

STUBBORN AS A MULE: THE ROADBLOCK OF OBSTINACY

When serving in a parish with a school, my favorite classrooms to visit were those of Kindergarteners, with their creative decorations and colorful atmosphere. Typically, though, my visits were brief. Why? Because I was exhausted after ten minutes, though utterly amazed at both the patience and ability of the teachers to turn on a dime! While the kids were delightful, there are few students quite so challenging under the right circumstances. Watching parents engage their young children is truly amazing, especially when they throw a tantrum! “Time to put on your boots, Johnny.” “No!” comes the defiant response, complete with a scowl. Parents know much better than I ever could, the tremendous **love and patience** these early years demand. But in the spiritual life, **stubbornness** is not limited to pre-school. When we exhibit an unwillingness to change, it can be downright devastating for the life of our soul.

But **stubbornness** is hardly limited to Kindergarten. When I first began listening to country music in the 1990’s, I recall a song by Collin Raye entitled, “That’s My Story.” It could be subtitled, “And I’m stickin’ to it.” It is about a husband who is clearly lying to his wife about his late-night poker antics, and to be frank— she ain’t buyin’ it! He repeats several times, “But that’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.” Lies get us in trouble, as too many know from experience. But the **refusal to admit** when we are wrong is actually much more spiritually dangerous. The problem of **obstinacy** in the spiritual life is predicated upon the understanding that a person disregards his or her spiritual life to such an extent as to knowingly dismiss clear Church teaching, stubbornly refusing to change.

When we approach the Sacrament of Penance we do so because we show true contrition for our sins. It may be unrealistic to exhibit perfect contrition, for there is often some mixture of motives (e.g. the fear of punishment) involved in seeking forgiveness. We know this first hand, and while we’d love to have perfect contrition, sometimes we just fall short. That is different from obstinacy. Citing the **Council of Trent**, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1451) teaches: “Among the penitent’s acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.’” (cf. Council of Trent, Session 14, 25 Nov. 1551) In his Holy Thursday Letter to Priests in 2002, Pope John Paul II stated, “Unless it appears otherwise, the priest must assume that, in confessing his or her sins, the penitent is genuinely sorry and is determined to make amends.”

This is sound advice by which I have tried to exercise my priesthood. I never assume obstinacy or a lack of good will by anyone who approaches the sacrament. Still, contrition is a tall order, requiring a **firm resolve** not to sin again and includes “not only ceasing from sin, the resolve of a new life and a beginning of it, but also a hatred of the old...” (Council of Trent) It is an ideal to which we are all equally held. Obstinacy refers to the quality of one’s life in which there is such an **ingrained desire to remain in sin** that even when presented with the reality that our sins do damage to our soul, we are not ready to give them up. Saint Augustine had a poignant way to describe this watershed moment, that moment in which an individual grasps that in order to change, we must be **firm and resolute** in attacking the problem head on, without compromise.

There is an amazing passage in the midst of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* where while recalling the events immediately prior to his conversion to the faith, he personified his vices, calling them his “mistresses,” assigning them a personality like one who would pluck at his garment of flesh, holding him back from real and substantial commitment. They spoke to him murmuring softly, “Are you sending us away?” And, “From this moment shall this or that not be allowed you, now or forever.” (*Confessions*, VIII, 11, 26) But at this point, they were no longer screaming as perhaps they did in his youth. Now, he was so close to the point of conversion, these vices began to be heard “not half so loud; they no longer stood against me face to face, but were softly muttering behind my back, and as I tried to depart, plucking stealthily at me to make me look back at them.” Still, he realized that was enough to keep him from shaking them off once for all. And then he writes something very interesting. The strong force of his own habit spoke to him: “Do you think you can live without them?”

This insight of Saint Augustine is one reason why his autobiography has touched countless lives throughout the centuries. It speaks to our human condition, one such that it matters little if we live in the 4th or the 21st

century— the realities are the same. Our bad habits and sins can become so ingrained that it is really no longer a question of the intellect, but one of the will. “Can we live without them?” When dealing with obstinacy, we ought to carefully consider the possibility of becoming hardened in our sin. It can occur with additions, which can minimize the culpability because one is not fully free to turn away from an addictive behavior. However, if it is a true hardness of heart, then we ought to pray for the grace to be converted to the truth of recognizing our error, and return to the loving embrace of our merciful Lord. (Next: Envy of another’s spiritual welfare)

- The head of the U.S. Bishops National Review Board spoke to the assembled prelates last week. He said: “It has taken the intervention of the state and the media to fully expose the darkness of abuse in our dioceses.” **Dr. Francesco Cesareo** added: “Today, the faithful and the clergy do not trust many of you. They are angry and frustrated, no longer satisfied with words and even with prayer...They seek action that signals a cultural change from the leadership of the Church.” Bravo! We need this kind of honesty.
- The **Giving Tree** is a wonderful way to support people in need as we approach Christmas. Please pick up an ornament in front of St. Peter’s Chapel. On the back you will see a suggested gift item that will surely be of great benefit to an individual. We also could use your volunteer assistance for collecting and sorting gifts on December 1-2.
- I am so deeply grateful to the **Cathedral Men’s Association** for their beautiful gift of a **new Monstrance** for the Cathedral. It is different in that it accommodates a much larger host (5 ³/₄ inch diameter), one that will be easier upon which to gaze during periods of Adoration. It is solid (i.e. heavy!) and that is a testament to its quality. I look forward to using this for years to come. Thank you, gentlemen!
- Looking for Catholic Christmas gifts? Consider our own items here at the Cathedral, including a beautiful illumined acrylic piece detailing our Cathedral dome. Check them out in the glass case located in the back of Church. We are also teaming up with Leaflet Missal Co. with a special **Parish Rewards** program, enabling the parish to receive a small percentage of your own family purchases as a donation to the Cathedral. See the announcement on page 7.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector