

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Struggle in the Spiritual Life

The interior life is both a gift from God and an intentional response on our part. In the midst of life's demands, this response often requires great effort to sustain. As a result, if we're to progress in the spiritual life, we must consider, as an essential component, the struggles that accompany it. By struggles, I mean the ongoing work associated with picking up our cross and following Jesus. This would include the difficulties associated with various forms of prayer, meditations, devotions, or spiritual practices as they relate to the living out of our vocation. In many respects, to pray well is to struggle often. As the entire tradition bears witness, the two go hand-in-hand.

To identify the spiritual life as a struggle is to beg some deeper questions, the first of which concerns the reason for our struggle. Why do we struggle? Much of this has to do with the effects of what the tradition calls "the three enemies of the soul," the world, the flesh, and the devil. These are the sources of our temptation, and they arise in a world tainted by Original Sin and still awaiting full redemption.

The Unholy Trinity Reflecting on the above passages in light of the moral life, tradition summarized these enticements to sin, giving them the popular title "The Unholy Trinity." Accordingly, the French medieval philosopher Peter Abelard identified three specific categories of temptation as the world, the flesh, and the devil. Likewise, Saint Thomas Aquinas acknowledged the deadly nature of these in his *Summa Theologica*. Later, Saint John of the Cross identified these very same three as serious threats to the perfection of the soul. Although the definitions and treatments given by these thinkers vary slightly, they are, for the most part, quite consistent in their understanding.

The "world" represents a willful indifference to the designs of God. This can be seen in the adoption of secular values in opposition to Christ and His Church. An example of the "world" is what Pope Saint John Paul II called "the culture of death," which includes the widespread acceptance of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. The "flesh" reflects the tendencies to gluttony and sexual immorality. These include our disordered passions and corrupt inclinations expressed in such evils as fornication, adultery, and homosexual acts. The "devil" represents himself — he is a real person, the chief fallen angel described by Saint John as the liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44; 1Jn 3:8). He, along with the rest of the fallen angels known as

demons, “prowl throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls.”¹ Examples of the “devil” include such deadly practices as openness to temptation, participation in the occult, and satanism. When embraced or even passively tolerated, the Unholy Trinity can have the real potential to erode our relationship with Christ the Servant, significantly diminish the effectiveness of our diaconal ministry and, if left unchecked, contribute to the loss of our salvation.

These threats, often experienced in the form of strong temptations, represent the prime reason for struggle in the interior life. Others include what tradition calls the seven deadly sins, which actually fall under the broader categories of the world, the flesh, and the devil. They are: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. While treatment of these can be found in a number of good sources,² one of these capital sins stands out as particularly troublesome in the spiritual life, that of sloth.

Sloth, also known by its Latin translation as *acedia*, refers to an interior struggle characterized by indifference to our religious duties and obligations. It’s a kind of spiritual malaise where we fail to do the things we should. In this respect, it can easily become a sin of omission, especially when we cease to resist it. Sloth arises out of the interior desire to seek pleasure and avoid hardship without regard to the moral and spiritual implications. As a result, we all too often follow the path of least resistance, becoming, in the spiritual life, nominally active and, in its extreme, religiously apathetic.

Sloth, which is as old as religion itself, was first identified as such by the Desert Father Evagrius of Pontus in the late fourth century. Writing in the early monastic tradition, he described it as a deep desire for monks to leave their cells, arising out of an ongoing indifference to the faith. This, in turn, easily led to futility in their monastic vocation. Saint Thomas Aquinas later described it as, “a sadness arising from the fact that the good is difficult.”³ Here, we become lukewarm to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, yielding to the weight of our lives and failing to source our strength in Christ the Servant.

While deacons are not monks, the same principles apply. We can allow ourselves to become slothful in the spiritual life, especially when it comes to things like our obligation to pray the Divine Office, or to ensure we have enough time for contemplative prayer. It’s all too easy to rationalize away such spiritual exercises because of the demands of our vocation, without recognizing that, unless we source ourselves in these practices, we cannot truly fulfill that same vocation. In much the same way respiration requires for its success a two-fold act, breathing in and breathing out, so too does the Christian life. Through the cultivation of the spiritual life, we breathe in the love of God. That same love of God, now transformed in us, is given to those we

¹ Taken from the Prayer of Saint Michael.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1866.

³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q35, A1.

serve by breathing out. If we simply breathe in and stop, we will inevitably die. Likewise, if we simply breathe out and stop, we will also perish. This movement from interiority to exteriority and back again reveals a wholesome integrity that gives life to us, and through us, to those we serve.

Although, in a strict sense, sloth is often associated with inactivity, there is a type of sloth that masks itself in a flurry of actions unrelated to the interior life. As Evagrius pointed out, we may well be busy with a great many things, even holy things, and still be slothful. This happens when we busy ourselves with exterior acts of piety as a way to avoid the much harder work associated with cultivating the interior life. The lack of interiority associated with exterior acts leaves them, as we have already seen, sterile and lifeless. Because we fail to grow in intimacy with Christ the Servant through constancy in the interior life, sloth leads to a cold, depersonalized ministry in which, instead of relating to those we serve, we merely function. This is simply the consequence of our failure to encounter Jesus in the world within us; so, as a result, we're rendered incapable of recognizing Him in the world around us.

In examining the struggles associated with the interior life, we've considered the most common kinds of difficulties. However, if we're not careful, we risk passing over that which is so obvious as to be missed. In its consideration of the battle of prayer, the *Catechism* focuses on the object of that battle when it teaches:

The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God.⁴

Sometimes, that which is right in front of us is most hidden. With regard to the interior life, we are the only element that's constant in absolutely every single one of our struggles. Such struggles as the Unholy Trinity and sloth are made possible only by our willingness to accept them, to appropriate them, to make them our own. True, we're surrounded by things and persons that constantly tempt us, but grace in each and every one of these moments makes it not only possible to resist, but possible to use these very same temptations as spiritual springboards to perfection. By not recognizing ourselves as the origin of our interior struggles, we look away from the source of the problem and, at the very same time, the solution.

Grace is the Remedy Grace is nothing less than supernatural help and, in this respect, represents an expression of divine love. To detach love from grace is to depersonalize the gift and, by extension, the Giver. Here, grace is not so much something given as Someone encountered in an intimate way. It is Christ the Servant, meeting us on the road to Calvary,

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2725.

helping us to carry our cross, enabling us to endure our sufferings and, in the end, to bask in the light of our own resurrection.

This divine love, given to us in grace to engage in the struggles of the interior life, can never be understated. It means that God desires us more than we can ever desire Him. He seeks us out more than we seek Him. God's absolute and unconditional love, and the grace that flows from it, is most fully expressed in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of His Son. Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (Jn 15:13)."

Our Lord gives Himself to us, and in this very giving He offers the grace necessary to overcome our struggles. As a result, because of this unconditional love, there's nothing we can do to make Him love us more, and nothing we can do to make Him love us less. He is love through and through. With this in mind, it's a grand lie of Satan that we must be good to allow God to draw close to us. As Saint Paul observes, "... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rm 5:8). We often buy into Satan's lie because we superimpose the frailties of human love over God's love, rather than allowing God's love to be the measure of our love. God's love is meant to purify our love so that our love reflects, albeit in a human way, His love.

Since it's an expression of divine love, grace is completely unmerited. There's absolutely nothing we can do to earn it. It's a gratuitous gift from God just because He's God and we're us. That's it. God's love for us is grounded not in what we do, but simply in our very being, in the pure and simple fact that we exist in His image. If this seems rather abstract, think of the love a father has for his son. Should the son, as he grows, engage in acts the father disapproves, such disapproval does not diminish the love he has for his son. This is nothing less than the principle of loving the sinner and hating the sin. The father sees beyond his son's acts to the babe he held long ago, to the boy he raised, to the man he's become. The father loves the son for who he is, and it's because of this love that he hates what his son's sins do to him and to others around him. Nonetheless, the father can no more abandon his son anymore than he can abandon himself. In this respect, authentic love, be it divine or human, admits to a kind of constant, regardless of the acts of the beloved. This is not to say that human love has the same power as divine love, only that human love, when sourced in God's love, has power beyond itself. In this respect, human love, at its best, is a participation in an expression of divine love.

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