

LESS ME

HE MUST INCREASE AND I MUST DECREASE." This little saying of St. John the Baptist captures his whole spirituality. And we know that St. John was very successful at prayer, spending years in the desert alone with God. Prayer gave him the power to know God. Prayer gave him the power to love God and to serve God. He spent hours and hours in the waters of the Jordan, hearing confessions and helping people find the Christ. He spoke out boldly against the errors, abuses and evils of his time, even to the very shedding of his blood. His spirituality, then, is something worth knowing and imitating.

Since the underlying principle of St. John's whole life was: "He must increase and I must decrease," he realized that the more Christ lives in us the better we become. St. Augustine said of St. John: "He saw where his salvation lay. He understood that he was a lamp, and his fear was that it might be blown out by the wind of pride." St. Therese of Lisieux certainly thought the same when she wrote: "Jesus, your arms are the elevator which lift me to heaven! To achieve this, I must not grow; just the opposite, I must remain small. I must become smaller and smaller." In order to grasp St. John's spirituality, let's shorten his saying, "He must increase and I must decrease," to LESS ME. Here is how to live LESS ME.

L STANDS FOR OUR LADY... St. John's spiritual life began when Our Lady came to visit her cousin Elizabeth and spoke a word of greeting. The Ark of the Covenant had come to his home and he danced before her. At the word of greeting from Blessed MARY, St. John leaped in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. "For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). He recognized the presence of Jesus in Blessed Mary by the power of God's grace. So,

we should start all our prayers the same way... by first going to Our Lady with a few Hail Mary's or a Hail Holy Queen. This really puts the devil to flight. He hates this WOMAN, this new Eve destined to crush his head. He still has a headache from their first encounter. This also puts us in the presence of Christ, Who is present in the Ark.

E STANDS FOR EUCHARIST... St. John united Himself to Our Lord—the new Manna—the Bread of Life dwelling in the womb of the Virgin Mother. St. Ambrose taught: "Besides the loving service that Mary rendered to her cousin, there was another reason for her staying that long: the advantage which her visit afforded to the great Prophet. For, if her very greeting brought such blessings at the beginning of her visit—the infant leaping for joy in the womb and his mother being filled with the Holy Spirit—we can readily surmise how much more benefit must have accrued from Mary's continued presence for so long a time. It meant that the Prophet was being anointed and trained like a good athlete in his mother's womb; for his strength was being built up for an uncompromising struggle." Like St. John we should unite ourselves to the Bread of Life



in the Most Blessed Sacrament. It is preferable to make our prayers in front of the Tabernacle whenever possible. In any case, make a spiritual communion... saying something like, "My Lord and my God, I love you with all my heart, and I want to be united with you. Would you come and dwell in me as you do at Communion time." The Catechism of the Council of Trent taught that those who make such spiritual communions receive many of the same fruits as they receive when making sacramental communions. Pope Paul VI taught that such spiritual communions dispose us all the more for our sacramental communions. Notice that St. John the Baptist did make a spiritual communion when he met with Our Lord at the Jordan, exclaiming: "Behold

the Lamb of God." He knew that somehow we must eat of this Lamb of God who was prefigured in the Passover lambs of old.

STANDS FOR HOLY SPIRIT... When Moses approached the Ark of the Covenant of old, God came down in a cloud and filled him with knowledge, strength, grace, and peace. When the Ark approached St. John and his mother Elizabeth, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and His gifts. "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women'" (Luke 1:41-42). When John baptized Our Lord in the Jordan, he saw the Holy Spirit descend from heaven in the form of a dove. We should, therefore, pray to the Holy Spirit to grant us many graces to make our meditation well and to protect us from evil thoughts, errors, and distractions. The traditional prayer is "*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love. Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created. Let us pray. O God, Who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise and ever to rejoice in His consolations. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*" Here is one written by a blessed Carmelite nun: "*Holy Spirit, inspire me. Love of God, consume me. Along the true road, lead me. Mary, my mother, look upon me. With Jesus, bless me. From all evil, from all illusion, From all danger, preserve me.*"

STANDS FOR SACRED SCRIPTURE AND SILENCE AND SECLUSION... After being exposed to the Living Word of God, St. John the Baptist spent much time in the silence and seclusion of the desert. There he would take up the written word of God too... in order to reinvigorate his mind. It is obvious from his preaching that he knew the Scriptures well. Like St. John we too should come into contact with the Living Word of God by prayerfully reading God's love letters—the Holy Scriptures. They speak many things to those who listen... in silence and seclusion. Yet, one can also read from an approved holy book such as *The Imitation of Christ, Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis DeSales, or some life of a Saint. As St. Philip Neri often said the best books are those written by authors whose first name begins with "S"... St. Bernard, St. Teresa, St. Therese...

MSTANDS FOR MEDITATION. While in the womb, St. John most likely meditated on the Living Word in his presence. While in the desert, he spent much time meditating upon what he read in the Scriptures

and their relevance to his life and the coming of the Christ. Like St. John we should meditate on what we read. Those who prayerfully approach the Holy Bible will get inspirations. When this happens, STOP and discuss the inspiration with our Lord. Ask Him what it means in the context it is written... how it affected the people at the time... and finally how it applies to our life. We should resolve to change our life to fit the inspiration and meditation accordingly. In this way, we are working with Christ to make the Word real to ourselves... we are fulfilling the Scriptures themselves by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember that we are seeking with St. John to decrease so that Christ may increase.

ESTANDS FOR EXAMINE... St. John helped others examine their conscience because they came out to him in the Jordan, "confessing their sins" (Mk. 1:5). Perhaps, he even had the gift of seeing their sins like St. Padre Pio or St. Jean Vianney. That would certainly explain why "there went out to him all the people of Jerusalem" (Mk. 1:5) even though St. John had worked no miracles. One cannot give to others what one does not have. St. John certainly knew, then, how to make an examination of conscience. Before making an examination, however, we need to have made a resolution. This we do after making our meditation. Recall that our goal is to decrease while Christ increases. We make resolutions to aid us in this effort. Be sure to make resolutions that are *reasonable* and *concrete*. Do not make broad ranging and general resolutions like, "I will be charitable today." No, this will never do.

As humans, we must be specific if it is going to be meaningful. Say rather, "I will not talk about so and so today" or "I will say something nice to so and so today" or "I will not complain about my health today." (If anyone asks how we are doing, in order to avoid telling a little lie or saying something trite, we could say something like, "I am doing better than I deserve" even when feeling terrible and we will be telling the truth.) After making our meditation and forming our resolution, we thank the Lord for calling us to spend this time with Him. Then we keep our resolution close to our heart, asking ourselves at least twice during the day how we are doing. Then we say we are sorry for our failures and renew our resolution to do better as the day progresses.

If this spirituality is followed it will make the Christian Life present and real. Practice LESS ME so that He might increase and you decrease.