it should produce the flame of holy zeal, of a truly catholic zeal, as wide as the world.

Certain souls will become especially dear to us, either because we have special charge of them, or for some other particular reason. But it is in the light of eternity that we must consider them all. The Sovereign Judge will demand an account of them, the demon is plotting to lead them astray, and perhaps the salvation of many of them depends upon us. We must give God to them and we must give them, all of them and absolutely, to God. The heavenly Father sacrificed His only-begotten Son, the eternal object of His complacency, so that the world might not perish but might have life everlasting. Our Lord immolated Himself for souls on the Cross, offers Himself for them every instant on our altars, nourishes them with His Own Substance, has given them the Church, the priesthood, the Sacraments, and constantly favors them with a superabundance of interior and exterior graces. By His Holy Spirit, moreover, He enlightens, attracts, urges, circumvents them; He conquers and sustains them; He pursues, recalls and pardons them. In short, He loves them, loves them almost infinitely in spite of their many miseries. A beautiful example of disinterested love, which has profoundly touched the Saints and which should confound our tepidity. However ardent may be our zeal for souls, can it ever compare with the zeal God exhibits?

We must love souls as God loves them, conforming ourselves to His guidance and to the order of His Providence. Having created us free, He will never do violence to our liberty. But He imparts His graces to all in abundance, to some more, to others less, in the measure, time and manner that best pleases Him. We likewise, must give to all, particularly to those who ought to be especially dear to us, the assistance of our prayers, sacrifices and good example. We must devote special attention to public prayer, if we are honored with that sublime apostolate. Should souls be entrusted to our care on one title or another, we must

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

cultivate them with a zeal proportionate to the love God bears them, to the worth they possess in His estimation. But while faithfully fulfilling our duties and praying with unflagging fervor, we must preserve our peace of mind, through respect for the rights of God and for the order of His Providence. For He is Master of His gifts, and has judged it well to endow human souls with the faculty of free choice.

Disappointments will not be wanting to us. God Himself, although possessing the key to all hearts, will nevertheless not enter by force, but stands at the door and knocks. Here we encounter the mystery of Divine grace and human co-operation. One hastens to welcome the Visitor, another refuses to open, many pay no attention at all; so that often enough He has to remain outside. Our sweet Savior, our Benefactor and Friend above all friends, came into His own domain and His own chosen people, and His own would not receive Him. The malicious sought to catch Him in His words, the multitude abandoned Him, Judas betrayed Him, the other Apostles fled from Him; and when He fell at last beneath the blows of His enemies, His Church was but a delicate plant buffeted by the tempest. The disciple is not above his Master. Hence, despite the prodigies they wrought, the Apostles finished their careers by Martyrdom, leaving behind them a defenseless flock in the midst of ravening wolves. If some of the Saints had astonishing success in their labors for souls, others, and these not the least in sanctity, labored without apparent result even to the end of their lives. To mention only the case of St. Alphonsus. His first disciples forsook him, and, in consequence, how many others either left him of their own accord or had to be dismissed! Two of them went so far as to ruin his credit with the Sovereign Pontiff and cause his expulsion from his Congregation. All these failures were necessary to perfect the founder in holiness and to establish his Institute firmly on the unshakable rock of Calvary. Still, as the designs of Heaven are only revealed to us gradually, it is no small trial for a zealous priest to see souls in danger, or for a zealous superior to be obliged to leave in mediocrity those whom he had hoped to lead to sanctity.

Howsoever bitter may be our lack of success, we must recognize in it the permission of God, accept it with peaceful abandonment, and turn it to account for our own spiritual progress. It is one of the very best occasions for entrenching ourselves more securely in humility, detaching ourselves from vainglory and human consolations, purifying our intentions, and resolving for the future to seek God alone in our spiritual ministrations. With the Royal Prophet, we should bless Providence in the humiliation we have received. Only too often, success blinds, inflates, and intoxicates us. It makes us forget that conversions come from God, and that they are due perhaps, not to our efforts, but to the secret prayers and sacrifices of some unsuspected soul. Failure opens our eyes to the reality of things. It reminds us that we are only poor instruments at best. It invites us to turn our gaze back upon ourselves, and, if there is need, to correct our shortcomings, to rectify our methods, to

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

reanimate our zeal, and to pray more. If our negligence and sins have contributed to our want of success, we must not only rid ourselves of these failings, but we are also bound to repair the consequences of them so far as possible, by redoubling our zeal, our prayers, and our sacrifices.

Humble resignation to God's will should not, however, cause our ardor to cool. When souls fail to correspond to our efforts, "let us weep for them," says St. Francis de Sales, "let us sigh, let us pray for them, as did our sweet Jesus, Who, after shedding tears all His life over sinners, died for them at last with His eyes dimmed from weeping and His whole Body bathed in Blood." 17 Condemned, betrayed, abandoned, He could have preserved His life and left us in our obstinacy. But He loved us unto the end. Thus He teaches us that true charity never yields to discouragement. She knows that very often she will at length triumph over the most obstinate resistance. She hopes all things, because she puts her hope in God Who can do all things. If compassionate love failed finally in the case of Judas, it made Saints of the Magdalen, Peter, Augustine, and so many other holy penitents. Humility, which reveals to us our own wretchedness and faults, makes us understand clearly the difficulties of virtue, and inspires us with a tender compassion for souls that are still weak. "How do you know," asks the gentle Bishop of Geneva, "whether the sinner will not, perhaps, do penance and save his soul? So long as there is room for hope, and whilst there is life there is hope, we must not abandon him, but must rather pray for him and help him as much as his malice will allow us." 18

But if souls disappoint our hopes of them, provided we have spared no efforts in their behalf we shall not be held accountable for their loss: we have done our duty, we have glorified God and rejoiced His merciful Heart in what concerns ourselves. In such circumstances, the sense of our insufficiency or of our responsibilities should not disquiet us. Our holy father, St. Bernard, reassures us on this point in his letter to the Blessed Baldwin, his disciple: "You will have to answer for that which you have," he says, "but not for that which you do not possess. Be ready with your account, but only for the talent entrusted to you. With regard to the rest, you can make your mind easy. If much has been given you, much also shall be required. If you have received only a little, be faithful in rendering that little back… Render back all, for all shall be exacted, even to the last farthing: I mean all that which you have been entrusted with, not that which you have not." 19

"But at last, when we have wept in vain over the obstinate sinner, when we have rendered him all the duties of charity in order to save him from perdition, let us imitate Our Lord and the Apostles. That is to say, let us divert our minds and energies to other objects and other occupations more conducive to the glory of God. For we must not waste in lamenting the loss of some the time that is useful and necessary for the salvation of others. Besides, we

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

must adore, love and praise for ever the avenging and punishing justice of God, as we love and praise His mercy. For by His grace He wills to make us good as He Himself is sovereignly good; by His justice He wills to punish sin, because He hates it. Now, the reason why He hates it is because, being sovereignly good, He necessarily detests the sovereign evil, which is sin. And always, whether it punishes or blesses, His good-pleasure is adorable, amiable, worthy of eternal benediction. Hence the just who sing the praises of His mercy towards such as shall be saved, will also rejoice at seeing His vengeance, as the Psalmist says. . . . And the holy Angels, having exercised their charity with respect to the human creatures to whom they were assigned as guardians, remain in peace, even when they see their protégés continuing obdurate or finally lost. We must likewise acquiesce in the will of God, and we must kiss with equal love and reverence the right hand of His mercy and the left of His justice." 20

We shall encounter other trials also in the conduct of souls. Each of them is providentially designed to make us practice detachment from persons and things, to excite in us an absolutely pure zeal, and to lead us to holy abandonment. For example, there are souls that give us complete satisfaction. God will take them from us in a manner we never expected. Far from murmuring, we must kiss the hand that has wounded us. Is it not our part to lead souls to God? We have enjoyed the sweet consolation of success in our work. It is for Him we have formed them: they belong more to Him than to us. If He judges well to deprive us of the joy of their presence and of our most cherished hopes, is it not right that His will should prevail over ours, His infinite wisdom over our short-sightedness, our own eternal interests over our transient consolations?

17. Am. de Dieu. I, ix. c. viii.

18. Ibid.

19. Epist., 201.

20. Saint Francis de Sales, Ibid.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.