

The Purgatorio, VIII

In the 17th Canto, Dante and Virgil step onto the terrace of sloth. We normally think of sloth as a kind of laziness, but remember Dante is a medieval man, and the medieval term for sloth is *acedia* – a sluggishness – not so much of the body as of the heart. Sloth is a falling short of the fervor we should have in our love of God and for our neighbor. St. Thomas Aquinas says it is essentially a failure to love.

You and I live in a culture of sloth. It is the characteristic sin of the modern world. Josef Pieper – a superb Catholic philosopher of the 20c – noticed that our culture is defined not by the movement of the heart to God, but by how much you can get done in a day.

Have you seen those magazines every city seems to have about business, and feature a man or woman who is tremendously successful in what they do, and describes amongst other things, their work schedule? Usually, it's a schedule which is up at 3 AM, then to the gym, then a breakfast of the healthiest and expensive fruit and what-not, then off to work and so-on, getting back home at 7 PM after a good meal at an expensive restaurant. Ah, that's the life! No children, but maybe a love interest, maybe a dog or two.

I have a friend who was offered a job with a huge corporation, with a starting salary that astounded him. But before taking it, he asked to speak with the man whom he was to replace. He visited the man at his home, which was a sprawling mansion in which he had a kind of apartment at one end and his wife the other, with two for the kids in the center. They communicated by email and text when absolutely necessary. The gentleman put it this way to my friend: "If you take the job, you'll lose your wife and your kids but you'll be rich, since you will work seven days a week and about 12 hours a day. Think about that." My friend did not take the job, but became a teacher, on a small salary, and has a great relationship with his wife and children. He did not define his life by how much he could get done in a day. Thank God.

Dr. Pieper goes on to say that modern man "Seems to mistrust everything that is effortless; that he can only enjoy, with a good conscience, what he has acquired with toil and trouble; he refuses to have anything as a gift." It is no wonder then that people in our times overlook the most important thing of all in life – that which comes freely as a gift from God.

This may seem a bit paradoxical. I said that we live in a culture of sloth, but Pieper said we are defined by how much we can get done. Which is it? It's both. The Greek word *paradoxos* comes from two words; *para* meaning "contrary to" and *doxa* meaning "opinion," which has its root in *dokein*, meaning "to appear" or "seem." So, a paradox is a statement that seems to contradict itself.

There are two kinds of paradoxes. One is rhetorical, and this is all over sacred scripture. "He who finds his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake, will find it." (Mt. 10:39) A logical paradox is a statement in which two or more things are self-contradictory. Scripture is loaded with rhetorical paradox, but there are no logical paradoxes in the Bible, such as that a thing can be and not be at the same time.

Now why use paradox at all? Why not just make things simple and direct and clear? The answer is that things are not simple and direct and clear on this side of heaven, and therefore, we must rely on more obscure means of knowledge such as poetry and music, to express the truths of the Faith.

I was sitting in an airplane once, and a very large evangelical woman was sitting across the aisle and asked in a very large voice "I suppose you are a Catholic priest, Reverend?" I said I was. She then asked, "When you preach, what do you preach?" I replied with a thick Kansas accent, "When I preach ma'am, I preach Christ, and Him crucified." Well, she liked that answer, and then looked both ways to see if anyone was looking, and took out of her purse a paperback copy of The Ascent of Mt. Carmel by St. John of the Cross. She said in a low voice, "This is a really good book." I could not have agreed more.

But it is a book chock-full of paradox. "To reach satisfaction in *all*, desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to possess *all*, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being *all*, desire to be nothing. To come to the knowledge of *all*, desire the knowledge of nothing. To come to enjoy what you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not. To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not. To come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not. To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not."

So, our culture of sloth is the sluggish, lazy, lukewarm interior embrace of the Cross with an exterior of frenzied activity, even if the activity is lazy, such as being a couch potato in front of a television. What those on the terrace of pride got wrong then, is love.

Thus, Dante goes into a long disquisition on what love is, and asks a great question. “If love is natural in us, then how can we be blamed if we love the wrong thing?” Virgil answers the question by distinguishing what should be our prime will – for God as our ultimate good – and secondary will – our will that chooses creaturely goods. We’re meant to use and love these goods because God created them. We are not meant to love them as if they were the sole thing we are to reach for.

You read of some guy engaging in extreme mountain climbing. He has numerous successes, and then dies (says the newspaper account) doing what he loved. But he leaves behind a wife and children. What are they supposed to do now, other than having the sappy celebration of his life with his favorite music and a slideshow of him having fun? He did not love the mountains because they were created by God. He used them as his purpose in life.

We have freedom to make a judgment about what is an ultimate good over what is fleeting and temporal. When we love created things with more fervor than we love God, then we live by sloth. And this may be measured by time. If I give six hours to professional football on a Sunday, and one or two to God, then I am destined for the terrace of sloth, should I be saved.

During their discourse, a team of racing spirits overtakes our poets, running pell-mell just as fast as they can. What are they doing running so hard? And why does Dante compare them to the drunken revelers of pagan times who worshipped Bacchus, the god of wine? Because it’s as though the souls on the terrace of sloth were too sober in their devotion to God and to the things of heaven. Thus, they are atoning for their sloth by embracing the virtue that combats sloth, namely zeal. Their passionate movement to the true good is the opposite of what they did on earth, and Dante learns that the passionate love of good, should arise from our hearts. As they run, they cry out phrases to encourage haste, such as in the Gospel according to St. Luke: “And Mary ran to the hill country in haste.” The moment Our Lady heard that St. Elizabeth her cousin was pregnant, she rushed to help her cousin. The Blessed Virgin was aflame with love without a trace of sloth.

This is what we pray for every time we say an Our Father. In that great prayer composed by Our Savior, we pray that the will of the Father be done here like those who live in heaven do it. And how do they do the will of the Father in heaven? They do it quickly, and cheerfully.