

A Fresh Start for 2018

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John the Baptist's ministry was a call to repentance, the renunciation of sin as prophesized by Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."(Mt 3:3) The Ten Commandments provide the moral baseline, with the First Commandment chief among them: "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have any false gods before me."

False gods come in many shapes and sizes. As the culture increasingly rejects our Judeo-Christian heritage, we can't rule out a return to false idols, made of stone. But a false god can also be an obsession so intense that it blots out properly worshiping the one God. Those obsessions are legion, but it is helpful to focus on just one type: our anger.

A curious thing happens as we get older. Our lives seem to compress and we start to lose track of time. Events that seem to have taken place earlier this year might have actually taken place several years ago. Curiously, even distant memories – good and bad – become more present. On Pearl Harbor Day, newspapers showed veterans well into their 90s with faces expressing the pain of grief as they remembered that fateful day way back in 1941.

There is the old joke about Irish Alzheimer's: you forget everything except your grudges. But it doesn't only affect the Irish. Anger is easy to understand – most of us know it all too well. It's there even in childhood. Take a rattle away from the baby, and he throws a temper tantrum. As we get older, we just get a bit more sophisticated in the way we express our anger – when others rattle us.

If we aren't vigilant, it is quite possible for even petty anger to fester into true hatreds. We are quite capable of allowing a momentary annoyance to become the reason to nurse a grudge.

It's not that we have a duty to ignore the outrage that comes with injustice. Outrage has its place. For example, the Church recognizes the state's role in administering capital punishment precisely out of a desire for justice: "Now the [death penalty] punishments inflicted by the civil authority, which is the legitimate avenger of crime . . . give security to life by repressing outrage and violence." (Roman Catechism) But even legitimate outrage as a result of injustice needs to be controlled and properly ordered.

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Furthermore, we cannot rely on any government to be perfect in the enforcement of all just laws. Apart from keeping criminals off-balance for the remainder of their lives by a threat of prosecution, it is unreasonable to expect all malefactors will be brought to justice. But cultivating a seething anger over an unresolved injustice is not an answer to these facts of human life. Cultivating rage is not only self-destructive; the obsession becomes a kind of false god, the center of our lives.

Years ago, a renowned Jewish hunter of Nazis observed that perhaps the greatest tragedy about the Holocaust is that it has replaced the Exodus as the center of Jewish history.

How are we, with God's grace, to remove the false god of hatred in this season of welcoming the coming of the Lord and facing a fresh New Year? As we all know, it's not easy.

A few Biblical suggestions:

Recognize that just anger is not a sin. Anger impels us to action, to balance the scales of justice. "Be angry but do not sin." (Eph 4:26).

Just anger needs to be proportionate and under the control of reason: "do not let the sun go down on your anger." (Eph 4:26)

Count to ten after being provoked: "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." (James 1:19) ("Honey, why don't you answer me?" "Darling, I'm counting to ten!")

Be prepared to forgive and forgive again. "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" (Mt 18:21-22)

Bear with the faults of others by remembering our own failures. "Forgives us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Recognize that strong emotions like anger are volatile and cannot be controlled without God's grace. So do not neglect prayer, the Sacrament of Penance and the devout reception of Holy Communion. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Mt 5:44)

Do not neglect the redemptive value of suffering injustice. "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering

for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col 1:24)

Try old-fashioned Christian kindness; "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:20-21)

Finally, especially for serious and chronically unresolved injustices, have confidence in the God's justice. Despite appearances, nobody gets away with murder; "Nobody can escape His judgment. Nobody can escape His righteous wrath. It is mine to avenge; I will repay." (Deuteronomy 32:35) Nobody will escape the judgment seat of God because there is a heaven *and* there is a hell.

We have the choice to be obsessed with injustices and risk our souls or to anticipate Christ with a firm faith. Let's firmly resolve to . . . just stop it. Stop nursing our grievances, great or small, and prepare the way of the Lord in the New Year – and every year.

****Image:** *John the Baptist* by Leonardo de Vinci, c. 1515 [Louvre, Paris]

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