

Spiritual Lessons from a Failed Saint

adapted from *Flunking Sainthood* by Jana Riess (Paraclete Press)

February: Fasting

Fasting is not for visions or even for answers to prayer. It's not to manipulate God into acting according to our wishes. Fasting is to help us on that painful road toward humility. But it doesn't make me more humble and less worldly. In fact, all this single-minded focus on the body may be having the opposite effect. There's also a part of me that wants my fasting to be effective and tangible, a visible means of supersizing my prayers.

March: Meeting Jesus in the kitchen...or not

At first, I don't much like Brother Lawrence, the 17th century French monk that everyone keeps telling me I need to read this month, as I attempt to infuse daily tasks with a sense of God's presence. He's infuriatingly jolly. Brother Lawrence apparently holds the keys to mindfulness in the Christian tradition. Apart from me, everyone adores him. His DIY spirituality requires no intermediary. Just step right in, folks! Scrub those dishes, and presto change-o, you're that much closer to God. Anyone can do it, anywhere. You just need a cutting board and cleaver, and suddenly you're flying down the Spirituality Express.

April: Lectio Divina

This ancient discipline prescribes a way of discernment through reading and prayer. I'm supposed to approach the text expecting to be changed, not just hoping to someday dominate a *Jeopardy* category about Jesus trivia. I can't keep relating to the Bible with just my head. I'll have to find where it's speaking to my heart.

May: Nixing Shoppertainment

The point of this month's practice of not shopping hits me: it's not just about curbing materialism, though that's a good thing, or even about not coveting. It's about taking some choices out of the mix, of letting God's guidance dictate the basic contours of what I will and won't do. I'm not just reducing physical clutter by not shopping. I need to reduce spiritual clutter by becoming the kind of Christian who does not covet. I'm going to get off the more, more, more treadmill.

June: ~~Centering Prayer~~ Er, the Jesus Prayer — Look! a squirrel!

It also sounds like these cautions [against newbies trying the Jesus Prayer] are intended for monks who feel themselves superior and imagine they've achieved a certain level of holiness. They've left humility behind. Not me, though. Not for nothing have I failed for six months continuously! If demons only attack those who think they're experts at spirituality, then one of the benefits of finding out you pretty much suck is that it's like spraying a demonic version of Off. When my assigned demons see that I'm hardly about to get cocky about the Jesus Prayer, they'll yawn and wander off to play poker.

July: Unorthodox Sabbath

Maybe the Sabbath is similar to the way I feel on a winter's night when, clad in fleece pajamas, I crawl under goose down covers and rest in the knowledge that nothing more will be demanded of me that day. God will embrace me with the tent of his peace. At least, that's the hope. It turns out that there's a whole lot of work involved in pitching a tent of peace.

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