

When I was twenty-one, I took the Spring quarter off from the UW and back-packed across Europe by myself. I ended up going from London to Holland, through Germany, Switzerland, Italy, then over to Greece. The only language I knew besides English was some German. I had only taken a year of German at college, but I thought it would help me along the way and would really improve as I used it. But truth be told, I didn't use my German that much beyond reading signs.

The problem was that I was too embarrassed to really test my German skills out on real, live Germans. I made mistakes. I looked foolish in my own mind. I forgot words. I got discouraged. When I did try to speak, I had some people look at me blankly, "What?" So, I shut up. I quit. My German never advanced from a very basic conversational ability. And I'm sure my experience in those German-speaking countries was less rich than if I had boldly stuck with my awkward German.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. We are always supposed to be growing in holiness, but especially during this

season of preparation for Easter. This growth is what Jesus has in mind today in the Gospel from Luke's Sermon on the Plain. We are to end our judgmentalism – seeing the splinter in other people's eyes but ignoring the beams in our own. Our lives are to bear good fruit. We are to change our hearts, so our mouths speak good, not evil. In a word, we are to turn away from sin, to a holy life in Jesus.

And every year many of us fail in our Lenten attempts at conversion. And we may wonder if this year will be any different. While Lent is supposed to be a time of renewed spiritual zeal, it can become little more than a reminder of our past spiritual failures. We can grow content with our mediocrity or even quit trying. And this isn't only true about Lent. It's true about the whole spiritual journey. In the face of such temptations to spiritual discouragement what's a Catholic to do?

Here I want to go back to my attempt, or lack of attempt, to use my German so many years ago. Think of holiness not so much as a series of virtues to attain, as a new language to learn – God's language,

that is, a way of life in which we have more or less fluency. Saints are those who speak, not English or German, but fluent Divinity. Their words, thoughts, actions, seem to reflect God's will effortlessly and attractively – like a native speaker of Heaven's language. But most of us speak Divinity very poorly. We stutter. We can pull off individual grace-filled acts, but we make lots of mistakes. We don't understand most of what God's saying most of the time. And we don't know how to respond to Him – or if we do – we can't make it come out right.

But that's not a reason to get discouraged in the spiritual life. Don't give up on holiness – especially not this Lent. If you do you will be like me, travelling through Germany and Switzerland with some very real, though limited, knowledge of German, but never growing in fluency because you're afraid, or tired, of failure.

I've been reading the works of an Irish Jesuit priest from a century ago. His name was Fr. William Doyle. He died in action in 1917 during World War I as a British Army chaplain. His men considered him a saint

and miracle worker – as do many today. Before the war Fr. Doyle was a famous retreat director and letter writer to Catholics seeking holiness. He wrote to one Catholic these words that I believe apply to all of us as we approach Ash Wednesday.

“Surely, child, you are not surprised to find that you have broken your resolution, or rather, that the devil has gained a victory over you. I am convinced from a pretty big experience that perfection, that is sanctity, is only to be won by repeated failures. If you rise again after a fall, sorry for the pain given our Lord, humbled by it, since you see better your real weakness, and determined to make another start, far more is gained than if you had gone on without a tumble. Besides, to expect to keep any resolution, till repeated acts have made it solid in the soul, is like one expecting to learn skating . . . without ever falling. The more falls, the better (that is if you don’t mind bumps), for every fall means that we have begun again, have made another effort and so have made progress.”

I've always wondered what it's like to speak another language fluently. It must be wonderful. I'm a bit old for that now, and I missed my best chance when I was almost there, or at least, had the good beginnings, but refused to try and fail at my German.

Do you desire to live holiness fluently, like a saint? Jesus' Sermon on the Plain that we began with today is not easy to live out -- that fullness of heart He speaks of, that fruitfulness. Of course, there will be failures in our attempts to do it. But the secret, whether we think of holiness as skating, as Fr. Doyle did, or as learning a new language, is to practice and fail -- so as to learn all the better. Jesus loves to see our efforts to speak to Him in His own language through prayer, service, fasting, charity. And He sees our good intentions in our failures. So, this Lent let us begin again with hope, excitement, and totally lacking in any fear of spiritual inadequacy or failure.