

CHAPTER 1

LIVING THE HOLY HACK LIFE

Holiness has a bad reputation. People fear it is a miserable and torturous life. By contrast, life hacks have become wildly popular on social media as shortcuts and creative ways to improve life. Holy hacks put the two together to show that striving for holiness doesn't have to be hard.

Nothing is worth improving more than our spiritual life, but the road to heaven seems to be a steep climb. Many saints were martyrs, or wore hair shirts, and some were given the stigmata (the actual wounds of crucifixion) as a *gift*. Holiness, then, might appear to be just for the stouthearted very few, not the rest of us. Yet, a hair shirt is not a mandatory religious

accessory, nor are grimaces and blood required to get into heaven. Dying to self does not have to be an abrupt slaughter. Instead, it can be a minute-by-minute offering of ourselves to God.

Many are tempted to feel guilty of chronic ordinariness—the routine of navigating life might seem to rule out sainthood. But some of the saints started out as positively ordinary to the average observer. Consider that at the end of St. Thérèse of Lisieux's life as a cloistered Carmelite nun, her fellow nuns wondered what they would put in her eulogy, because she was so ordinary. Yet she became a Doctor of the Church and is a very popular saint. People often claim that she sends roses from heaven in answer to prayers just as she promised she would while spending her time in heaven working for us. St. Thérèse's way to sainthood was what she called the "little way," simply doing even the smallest task with love and in union with God.

St. Teresa of Kolkata, whom we knew as Mother Teresa, had the same idea. She used to say that while not all of us can do great things, we can do small things with great love. Mother Teresa actually did very big things such as founding the Missionaries of Charity and being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1979, "for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress, which also constitutes a threat

to peace.” But she started out small and simple, just doing the tasks before her with great love.

That makes the point for holy hacks: just do the little things, and God will let you know if he has more for you to do and give you the grace to do it when the time comes.

All the saints paved their lives with spiritual hacks, which are simply opportunities to integrate holiness into everyday life without making a show, inconveniencing others, or turning our lives upside down. While whole-life overhauls are sometimes necessary for those living on the far edge of morality, the average person can take little but consistent steps toward God. That is all that is expected—or required—on the road to sainthood.

INCREASED CAPACITY

Slipping in more holy thoughts, words, and deeds can expand our holiness beyond what we may have thought was our capacity. Living more deeply united to Jesus is easily adapted to everyday life. The trickling current, ever moving forward, can become a mighty river, but a river that stops moving soon becomes a snake-infested swamp. The key is that our hearts be in the right place: with God. We are not amassing line items to build up spiritual collateral because holiness follows the heart and not a

spreadsheet. We need to make God our focus so we have a clear perspective on everything else in our lives.

With such a perspective, we find ways to grow in love by following the two greatest commandments Jesus gave us. “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Mt 22:37–40).

The goal is to strengthen our hope, follow our faith, and grow in love. “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

And through this, we aspire to our heavenly treasure. “For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Mt 6:21).

Holy hacks are really life hacks for eternal life—easy and creative ideas to do more for the love of God and neighbor in ways that fit into your life. People sometimes resist sainthood and their vision of what holiness looks like, because it seems like it will hurt or be too hard. Holy hacks offer a way to holiness in baby steps that add up without a Herculean effort you probably cannot sustain. It is the sure and steady course of the tortoise that finishes the race rather than the fast start of the hare that never finished. At

such a rate of speed, we increase the capacity of our heart to love others and live more fully for Christ incrementally.

If this book is nothing more than a collection of clever to-do lists, then it serves no purpose other than to keep you busy and out of trouble. In such a case, you would be just a noisy gong. “If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). But when someone falls in love, they want to do more for their beloved. New parents also experience love with an increased capacity to serve, not out of obligation but from desire.

CUSTOM DESIGNED

Approach these suggestions by first spending time with God in prayer. Ask him to lead you to the ways that will complete your love for him. Otherwise, you risk looking at all the suggestions and crying out: “Oh Lord! Hundreds more things I’m not doing that make me feel inadequate.” Religion isn’t magic, although it’s often miraculous. The simple holy habits of prayer, scripture study, and listening to personal promptings will lead us to God’s custom-designed plan for us.

Think of it as a cookbook. You don’t thumb through the pages feeling overwhelmed because you

don't have time to make every recipe. Instead, you find things that grab your attention, things that you would like to make. Their key is to do everything in love, for and with Jesus, and in his name. "And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17).

Don't worry! God cannot be outdone in generosity. Every minute you give to him and to your neighbor will bring abundance in the grace of holiness. We will always get more than we give; it's a divine bargain. Holy hacks are about stretching and enlarging our lives. They're about turning to prayer rather than a cell phone, doing a good work before posting a picture on Facebook or Instagram. It's about showing yourself to God—mind, body, and soul—rather than snapping yet another selfie to post for the world.

This book is a tool to help you integrate love into actions—the only thing we take with us before God when our days are up. On judgment day, we don't want to learn that the margins of our lives could have made the world a better place and our own souls stronger. Just as super-absorbent paper towels can soak up more liquids, the more we give to Christ, the greater will become our capacity to give. The saints prove that to us.

Imagine the joy of hearing that your many sins have been forgiven because you have loved much

(see Luke 7:36–50). Love is lived out daily, moment by moment, prayer by prayer, and hack by hack.



THE HOLY HACKS

St. Thérèse of Lisieux's "little way" turns out to be as doable outside a convent as inside one. Little ways—such as letting someone go ahead of us in traffic, taking the piece of pizza where all the pepperoni has slipped off, or picking up someone else's garbage—can become habits to holiness, although they can be so hard sometimes.

Pray a Rosary of gratitude. Thankfulness leads to humility, love, and acceptance of God's will. Simply think of something you are grateful for on each bead of the rosary—easy but transformative.

Multitask with inspirational music, podcasts, or Catholic radio while folding laundry and doing other mundane tasks.

Vow to make at least one sacrifice a day, no matter how small.

Abstain from complaining. Don't even grumble about the weather. "You must accept your cross,"

said St. John Vianney in his catechism on suffering. “If you bear it courageously it will carry you to heaven.”

Have short memorized prayers ready (or an ongoing Rosary) for life’s delays. Type out favorite prayers, laminate them, and keep them handy. Traffic jams, waiting for the microwave, and being put on hold never looked so holy.

Find out the saint of the day every day, and ask for their prayers. They have pull.

Talk to your heavenly secret service agent—your guardian angel—every day and throughout the day.

Take an area pilgrimage to a nearby shrine or cathedral. Adding elements such as walking, taking the bus, and fasting can raise it to the level of a real Holy Land pilgrimage. This idea comes from *The Catholic Hipster Handbook: Rediscovering Cool Saints, Forgotten Prayers, and Other Weird but Sacred Stuff*.

Fast daily. There’s a sacrifice to be had at every meal, such as holding the mayonnaise in a

sandwich or skipping the fries. Fasting is powerful, so why not slip it in more often?

Set an alarm daily for 3:00 p.m., the hour of mercy, to pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

When driving, pray for the people who irritate you. If they give you the finger or lay on the horn, offer up your indignity along with a prayer for them. It makes God happy and you holy. Besides, in Matthew 7:2, Jesus told us that the measure with which we measure will be measured back to you. Such a deal! That undeserved mercy will come right back to us when we repay annoying behavior with good, so those drivers just did you a favor.

Write a letter to the editor with an opinion that includes faith.

Kneel during prayers.

Put a pro-God or pro-life bumper sticker on your car or on vanity plates to evangelize even in parking lots. (For decades now, my dad's license plate has read, "ALLPRAY.")

Take advantage of indulgences. Talk about a hack to heaven! Indulgences remove temporal penalties for sin. They're part of the Church's infallible teaching, which means that no Catholic is at liberty to disbelieve in them. Go to "Primer on Indulgences" at Catholic Answers (www.catholic.com) to learn more.

Having trouble focusing on your prayers? Try saying them out loud if you are alone.

Enroll people for Mass intentions when you give greeting cards and thank-yous. The Association of the Miraculous Medals (www.amm.org) is one of my favorites because you can enroll someone for five years for only a dollar.

Pay people back for a favor with an hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Say grace in public—even at vending machines.

Say, "God bless" to people when saying good-bye, even the cashier.

Stand up for God when someone uses his name in vain. Make a Sign of the Cross, say something