



## Penance Builds Up Will to Improve

Once a week Dr. John Massaro drives 30 miles to Pulaski, N.Y., a village near the shores of Lake Ontario and the foothills of the Adirondack mountains. He spends the day there practicing dentistry, with many of his patients coming long distances from rural homes to receive oral care.

For some, their visit to Dr. Massaro is filled with anxiety since the inconvenience involved in making those lengthy journeys has kept them from a dentist's chair for 10-20 years.

Three factors finally moved these individuals to come for help: the extreme pain in their deteriorated teeth and mouths; the assurance from others that Dr. John won't hurt them too much; the hope of relief through his treatment.

A parallel exists here between the person who has seriously neglected his or her teeth and the penitent who has gravely neglected his or her spiritual life.

Both hurt, one from physical pain and the other from oppressive guilt.

Both reach an unbearable condition which overcomes their reluctance and leads them to seek healing, one from the graceful hands of a dentist and the other from the grace-filled words of a priest.

Both look for healers with reputations of gen-

Fr. Joseph M. Champlin



Our Church Family

teness, one who is called "Doctor," the other known as "Father."

Both in a weakly confident, deeply troubled way hope this trip to the dentist's office or the reconciliation room will remove their ever present burdens.

The sacrament of penance is, first of all, a sacrament of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace for those in darkness or alienated from God. Jesus acts through this experience now as he did earlier in Palestine: "Christ not only exhorted men to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father." (Rite of Penance, Article 1)

In his late teens, Ralph Rimualdo was warned by a dentist, "Either you start to take care of your teeth or you will have none by the time you are 35."

That advice came a dozen years ago and Ralph

heeded those stern words. In addition to his daily oral hygiene, every six months Mr. Rimualdo visits the dentist for a checkup, for what he calls "preventive insurance."

The sacrament of penance, similarly, is not only for those who have wandered far away from the Lord and wish to come home. God has also offered this ritual to all for their personal, spiritual growth.

"Frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly." (Article 7).

We walk away from those semi-annual visits to the dentist with our teeth cleaned and minor repairs accomplished, determined we will exert even greater efforts to care for them.

The penitent, after a confession of venial sins, leaves the sacrament in roughly parallel fashion with these faults washed away in Christ's Precious Blood and weakening wounds opened up by those shortcomings healed by God's grace. We also sense a renewed determination to "conform more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively." (Article 7).

## Geniuses at Work . . . But Not at Living

The joke, now a little shop-worn, at our house was that for Christmas I gave my husband a pile of books that I'd been wanting to read.

It wasn't true. There was only one out of the four that I was really eager to peruse and last week, taking advantage of a flu-ish condition and Himself's absence I finished the nearly 600 pages of "Max Perkins, Editor of Genius."

The work of A. Scott Berg, it is the story of the man who guided the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner and Thomas Wolfe, among many others, to fame although not always fortune.

Beginning in 1914 when he moved from advertising manager at Charles Scribner's Sons Publishing to editor until his death in 1947, Max Perkins encouraged, inspired, sympathized, drank with, lent money to, and did almost anything else his authors required in order to produce.

Sarah Child



All in the Family

It is not a book to skim. For one thing there are too many delightful anecdotes about the literary giants that would serve the would-be raconteur for weeks to come.

In addition, there are lessons aplenty for those who aspire to write, found in the many notes and letters Max sent to the men and women whom he nurtured and prodded and whose works he cut down to size.

Probably the most important lesson found in the book is not one Perkins taught, but comes from close looks at the legendary talents.

Their personal lives were such as to give genius a bad name.

Fitzgerald, for example, lived in a constant state of anxiety — over lack of money, mentally disturbed wife Zelda, ability to keep producing and his own mortality. He worried about growing old from the age of late twenties.

Wolfe, who died in his thirties, was insecure, paranoid, unable to form lasting relationships. Nor could he figure out why his hometown of Asheville, N.C., was up in arms when he put the people in his novels piecemeal without disguising them.

Hemingway, married four times, obviously had doubts about his own virility, became enraged when it was suggested this was behind his need to continually write about the macho man, took his own life in 1961.

So much for legends.

## Developing Family Spirituality

We were finishing our coffee in the interstate restaurant when a noisy family of six entered. With much confusion and jocularly, they found chairs, ordered, and checked each other's order carefully to be sure they had their own. Then a remarkable thing happened. Without any sign from their parents, they became silent, bowed their heads, and shared a quiet and reverent prayer. With the "Amen," the family returned to its former noise level.

But their thirty-second pause for God seemed to affect every table in the place. People had witnessed a family's faith — a faith that went out to eat with the family, an unembarrassed faith, and obviously a meaningful one, even to the six year-old who was as intent and prayerful as his parents.

Some families preserve the faith. Others spread it. It's really as simple as that. A truly alive family spirituality can't be hidden because it goes beyond itself to others. It gives others a model and witness to follow. It gives them encouragement to try themselves. In spite of the seeming disinterest in non-praying families, there's often a deep hidden wish that they, too, could share a spiritual dimension, if only they knew how.

When I go into a parish to consult on family spirituality, I ask, "Who are your mustard seed

Dolores Curran



Talks With Parents

families? Which ones can pray together?" And everyone names the same families. Their lights aren't hidden under a bushel or patio. They're willing to talk about their faith openly, they are unashamed, and they include everyone who's there in their prayers. If they have a fault, it's that they presume other families are like themselves.

Most families have a long way to go before they reach that stage. The key is becoming natural and comfortable enough with God that it doesn't have to become a planned occasion. It's when the family spontaneously turns from talking about the beauty of a surrounding or the marvel of a construction to talking of God. It's when two children talk about Jesus unselfconsciously.

It's when children "catch" their parents in prayer. It's when Dad does something generous for another and doesn't say anything but everyone notes it. It's when a teen leaves a note, "Everyone pray hard for me third hour because I have a terrible test." It's when Mom goes out of her way to be sure everyone in the neighborhood or pew is included in whatever is going on.

A sense of witness is difficult to describe to a family that is always looking inwardly on itself. Such a family is part of what has come to be called the "me generation." How can we get ahead? What can we buy next? How can we make use of others?"

In such a family, it's discouraging to discuss family spirituality because it usually emanates from a selfish base, i.e. we pray so we can get more for ourselves.

Witnessing to others goes hand in hand with developing a sense of family bonding through God and Christian works. The family that is having considerable difficulty praying together might check its concern for others. It may know all its prayers and put them in the right order but it's forgotten the wise meaning behind St. Exuperius's words: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction."