

THE TWELVE STEP REVIEW

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P.



Fall 2016

American television soap operas are very much like ancient Greek mythology. The gods and goddesses in the ancient world were created by man and thus acted as humans did. Although they were portrayed as immortal and far more powerful than humans, nevertheless, morally speaking, they were not really much better than we are.

Religion for the pagans of the ancient world consisted of rites and rituals used to implore the help of the gods and to propitiate them, to get their help or to turn away their wrath. The gods and goddesses were not tied to a code of moral responsibility. Morality was not central to pagan religions as it was to the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, and now to us as Christians. It is important for Christians who embrace twelve-step spirituality to do so with a understanding of God's true nature as revealed in and through Christ.

God as we understood Him

The second of the twelve steps states: *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.* How we understand God is very important to our recovery and to our lives as Christians. Because Christ presents us with the true nature of God, it is important to incorporate that understanding into our recovery and, with Step Eleven, in our prayer life.

Our image of God lies at the foundation of our prayer life, because the objective of prayer is to strengthen and deepen a relationship with the unchanging God of love. If we have a distorted view of God—and this often happens to those who grew up in highly dysfunctional families that were portrayed as religious, yet that religion was filtered through the lens of dysfunction which distorted the image of God—our spiritual

journey will be impaired. For some dysfunctional families, God was portrayed as the “pay-back God” or the “angry God”—a distortion which dysfunction in “religious” families brings about.

The call of God placed in our hearts

All religions have things in common, which makes sense because we were all created in the image and likeness of God who has placed in all our hearts a call, and everyone experiences this call, even the atheist. It is basically a call to happiness. All sane persons want happiness. Happiness is the one thing we can choose for itself; everything else is chosen for the sake of happiness.

We have been pre-programmed for it. Everything we do is done for happiness' sake. The drug addict, for example, turns to drugs to escape pain and find happiness, but of course it's only a pseudo happiness that lasts only as long as the effects of the drugs. Nothing exhausts the scope of human desire, which is the basis of all addiction. It's never enough. The gambling addict isn't satisfied with one game, nor is the pornography addict content with just one gaze. It is ongoing. We desire not *some* happiness, but *unending* happiness. That is why the discovery of an untreatable disease is devastating. And it is devastating to the atheist as well. Take the example of

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INSPIRATION FROM THE SAINTS

In our age of rampant pornography, we do well to call upon Saints who came from a life of sexual addiction. Here are a few examples.

- **Saint Mary of Egypt** (c. 344 - c. 421; feast day April 1) is perhaps one of the most revered and beloved models of repentance in the Orthodox Church. By the end of her life, she was one of the greatest spiritual pillars of her time. As a young girl in a sexually abusive family, she indulged in a life of lust. Having lost her virginity at twelve, she ran away from home and spent the next 17 years pursuing sexual partners to satisfy her lust. She eventually made an unexpected journey to the Holy Land where she experienced a conversion at the tomb of Jesus. Drawn to repentance from a life of lust, she prayed to Our Lady,

O Lady Virgin, who gave birth in the flesh to God the Word, I know that I am unworthy to look upon your icon. I rightly inspire hatred and disgust before your purity, but I know also that God became Man in order to call sinners to repentance. Help me, O All-Pure One. Let me enter the church. Allow me to behold the Wood upon which the Lord was crucified in the flesh, shedding His Blood for the redemption of sinners, and also for me. Be my witness before Your Son that I will never defile my body again with the impurity of fornication. As soon as I have seen the Cross of your Son, I will renounce the world, and go wherever you lead me.

The primary source of information on Saint Mary of Egypt comes from her biography written by St. Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem (634–638).

- **Saint Moses the Ethiopian** (c. 330 - c. 405; feast day August 28) was the leader of a band of murderers and robbers who rampaged through Egypt in the early fifth century. When he was turned to repentance by St. Isidore, he struggled for many years with the lingering passions from his former life, especially lustful and violent thoughts. In his struggle, he became incredibly humble, never deigning to judge a brother for his struggle, knowing the pervasiveness of his own sinful desires and the destructive consequences they had in his past. In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers we are told:

On one occasion Abba Moses of Patara was engaged in a war against fornication, and he could not endure being in his cell, and he went and informed Abba Isidore of it; and the old man entreated him to return to his cell, but he would not agree. And having said, “Father, I cannot bear it,” the old man took him up to the roof of his cell and said unto him, “Look to the west,” and when he looked he saw multitudes of devils with troubled and terrified aspects, and they showed themselves in the forms of phantoms with fighting attitudes. Abba Isidore said to him, “Look to the east,” and when he looked he saw innumerable holy angels standing there, and they were in a state of great glory.

Then Abba Isidore said to him, “Behold, those who are in the west are those who are fighting with the holy ones; and those whom you have seen in the east are those who are sent by God to the help of the saints, for those who are with us are many.” And having seen these, Abba Moses took courage and returned to his cell without fear.

Saint John the Long-Suffering, (d. 1160; feast day September 28) like Saint Mary of Egypt was tormented since youth by sexual desires. No ascetical practice seemed to be a match for the passion that raged in him. Even when he became a recluse, still he struggled greatly with lust, and the devil did his best to shake St. John’s determination to overcome this passion—by tempting him into forsaking his life as a hermit. Then one year, during the Easter Vigil, in the midst of these torments and his own temptations, he cried out to Christ,

O Lord my God and my Savior! Why have You forsaken me? Have mercy upon me, only Lover of Mankind; deliver me from my foul iniquity, so that I am not trapped in the snares of the Evil One. Deliver me from the mouth of my enemy: send down a flash of lightning and drive it away.

And relying on the strength of God’s grace, he overcame his temptations to lust.

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We also have a set of Our Lady of Recovery note cards, 7" by 5", with the image on the front, blank inside, and the prayer to Our Lady of Recovery on the back side. They come 10 to a box, along with 10 envelopes, for \$7.50, plus S/H.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT SEX AND MARRIAGE: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching. Christopher West's book taps into the desire we all have for deep spirituality and an integrated life. He draws upon his own remarkable life experience and his theological training to shape answers to the most sublime and some of the most gritty questions spouses are likely to have. Those who adopt the principles of the book can have much happier marriages. Paperback, 191 pp., \$11.95, plus shipping and handling.

THE WOUNDED HEART: HOPE FOR ADULT VICTIMS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE. Studies indicate that 38% of the women interviewed had been sexually abused by an adult or family member by the age of 18. You may think you don't know anyone who has been sexually abused, especially if most of your friends and acquaintances are Christians. But the statistics indicate otherwise: Sexual abuse knows no religious or social boundaries. **The Wounded Heart** is an intensely personal and specific look at this

most "soul deadening" form of abuse. Personal because it may be affecting you, your spouse, a close friend or neighbor, or someone you know well at church. And specific because it goes well beyond the general issues and solutions discussed in other books. Dr. Allender's book reaches deep into the wounded heart of someone you know, exploring the secret lament of the soul damaged by sexual abuse—and laying hold of the hope buried there by the One whose unstained image we all bear. Paperback, 301 pp., \$16.95, plus shipping and handling.

the famous French atheist, Simone de Beauvoir. Having to confront her mortality in the face of death, she remarked:

I loathe the thought of being annihilated quite as much now as I ever did. I think with sadness of all the books I've read, all the places I've seen, all the knowledge I've amassed.... and that will be no more? All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places....

Then she reminisces about her youth:

I can still see the hedge of hazel trees flurried by the wind and the promises with which I fed my {young} beating heart as I looked to the future.

Well, that future came and went, and she looked in horror at her impending death. Why would this occur if transcendence were not an integral part of our nature and consciousness?

We have been pre-programmed for paradise, and that is why we desire not only *some* happiness, but perfect and ultimate happiness, which only God can give because God alone is infinite. This particular desire differentiates humans from all other animals. It has been placed in our hearts by our Creator, who created us for Himself.

True happiness is a happiness that lasts, and happiness that lasts is transcendent, not ephemeral. No one, including the atheist, wants crumbs. But all you get in this world are crumbs, which points to something otherworldly as the source of true and lasting happiness.

God as we understand Him in Christ

The true nature of God has been revealed to us in and through Christ, the Son of God. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), for example, we see the son wander off from his family and squander his father's money which he inherited, ending up with nothing. He decides to return to his father. The father, realizing his son's repentance, celebrates his return. This is the true nature of God as revealed in Christ. Even when Judas comes to betray Christ, Jesus doesn't revile him or curse him to hell. He addresses Judas as "friend" (Matthew 26:50), for God will never reject us. We are free, as was Judas, to accept the hand of God or to refuse it. The God of love doesn't force us. As St. John Chrysostom has noted, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ does not oblige us, neither does He constrain us to be saved, but invites us, through our free-will, to participate in His heritage. Whereas the pagan gods and goddesses of ancient Rome had to be placated and bribed if one wanted their help, the true God has been revealed in and through Christ as **unconditional** love. We believe that there is some truth in virtually all the world's religions, and that the revelation of the unconditional love of God in and

through Jesus' life and preaching brings the goal of these religions to their fulfillment. The true image of God can be seen in this prayer of Saint Thomas Aquinas:

I praise, glorify, and bless You, my God, for the immeasurable favors shown to me who am unworthy. I praise Your forbearance; waiting for me for so long, and Your gentleness appearing in the guise of a sharp reprisal. I praise Your tenderness calling out to me, Your kindness supporting me, Your mercy forgiving my sins. I praise Your goodness for giving me more than I deserve and Your patience for not remembering past injuries. I praise Your humility that consoles me.

For You call back the fugitive, You welcome the one who returns. You support the one who falters. You gladden the despondent, You urge on the negligent. You spurn not the repentant sinner, You do not remember past crimes. You set us free from many perils, You soften our hearts for penitence. You correct us with scourges, You guard us with a ministering angel. Temporal things You supply for us, eternal things You keep for us in reserve. You inspire us with the grandeur of creation. You draw us forward with the mercy of redemption. You promise us blessings in reward. For all these things I cannot give sufficient praise. I give thanks, however, for the abundance of Your immense goodness. May You always increase Your grace in me, preserve that increase, and reward what You have preserved. Amen.

The spirit of this prayer is envisioned in the photo on page one. It portrays Jesus pouring water that will be used by Him to wash the feet of His disciples. Imagine, God Himself washing the feet of those who the very next day would abandon Him. This is the true image of the God of love.

It is the image of God that the recovering Christian must fall in love with, keep before his eyes, and reveal to others in his own behavior, which allows him, then, to live the axiom that mirrors the sentiment of Step 12 given by St. Thomas Aquinas, "To convert somebody, go and take them by the hand and guide them."

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THE 12-STEP REVIEW

2001 NW 94th Street

Vancouver, WA 98665

1-800-556-6177

www.12-step-review.org

