

## The Healing of Sloth

This insert goes with Sermon VIII in the series on the *Divine Comedy*. I use here the thought of Fr. Garrigou Lagrange, O.P.

Among the capital sins, there is one, spiritual sloth, called also *acedia*, which is directly opposed to the love of God and to the joy that results from generosity in His service. We must discuss it in order to complete what we have said about the active purification of the will and to note exactly the grave confusions made by the quietists on this point.

Sloth in general, *pigritia*, is a voluntary and culpable repugnance to work, to effort, and consequently a tendency to idleness, or at least to negligence, to pusillanimity, which is opposed to generosity or magnanimity.

Sloth is not the languor or torpor in action which comes from poor health; it is an evil disposition of the will and of the sensible appetites, by which one fears and refuses effort, wishes to avoid all trouble, and seeks a *dolce farniente*. It has often been remarked that the slothful man is a parasite, who lives at the expense of others, as tranquil as a woodchuck when he is undisturbed in his idleness, and ill-humored when an effort is made to oblige him to work. This vice begins with unconcern and negligence in work, and manifests itself by a progressive dislike for all serious, physical and mental labor. When idleness affects the accomplishment of the religious duties necessary to sanctification, it is called *acedia*. It is an evil sadness opposed to spiritual joy, which is the fruit of generosity in the love of God. *Acedia* is a disgust for spiritual things, a disgust which leads one to perform them negligently, to shorten them, or to omit them under vain pretexts. It is the cause of tepidity.

This sadness, which is radically opposed to that of contrition, depresses the soul and weighs it down because it does not react as it should. Then it reaches a voluntary disgust for spiritual things, because they demand too much effort and self-discipline. Whereas devotion, which is the promptness of the will in the service of God, lifts the soul up, spiritual sloth weighs down and crushes the soul and ends by causing it to find the yoke of the Lord unbearable and to flee the Divine light, which reminds it of its duties. St. Augustine says: "Light which is so pleasant to pure eyes, becomes hateful to infirm eyes which can no longer bear it."

This depressing sadness, the result of negligence, and this disgust, which is at least indirectly voluntary, are quite different from the sensible or spiritual aridity which, in Divine trials, is accompanied by true contrition for our sins, by fear of offending God, by a keen desire for perfection, by a need of solitude, of recollection, and of the prayer of simple gaze.

St. John of the Cross, referring to the condition of the spiritual man in the passive purification of the senses, says:

We find no comfort in the things of God, and none also in created things ... but the memory dwells ordinarily upon God with a painful anxiety and carefulness; the soul thinks it is not serving God, but going backwards, because it is no longer conscious of any sweetness in the things of God. In that case it is clear that this weariness of spirit and aridity are not the results of weakness and lukewarmness; for the peculiarity of lukewarmness is the want of earnestness in, and of interior solicitude for, the things of God. There is, therefore, a great difference between dryness and lukewarmness, for the latter consists in great remissness and weakness of will and spirit, in the want of all solicitude about serving God. The true purgative aridity is accompanied in general by a painful anxiety, because the soul thinks that it is not serving God. ... For when mere bodily indisposition is the cause, all that it does is to produce disgust and the ruin of bodily health, without the desire of serving God which belongs to the purgative aridity. In this aridity, though the sensual part of man be greatly depressed, weak and sluggish in good works, by reason of the little satisfaction they furnish, the spirit is, nevertheless, ready and strong.

Spiritual sloth or *acedia* is even, as St. Gregory and St. Thomas show, a capital sin, the root of many others. Why is this? Because man seeks material consolations in order to flee from the sadness and disgust which spiritual things inspire in him on account of the renunciation and self-discipline which they demand. As Aristotle says, "No one can long remain in sadness without any joy," and then he who deprives himself of all spiritual joy through his own negligence and sloth, does not delay in seeking inferior pleasures.

### THE CURE FOR SPIRITUAL SLOTH

Cassian declared that experience proves that a person triumphs over the temptation to spiritual sloth, not by

fleeing from it, but by resisting it. On this subject St. Thomas observes: "Sin is ever to be shunned, but the assaults of sin should be overcome, sometimes by flight, sometimes by resistance; by flight, when a continued thought increases the incentive to sin, as in lust; ... by resistance, when perseverance in the thought diminishes the incentive to sin, which incentive arises from some trivial consideration. This is the case with sloth, because the more we think about spiritual goods, the more pleasing they become to us, and forthwith sloth dies away."

We must, therefore, conquer spiritual sloth by real love of God, by true devotion of the will, which ought to subsist in spite of sensible aridity. We must revert again and again to the prolonged consideration of the eternal goods which are promised us.

And to recover the spirit of faith, enthusiasm, and generosity in the love of God, we must every day courageously impose some sacrifices on ourselves in those matters in which we are weakest. It is the first step that costs; but after a week of effort the task becomes easy: for example, to rise at the appointed hour and to be obliging to everybody. All spiritual authors say that one of the remedies for tepidity is frankness with ourselves and with our confessor, a serious examination of conscience every day in order to rise again, the assiduous practice of our religious duties coupled with our duties of state, fidelity to prayer and to the morning offering, which we ought to make to God of all our actions during the day. And since we have little to present to God, let us offer Him frequently the precious Blood of Jesus and the interior act of oblation ever living in His heart. Blessed are they who renew this offering when they hear the hour strike, and who offer the fleeting hour that it may bear fruits for eternity; that the moment which is passing may remain in the eternal instant which does not pass.

Above all, some daily sacrifices will restore vigor and tone to our spiritual life. Thus we will gradually recover substantial fervor, promptness of the will in the service of God, even if sensible devotion is lacking, a privation we should accept in order to make reparation for past offenses.

To conquer spiritual sloth and to avoid spiritual instability, we should determine the religious employment of our time: for example, divide the day by the recitation of the parts of the Divine Office, or of the Rosary. Some interior souls divide the week according to the mysteries of faith, the rule of our life:

Sunday is consecrated to God by special devotion and thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity. Monday is consecrated to the mystery of the Incarnation by recalling the *Ecce venio* of Christ and the *Ecce ancilla Domini* of Mary. Tuesday is devoted to the thought of our Savior's hidden life. Wednesday is devoted to His apostolic life. Thursday recalls the institution of the Eucharist and of the priesthood. Friday is consecrated to living the dolorous Passion, to asking for love of the cross. Saturday is given over to the thought of the privileges of Mary, her sorrows, and her role as Mediatrix and Co-redemptrix.

Thus instead of losing time which flees, we recover it and gain it for eternity. And gradually we recover spiritual joy, that of which St. Paul speaks when he writes to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice. Let your modesty be known to all men. The Lord is nigh. Be nothing solicitous; but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your petitions be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasseth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."