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At the Sacristy Door

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

I HAD preached that morning on the text, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." I had tried to point out that the call to holiness, to great sanctity, was for all. I had said that lay people quite often think of holiness as an occupational tool of priests and sisters, that those dedicated to the service of God are often looked upon as the professionally holy—holiness being a demand of their professional dedication. What I wanted the congregation to understand was that the vocation to perfection was not limited to those who lived in rectories and convents. Lay people, single and married, were called to be saints. I realized that it was not a very original idea. But as I turned from the pulpit I did feel the satisfaction, legitimate or not, of having preached with conviction if not with eloquence.

After unvesting and after I had made my thanksgiving, I left by the sacristy door. Waiting outside was a young mother with her three young children. Actually they were three of her seven children. The mother held the youngest, whom I learned was called Suzy. I recognized Suzy immediately. Last St. Blaise's day her mother had brought her to the rail to have her throat blessed. Most children of three years either cried or looked at you with that inimitable combination of wonder and terror. But Suzy flashed her great blue eyes and smiled from ear to ear. My priestly decorum was shattered for the next ten throats. Yes, I remembered Suzy.

The mother spoke. "Father, I liked your sermon, but . . . well . . . I don't know how to say what is in my mind without seeming to be bold."

I assured her she could speak freely and I would not take it amiss.

"Well, it seems to me that you, and priests in general, do not understand what married life entails. Pardon me if this sounds fresh, but I often think that priests must spring full grown from the minds of their bishops, that they do not come into the world as the rest of us do,

as children who grow up as a member of a family. What I'm trying to say is that priests do not seem to have experienced the give and take of family life; they do not seem to realize what a mother and father go through."

I TOLD her I had come into the world as men had come for centuries, that I came from a family of eight children, seven of whom were boys. And I knew well that mothers could be distraught and fathers worried.

"But, Father, you talk about married people becoming saints. Being married and being a mother is a full-time job. And from what you say, becoming a saint is a full-time job. That makes two full-time jobs. And you talk about meditating a little each day, reading the Bible, going to daily Mass, making visits to the Blessed Sacrament. With seven children to take care of, I scarcely have time to grab a bite to eat in the morning. I get four of the children off to school. Then I'm on the go almost constantly. By midafternoon my nerves are frayed. Then at four o'clock the four children who go to school descend upon me with all their pent-up energy. By eight o'clock I am too tired to move, too tired even to talk with my husband."

I began to see that I had preached a poor sermon.

"I can understand your difficulty," I began somewhat lamely. "I think you know that there are not different kinds of holiness, a special kind of holiness for priests and sisters, and a watered-down, secondhand kind for lay people. No, there are not different kinds of holiness. But there are different ways of attaining holiness. Each of us knows his or her way from the particular vocation God has given us. I attain holiness in a priestly way: by my daily Mass, my breviary, hearing confessions, visiting the people in their homes, typing out the parish bulletin. My vocation is my way of attaining holiness."

I continued, "You attain the same holiness in a different way. You are a

wife and a mother. You will attain holiness as a wife and mother by washing dishes, ironing clothes, correcting children; by, at times, getting so tired you can't think. You become holy accepting what you cannot change, the state of perpetual bedlam that even healthy vigorous children are constantly creating. You become holy by being faithful to your conjugal obligations.

"You mentioned that your work at home and acquiring holiness are both full-time jobs. That is certainly correct. But they are really one job, not two jobs. I attain holiness by being a good priest. You attain holiness by being a good wife and mother. A poor housekeeper and a grudging, nagging wife could never attain perfection. In show your vocation as a wife and mother your way to holiness."

SHE thought a moment and objected. "But what about daily Mass, and reading the Bible, and all the other spiritual exercises you mentioned in your sermon?"

"Don't forget," I answered, "you can also become holy by not going to Mass on week days. From what you say, it is impossible for you to get to Mass during the week. Since that is the case, you accept it as God's will. Ultimately it is doing God's will that makes us holy. To sanctify your day with small snatchings of prayer, just as you must snatch a bite to eat if you are going to get any bread fast. If you plan carefully, you can get in two or three minutes of spiritual reading and some family prayers. As your family grows up you will have more time for spiritual exercises. Until then be patient and do the best you can."

Suzy tugged at her mother's dress and the other two children were getting impatient. The mother thanked me and was off down the street. As I walked toward the rectory I marveled at the wondrously simple way God leads us to Himself. We, priest and lay people, are the ones who complicate holiness, as we complicate so many things.