

March 30, 1981, almost 30 years ago, John Hinkley Jr. fired six shots at President Ronald Reagan. Secret Service Agent Timothy McCarthy stepped between Hinkley and the President, shielding him from fire. McCarthy was wounded.

He survived, and though thought of as a hero, McCarthy himself said in interviews that he was simply reacting. It was an automatic response to a situation he had trained for.

I became curious, as to what kind of training such an agent goes through.

I learned that the job of protecting the President, their family, foreign dignitaries and presidential candidates is hardly a glamorous calling, but it is an elite one. I learned that their training is very intense, with a near constant barrage of scenarios, each carefully planned and executed. But it is more than just intense, it is highly trans-formative. It changes the way that they think

Military personnel and police officers are trained to take cover, whatever is available, when there are gunshots involved. Pretty smart I think, and actually very intuitive.

Firemen can tell you the difference between a hero and a fool. Heroes are able to assess a situation, they are aware of the dangers they face, but are trained and equipped to make their efforts more likely to succeed. Fool's really do jump in where even the most heroic people fear to go.

But people like McCarthy are neither heroes nor fool's. They are responsive and they are counter-intuitive. They have been trained to go toward the danger. And they have trained for that until they are perfect at it. The adage "practice makes perfect" certainly applies here.

We are in the fourth week of the Sermon on the Mount. We've heard the Beatitudes, been identified as Salt and Light, and were called to a newer,

more fulfilling form of righteousness. Have you noticed something? There has been a progression in difficulty to our challenge to live a life that is Christ-like, to live as Christians.

Today, we are called to be perfect because God is perfect. And in order to do that, we must become counter intuitive. We must run toward the bullets.

It is our nature to turn away from what might hurt us. And I want to be very clear that we are morally obligated to protect our own lives, the lives of our loved ones and the lives of the innocent.... We certainly don't want to go out of our way to create bad situations for ourselves, but generally, we don't need to, do we?

There are plenty of people who spread rumors about us, who are out to damage our reputations. Those who lie about us and those who lie to us. There are those who have cheated us, stolen from us and disgraced us.... and then there are those who, for whatever reason, just plain don't like us.

Our natural response is to defend ourselves, to refute the lies, to get back, to have our revenge.

But because we are Baptized, because we are blessed, because we are salt and light, because we are made righteous by Righteousness Himself, the option to hate, to extract vengeance, to strike back, is no longer legitimately ours.

Jesus says: “ pray for those who persecute you, love your enemies, go the extra mile for them”.

We are different, because we are “Christed” by the Saving Waters of Baptism and so we are to act differently. We are not glamorous, but we are elite.

Will our actions change the behavior of our enemies? Maybe..... they might, but they might not. But this love of enemy, praying for persecutors isn't

meant to change them, but to change us. And for that, we need help.

Timothy McCarthy needed the desire to become the best agent he could, but he could not have possibly trained himself to react the way he did that day.

Had his instructors not have had that same resolve, that same tenacity, that same training, President Reagan may have died of an assassin's bullet.

Jesus Christ is our instructor. Though He was innocent, He endured the sufferings of Calvary for our Salvation, but also as a model for us.

If we are “in Christ” then His expectations are made possible through training. There are plenty of people willing to treat us badly. That means that there are plenty of people to whom we can turn the other cheek, plenty of people we can pray for, ... people we can love.

To live a life steeped in the Sacraments, in Scripture, in Devotion, in Prayer is our source of strength.

To practice forgiveness and prayer for enemies is gradually adapted, it is a learned response which only becomes fully responsive when it becomes our nature.

We must practice, that is, we habitually participate in these virtues, in order for them to become a living part of us. Praying for your enemy tomorrow is made a little easier if you prayed for them yesterday.

And in the Spiritual life, this kind of practice really can make us perfect.