

On Anger

It may seem odd that in the midst of Paschaltide, when the Church luxuriates in the glory of the Resurrection, that we receive a message from St. James about anger, but it is not so strange, given that the angry man will put his anger away only for a little while, even after Easter. Angry people are, like the poor, with us always.

I'm not going to speak about anger as a mere emotion or a passion, but as a sin, and what we can do about it.

The sin of anger is a disordered desire for vengeance.

1. It is a sin when we have anger towards those who do not deserve our anger.
2. Anger becomes a sin when the desire for it is to a greater extent than has been deserved.
3. It is a sin when the desire for vengeance is in conflict with law.
4. It is a sin when it comes from an improper motive.

This is a serious issue, since unjust anger is a door to demonic influence. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger, lest the devil gain a foothold." (or, in the Douay Rheims version – give not place to the devil). Eph. 4.26.

The demonic influence due to anger is not necessarily direct, such as in a case of possession. Rather the influence or giving a place for the devil in our families comes from us *acting* like devils. They, like their master, make a constant stream of accusations. And these are not just any accusations; they are intended to hurt, to belittle, and to devastate. So if a man in his anger really wants to belittle, really wants to hurt someone, he takes some secret knowledge of the person upon whom he wants vengeance, some fault or sin, some mistake or some physical flaw that the victim is ashamed of, and uses that knowledge against the victim. This is precisely what devils do to the priest in the course of an exorcism. They try to accuse and overwhelm the priest with their knowledge of the priest's faults and sins. So if we do that to one another, we behave like devils. As it says in the Proverbs, "The passionate man engendereth quarrels, but the angry man diggeth up sins."

When constant anger becomes a vice, St. Thomas Aquinas points out that it has six effects: Indignation, mental disturbance, noisy speech, blasphemy, abuse, and quarrels. Every one of those effects is contrary to what we are called to be. I hope I've made the point sufficiently for everyone here to take this seriously, and more importantly, do something about it. The ancient remedies which are spoken of by the Fathers are quite valid today as they were in the 4th century. So I'll use those, in the order given, but with a slight addition of some modern psychology.

1. Face the problem. Irascimini et nolite peccare. Be angry and sin not (PS 23). That is, if a man is angry, but wishes to pretend that it is not a problem, he will continue to sin in anger. But if he faces it, admitting he is angry, he has just made great progress.
2. Forsee its causes. Look within the soul that is angry, and you will find a man who demands fairness, appreciation, agreement, and a strong will that others must do things their way. So the mind must be addressed here, the thoughts must be considered. Logic can defeat anger. Logic is not enough of course, but we would be foolish not to employ it. As St. Thomas says, anger is the passion that most interferes with the reason. So the consideration of how absurd it is that we must always have our way is best done in a quiet moment.

Notice how those who are angry always speak in absolutes? "The stupid government... The bishops never... My idiot neighbors always..." Beware of absolutes, of exaggeration, and being overly dramatic in describing the thing which vexes you. Speaking in absolutes by the way, especially when they are laced with profanity, tends to worsen the sin.

Have you noticed how extremely rare it is that anger fixes anything? Those who are angry tend only to look for a solution, and seek to eliminate the cause of their anger. But very few causes of our anger can be eliminated.

3. Resist its movements. Anger can be expressed, suppressed or tamed. Those are the basic choices. Probably 99% of the time the expression will lead to sin. Suppression will lead mostly to depression. But to tame the passion is Catholic.

a. Remote resistance:

1. Better communication. Angry people tend to jump to conclusions, which are often very inaccurate. Slow down and listen, and stop talking so much.
2. Check your timing. If you have a problem which needs to be dealt with, what is the best time to do it?
3. All the rules of life written by our great saints demand that their disciples recreate each day. But in modern life too many skip the daily recreation, which just leads to increased stress and more anger.

4. Embrace silence. Turning off the radio, TV, and maybe even the phone for a while is a good idea if you need more silence. Listening to birds sing, and the sound of the wind in the pines, and the sound of the brook splashing over the stones is very conducive to peace. The music God makes in nature is better in many ways than the music we make.

5. Look for some alternatives. Speaking with a lady who was a former parishioner, I heard "Every time I speak to Aunt Betty I get furious." I responded, "Don't talk to Aunt Betty." Men tend to solve problems like this, and it is not much of a solution. "Every time I walk by my son's room and see that unmade bed..." So shut the door. But some alternatives are good. Find a different route when you drive, one more scenic perhaps. Turn off the radio while you drive, or if you must listen to something, listen to Gregorian Chant.

b. Immediate resistance. . .use the external senses:

1. Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.
2. Use good words to yourself like "Take it easy." Or better yet, "O God come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me."
3. Focus your sight on something peaceful, like the tabernacle, or someone peaceful, like our Lady.

4. And the greatest remedy? It is contained in the epistle we just heard for the Fourth Sunday after Easter; "Wherefore, with meekness receive the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls." Our separated brethren the Protestants are able to saturate their minds and souls with Sacred Scripture, and that is the first meaning of that passage. Good for them. We should do the same. To go a whole day saturated with the words of men and not hearing the word of God, that is not right for a son or a daughter of God. But we Catholics can feast not only on His words, but the Word Himself in Holy Communion. So we are back to the Mass aren't we?

So, I'll make you a promise. If you do just three things, your sin of anger will disappear in time.

1. Admit your sin by anger.

2. Try to cast aside all uncleanness and abundance of naughtiness. In other words, go to confession regularly, every day if that's what it takes.

3. Receive the ingrafted word with meekness. In other words, go to Holy Mass each day, and receive your fill of Sacred Scripture, but also receive Holy Communion, and receive the Word Himself.