

# Garrigou-Lagrange - On Spiritual Sloth

Source: The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life

Part II, Chapter 29

## The Healing of Spiritual Sloth, or Acedia

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.

We shall see, first of all, the general nature of spiritual sloth, then the gravity of this evil and the way to cure it.(1)

### THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL SLOTH, OR ACEDIA

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, (2) 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 far niente*. 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-humoured 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 labour.

When idleness affects the accomplishment of the religious duties necessary to sanctification, it is called acedia. (3) 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.(40)

In other words, this divine trial is the privation of accidental devotion alone and not of substantial devotion, which consists in the will to give oneself generously and promptly to the service of God. (5) Spiritual sloth or acedia, on the contrary, is, by reason of culpable negligence, the privation of substantial devotion itself and at least indirectly voluntary disgust for spiritual things because of the abnegation and effort they demand.

Whereas in the divine trial of which we are speaking, a person suffers because he has distractions and strives to diminish their number, in the state of spiritual sloth a man welcomes them, lets himself glide easily into useless thoughts, and does not react against them. When such is the case, distractions that are at least indirectly voluntary soon invade prayer almost completely; the examination of conscience, which has become annoying, is suppressed; sins are no longer accounted for; and the soul descends farther and farther along the slope of tepidity. It falls into spiritual anaemia in which little by little, with the defects springing from it, the three concupiscences awaken.

The confusion of spiritual sloth with the divine trial of aridity was one of the chief errors of the quietists. For this reason, the two following propositions of Molinos were condemned: "Disgust for spiritual things is good; by it the soul is purified, freed from self-love." "When the interior soul feels repugnance for discursive meditation on God, for the virtues, when it remains cold, and does not experience any fervour, it is a good sign." (6) These propositions were condemned as offensive and dangerous in practice. The fact of the matter is certainly that disgust for spiritual things is not at all good, that it is an evil and a sin as soon as it is voluntary, whether directly or indirectly so, by reason of negligence. St. Paul writes to the Romans: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God. . . . Loving one another with the charity of brotherhood, with honour preventing one another, in carefulness not slothful, in spirit fervent, serving the Lord. Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, instant in prayer." (7) How far these words are from the quietism of Molinos!

The latter confounded spiritual sloth with the aridity and dryness of divine trials, not observing that the soul which bears these trials well, far from being slothful, has a keen desire for God and for perfection, and therefore preserves a true, substantial devotion of the will in the absence of sensible devotion of which it is deprived. Molinos confounded sensible and absolutely involuntary disgust for divine things with the disgust which is at least indirectly voluntary and culpable because of sloth and negligence.

St. John of the Cross, on the contrary, in *The Dark Night* gives an excellent description of spiritual sloth. Writing about the imperfections of beginners, he says:

As to spiritual sloth, beginners are wont to find their most spiritual occupations irksome, and avoid them as repugnant to their taste; for, being so given to sweetness in spiritual things, they loathe such occupations when they find no sweetness. If they miss once this sweetness in prayer which is their joy, - it is expedient that God should deprive them of it in order to try them - they will not resume it; at other times they omit it, or return to it with a bad grace. Thus, under the influence of sloth they neglect the way of perfection - which is the denial of their will and pleasure for God - for the gratification of their own will, which they serve rather than the will of God. Many of these will have it that God should will what they will, and are afflicted when they must will what He wills, reluctantly submitting their own will to the will of God. As a result, they often imagine that what is not according to their will is also not according to the will of God; and, on the other hand, when they are pleased, they believe that God is pleased. They measure Him by themselves, and not themselves by Him. . . . They also find it wearisome

to obey when they are commanded to do what they like not; and because they walk in the way of consolation and spiritual sweetness, they are too weak for the rough trials of perfection. They are like persons delicately nurtured who avoid with heavy hearts all that is hard and rugged, and are offended at the cross wherein the joys of the spirit consist. The more spiritual the work they have to do, the more irksome do they feel it to be. And because they insist on having their own way and will in spiritual things, they enter on the "strait way that leads unto life" (Matt. 16:25), of which Christ speaks, with repugnance and heaviness of heart.(8)

Some who abandon prayer say, in order to cloak spiritual sloth: "The sweetness of prayer must be sacrificed to the austerity of study" or of work. If a truly generous person made this statement, it would mean: "One must know how to sacrifice the sweetness of prayer, especially of sensible devotion, to the austerity of the study or the work necessary for the salvation of souls." But if this statement is made by someone who is losing all true devotion, it does not make sense; for such a one in no way sacrifices the delights of prayer, which he does not experience, and he is only seeking to hide his spiritual sloth under the veil of a relatively exterior work in which he seeks himself. This man flees interior work because of spiritual sloth. True contemplation and union with God should, it is clear, not be sacrificed to study, which is subordinate to them; to do so would be to sacrifice the end for the means. Moreover, study not inspired by the love of God and of souls would, from the spiritual point of view, remain truly fruitless. In short, when a man says, "The sweetness of prayer must be sacrificed to the austerity of work," he wishes to forget that prayer is often dry. This is why it is more difficult to lead souls to a true life of profound and persevering prayer than to induce them to read and talk about books which appear on the subject. Finally, spiritual sloth not infrequently grows out of an excessive, unsanctified natural activity in which a person takes complacency instead of seeking God and the good of souls in it.

### **THE GRAVITY OF SPIRITUAL SLOTH AND ITS RESULTS**

Spiritual sloth is gravely sinful when it reaches the point of giving up the religious duties necessary for our salvation and sanctification: for example, when it goes so far as to omit the hearing of Mass on Sunday.(9) When it leads us to omit religious acts of lesser importance without a reason, the sin is only venial; but if we do not struggle against this negligence, it soon becomes more serious, placing us in a genuine state of tepidity or spiritual relaxation. This state is a sort of moral anaemia, in which evil tendencies awaken little by little, seek to prevail, and manifest themselves by numerous deliberate venial sins, which dispose us to still graver faults, just as bodily anaemia prepares the way for the invasion of the germ of a disease, the beginning of a serious illness.

Spiritual sloth or acedia is even, as St. Gregory (10) and St. Thomas (11) 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," (12) and then he who deprives himself of all spiritual joy through his own negligence and sloth, does not delay in seeking inferior pleasures.

Consequently, disastrous results follow disgust for spiritual things and for the work of sanctification, a sin which is directly opposed to the love of God and to the holy joy resulting therefrom. When life does not rise toward God, it descends or falls into evil sadness which oppresses the soul. From this evil sadness, says St. Gregory (loc. cit.), are born malice - and no longer only weakness - rancour toward one's neighbour, pusillanimity in the face of duty to be accomplished, discouragement, spiritual torpor even to the forgetting of the precepts, and finally, dissipation of spirit and the seeking after forbidden things. This seeking after unlawful things manifests itself by the externalization of life, by curiosity, loquacity, uneasiness, instability, and fruitless agitation. (13) Thus a person arrives at spiritual blindness and the progressive weakening of the will.

Descending this slope, many have lost sight of the grandeur of the Christian vocation, have forgotten the promises they made to God, and have taken the descending road, which at first seems broad, but

which grows narrower and narrower, whereas the narrow road, which leads upward, becomes ever wider, immense as God Himself to whom it leads.

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross says on this subject: "Dissipation of the mind engenders in its turn spiritual sloth and lukewarmness, which grow into weariness and sadness in divine things, so that in the end we come to hate them." (14)

## **THE CURE FOR SPIRITUAL SLOTH**

Cassian (15) 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." (16)

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 vigour and tone to our spiritual life. Thus we will gradually recover substantial fervour, 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 Saviour'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 (...).

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 surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (17)

1. Cf. St. Thomas, *Ia IIae*, q.35; *De malo*, q. 11; St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, chap. 7.
2. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 133, a.2.
3. From *acedior*, to suffer impatiently, to grieve over one's sin, because one fails to make an effort for what is good.
4. *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, chap. 9.
5. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q.82, a. I.
6. Denzinger, nos. 1248 f.
7. Rom. 12:1, 10 f.
8. Bk. I, chap. 7.
9. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q.35, a.3. St. Thomas even says (*De malo*, q.II, a.3 ad 6um): "That man should delight in God, falls under the precept, just as that man should love God, because delight follows love."
10. *Morales*, Bk. XXXI, chap. 17.
11. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q. 35, a.4.
12. *Ethics*, Bk. VIII, chap. 5.
13. Cf. *Ia IIae*. q.35. a.4 ad 3um.
14. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. III, chap. 21.
15. *De instit. monasteriorum*, Bk. X, cap. ult.
16. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q. 35, a. 1 ad 4um.
17. Phil. 4:4-7.