

Growing in Grace: St. Carlo Acutis's Five Practices

If you've been at St. John Vianney or Holy Family the last two weeks, you know we are in the middle of a homily series on the universal call to holiness. A very quick review of the last two weeks: In the first week we talked about what holiness is, with the example of St. John the Baptist. To be holy—by definition and etymology—means to be set apart. Each of the baptized is set apart for a particular purpose. Whatever that purpose may be, every one of us is called to be holy: set apart from the world for the purposes of God. John the Baptist had a powerful motto for anyone seeking sanctity: “I must decrease so that He might increase.” He spoke it about his ministry as Jesus came onto the scene, but that attitude—our ego decreasing so that Christ can increase in us—is exactly what happens in holiness.

Last week we talked about the “mechanism” of holiness: sanctifying grace, the gift we receive in Baptism. Sanctifying grace is, more or less, our treasure in heaven. It can “turn off”—we can lose it by mortal sin—but when we return to the Lord, we receive it back. Moreover, it is meant to grow. That growth of sanctifying grace is holiness within us—our treasure increasing in heaven. Today (and for the next two weeks) we focus on aspects of how sanctifying grace—how holiness—in us actually increases. Our saint this week is St. Carlo Acutis, who speaks exactly to this point.

Desire, Persistence, and Humility

St. Carlo Acutis—canonized about a month ago—died at fifteen, the first millennial saint. He kept a fairly extensive diary, so we have many quotes. One of his lines speaks directly to today's theme: “Life is a gift. As long as we are on this planet, we can increase the level of charity—that sanctifying grace. The greater it is, the more we shall enjoy the eternal beatitude of God.” St. Teresa of Avila remarked somewhere that if we could see in heaven what even one higher degree of beatitude is, we would make every sacrifice necessary on earth to attain it. Carlo is a good model: if we reach the age of reason around seven or eight, then in seven short years God, by His grace, made Carlo a saint. It is not too late for us; God is good and creative, and He does not usually work on our timelines.

Before the “how,” establish the “means.” The means is the Lord Himself. Because He loves you, the Lord is perfectly present to you, always, to give a plan—perfectly tailored to your temperament and state of life—for growing in holiness. The psalm says, “The Lord is at my right hand.” The disposition that gets us there is captured by today's readings: persistence. Persistence, persistence, persistence. Why? Because we fail a lot. We must persist, trust, and keep pressing in; in the language of faith, we call this faithfulness. And we need humility. Consider Moses: had he said, “I've got this; I don't need help,” his arms would have fallen, and Israel would have lost the battle. He had to refuse self-reliance. Self-

reliance—independence from God—is a silent killer of holiness. We must rely on God and recognize we owe Him all things. Carlo said, “You too can be a saint, but you have to want it with your whole heart. If you do not yet desire it, ask the Lord for it with insistence.” And, we might add, with persistence.

St. Carlo Acutis: Five Practices for Growing in Grace

A helpful study—Carlo Acutis: Five Steps to Being a Saint—was written by a priest near Milan who interviewed Carlo’s parents, his primary chaperone (whom Carlo helped bring to the faith from Hinduism), and his spiritual director. These five practices marked Carlo’s life. They may be unusual for an 11–13-year-old, but they are actually “normal” holiness—perhaps not common, but normal. Carlo’s family was very wealthy; he had a full-time chaperone and driver and no job, so he had more freedom than most. But every one of these practices can be adapted. The key was that he *wanted* to do them—he even limited video games to about an hour a week.

1. Reception of the Eucharist as often as possible. He usually made it to daily Mass. On days he could not, he read the daily Scripture readings and made a spiritual communion. Most working folks cannot get to daily Mass, but we can grow by intentionality: the Eucharist serves the growth of sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is the “thing,” not the Eucharist in isolation. When reception isn’t possible, the Lord is not bound—He can increase grace in other ways.
2. Eucharistic adoration. Carlo stopped by the chapel multiple times a week, often daily. One of his lines: if you go before the sun, you get a suntan; if you go before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, you become holy. Adoration is accessible in many places and times—often 24/7 with access codes or during parish hours.
3. Regular confession. Confession keeps us accountable, absolves sins, gives protective grace, and helps us grow in virtue. Carlo went nearly every week. Many cannot go weekly, but the Holy Fathers have often recommended at least monthly as a practical minimum for growth. A Catholic cannot be holy without frequent confession.
4. Devotion to Mary and the saints. From a very young age, Carlo had a deep devotion to the Blessed Mother. He cultivated friendships with St. John the Apostle and St. Francis of Assisi. By friendship with the saints and sonship with Mary, he received special helps that ordinarily come only from such communion.
5. A generous heart. This is the key that makes the other four effective. One can attend daily Mass and adoration and still act poorly; over time the Lord will work on us, but

the “unlock” is generosity. Carlo’s mother said: “Each person was important to Carlo.” Those interviewed echoed this: he saw people and cared for them—the janitor, the gatekeeper, a housemaid he secretly helped on Sundays so she could get home for dinner, classmates who struggled. He spent most of his allowance on the poor, worked in a soup kitchen, and taught catechism to younger children. Generous acts of charity help us grow in sanctifying grace.

Two final notes about Carlo’s “attitude.” First, his motto: “To be always united to Jesus is my life program.” It’s a play on words—he was a computer programmer—but it captures the heart needed for growth, whatever disciplines the Lord asks at a given time. Second, his approach to prayer showed maturity beyond his years: “I like to speak to Jesus about all that I’m living and feeling.” The only rule of prayer is: be real. If you’ve had a hard day with the kids and come to prayer with a polished line, that’s not real. Piety starts by being real and trusting that the Lord cares about what you’re living—He loves you and forgives you. Another of Carlo’s lines: “To Him I can always confide something. I can also complain, question Him about His silence, and tell Him what I do not understand.” He would then reflect, and—because he was at daily Mass or reading the daily Gospel—“within me I find a word that He sends me, or a moment of the Gospel that fills me with conviction and certainty.”

Dear friends in Christ, as we receive the Eucharist—meant to increase the Lord’s life in us, which is sanctifying grace—let us thank Him for His grace and ask Him to show each of us how He is calling us, personally, to grow in holiness and life in Him.

Praise be Jesus Christ.