

THE MEANING OF SLOTH

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MAGNIFICAT, July 2000, p. 2



Was there ever a time in your spiritual life when you asked, “What’s the use?” – a point when piety became arduous and burdensome? When you lost a taste for the holy, lacked wonder, wrestled with weariness, and actually felt cynical about sanctity? It is possible for believers to reach a stage when spiritual things begin to lose their luster. This precarious state is what spiritual authors call SLOTH.

Sometimes we make the mistake of equating sloth with laziness. In reality, the root of sloth is much deeper. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that sloth is a vice opposed to the joy of charity. He called it “an oppressive sorrow that so weighs upon our mind that we want to do nothing.” The *Catechism* states that “spiritual sloth goes so far as to refuse the joy that comes from God and to be repelled by divine goodness” (2094).

In commenting on this vice, the famous Dominican theologian Father Garrigou-Lagrange noted that sloth is “a disposition by which one refuses effort, wishes to avoid all trouble, and seeks a *dolce far niente* (i.e., carefree idleness) ...In the state of spiritual sloth a man welcomes distractions, lets himself glide easily into useless thoughts, and does not react against them.”

Saint Gregory the Great assigned six “daughters” to sloth: malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, and wanderings of the mind after unlawful things. But, as American philosopher Peter Kreeft points out, perhaps the greatest evil associated with the sin of sloth is that it undoes us “by robbing us of our

appetite for God, our zest for God, our interest and enjoyment in God. Sloth stops us from seeking God.” And when that search ceases, so does the possibility of our happiness. Nothing is more tragic.

Sloth comes upon us as the result of negligence or laxity, a slacking off in the life of faith. When we allow ourselves to be habitually distracted, when we live without sufficient attentiveness to what is really important in life, sloth ensnares us...Once this spiritual paralysis sets in, we no longer want to pray, we recoil at the thought of examining our consciences, and we react with rancor towards others’ religious fidelity. As Kreeft observes, the slothful “avoid God’s absence as much as God’s presence....If we are bored with God, we will be bored with everything.” That is why this sin is called “deadly.”...

According to the method of the Incarnation, God constantly calls us to himself by what is most human about us. Our desires are God’s own gift to us to draw us to the fullness of His love, to the superabundance of life (see John 10:10). Sloth assails us because we desire too little, compromising our desires and letting them be deceived. The irrefutable truth is that our desire will never be satisfied until Jesus Christ himself is the object of that desire. Our desire needs always to be educated and energized. The treacherous triumph of sloth is its capacity to dismantle our desire.



*The LORD created me at the
beginning of his work, the first
of his acts of long ago.*

Proverbs 8:22, NRSV