

Beware of Sloth

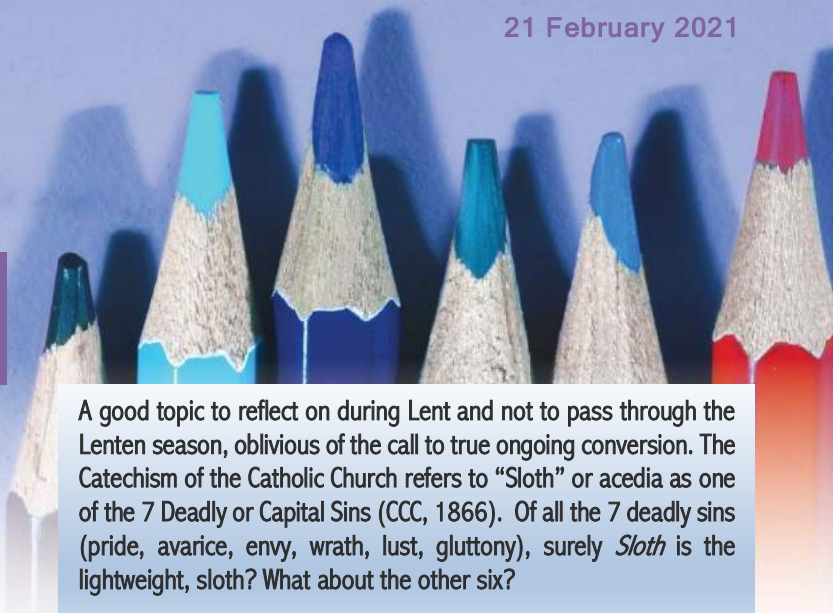
The Dangers of Spiritual Sloth

The poor of spirit are empty and so long to be filled. They hunger and thirst for the wholeness that is called holiness, for the food that truly satisfies. The rich in spirit don't hunger for anything. They are "full of themselves," self-satisfied. When offered an opportunity to grow spiritually, they protest, "But I'm a good person and worship God in my own way," or "I go to Mass every Sunday, isn't that enough?" They are too busy for prayer and yawn when exposed to a spiritual discussion. They are too absorbed with themselves to be interested in God. They may be able to get excited about Soccer or Formula 1, but never about heaven.

This lack of spiritual hunger, this utter apathy in the face of the things of God, one of the seven deadly sins, is sloth or spiritual laziness. It is a sneaky sin that quietly creeps into the lives of even religious people and gradually chokes out true spirituality. It diverts our attention from the things of heaven to a myriad of other things until we find ourselves bored with God, making only routine and mechanical efforts to "fulfil our Sunday obligation." There is no passion, no zeal, no desire. Just lots of excuses.

Prayer for eliminating sloth

God, You never stop loving me. Thank You for never sleeping and never slumbering on my behalf. Please help me be intentional in You. Help me love You and serve others as You would direct me. Amen.



A good topic to reflect on during Lent and not to pass through the Lenten season, oblivious of the call to true ongoing conversion. The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to "Sloth" or acedia as one of the 7 Deadly or Capital Sins (CCC, 1866). Of all the 7 deadly sins (pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony), surely *Sloth* is the lightweight, sloth? What about the other six?

"Blessed are the single-hearted, for they shall see God." The hearts of the blessed, the truly happy, are not divided among God, and football, and career, and money. Those truly happy have only one God, and look to Him alone to be filled. If they play sports, they do it for His honour and glory, not theirs. If they marry, they love Christ and are loved by Christ through their spouse. If they pursue a career or build a business, they do it according to His will to advance His Kingdom.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, is a gut check for us all. It's one of the best examinations of conscience that there is, perfect to read before every confession and every Lent. Incidentally, that's what the penitential season of Lent is about. The fasting is meant to re-stimulate our spiritual appetite. The spiritual exercises are designed to shrug off the laziness of sloth. Christianity is not just a matter of believing in God, but avidly pursuing Him. We know pride goes before a fall. We know wrath too often leads to violence. We know lust destroys from the inside out, that envy put Jesus on the cross. We even get that gluttony can lead to premature death. But seriously, has anyone ever died from taking it easy? You can be pretty sure the coroner's report never reads: "Cause of death: too many snoozes." Sloth may not get you to the top of the list, but is that so bad?

What is Sloth?

What is acedia (sloth), and why is it so deadly? Some of us, when we hear the word "sloth," think of a three-toed mammal famous for hanging around, moving slowly, and sleeping 15 hours a day. That brings to mind another mammal of the five-toed variety - a human on a couch - a couch potato, which helps to clarify the meaning of the word. Acedia (Sloth): physical laziness, also disinterest in spiritual matters or neglecting spiritual growth. "Acedia or spiritual sloth goes so far as to refuse the joy that comes from God and to be repelled by divine goodness: (CCC, 2094).

The dictionary defines sloth as "reluctance to work or make effort." Then it adds a variety of synonyms - laziness, idleness, sluggishness, apathy, lassitude, lethargy, languor, and torpidity - none of which look good on a resume. The ancient word is the Latin, *acedia*, which sounds equally unbecoming and basically means "lack of care." To fully comprehend the spiritual dimension of sloth, we have to go back to the Desert Fathers, the monks of the 3rd and 4th centuries who ventured to the desert to escape the evils of the world, only to discover that those evils reside within them. They were the ones who originally named and profiled these seven deadly tendencies.

They described Sloth as "the noon-day demon." They discovered that in the middle of the day, when the sun was high and their metabolism low, they found it difficult to focus on prayer and study. They found it easy to look out the window and let their minds wander: to wonder if life might be better at some other monastery, or even out in the world. Listen to the words of Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth-century monk, describing this malady:



The demon of acedia ... attacks the monk about the fourth hour [which would have been 10:00am]. First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be 50 hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly toward the windows, to [want to] jump out of his cell ... and further he instils in him a dislike for the place and for his state of life itself, for manual labour, and also instils the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and that there is no one who cares about him. ... He leads him to a desire for other places ... and to pursue a trade that is easier and more productive ... and adds that pleasing the Lord is not a question of being in a particular place.

There's more to sloth than a case of the afternoon "sleepies". It could bring a monk to the brink of quitting his vocation and abandoning God's call. None of us are monks, but sloth sneaks up on us in all kinds of ways. It sets our minds to wandering when they should be focused. It persuades us to stay on the couch, or in the pew, instead of getting up and doing something. We daydream and we procrastinate much more during this Pandemic outbreak. We run late for appointments or miss them completely. We fritter away whole evening in front of the TV. We spend too much time on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or whatever our web addiction happens to be. We intend for things to happen that we never actually start. We start things that we never actually finish. We end up neglecting God or people because of our laziness or distractions.





P - PRIDE
L - LUST
A - ANGER
A - AVARICE
G - GLUTTONY
E - ENVY
S - SLOTH

It brings to mind the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was troubled to the point of death, facing the greatest test of His life. He asked His disciples to keep watch with Him while He prayed, to be with Him in His hour of need. Jesus asked Peter: "Could you not stay awake one hour? Stay awake and pray that you do not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41). Twice more, Jesus asked the disciples to keep watch with Him, and twice more, they can't keep their eyes open. Finally, Jesus said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is a hand" (Matthew 26: 45-46). We are still in the midst of the pandemic, facing uncertainty and feeling at a loss: an appropriate time for the soul-searching season of Lent. All seven of these sins are lurking in the dark corners of our souls. They are robbing us of joy, ruining relationships, and wreaking havoc in society. But along the way, we have also found help, healing, and hope for overcoming these dark tendencies.



Why is Sloth so Deadly?

All Jesus asked of His disciples is that they would care enough to be with Him in that moment: to be awake and on the alert. But they couldn't, or wouldn't, do it. Not only did they miss an opportunity to be with the Lord in His hour of need, but they failed to prepare for their moment of testing, as well. How differently Peter might have responded if he had strengthened himself through prayer?

How many moments with God have we missed because we were too sleepy, or too busy, or too distracted to notice? How many opportunities to do good have we missed, simply because we never got around to it?

Generally speaking, the other six deadly sins are sins of commission. Lust, anger, envy, gluttony: We think or feel or do something that we know to be wrong or hurtful. But **sloth is a sin of omission** - failing to think or feel or do something right and good. It's not just about falling asleep during our prayer time. It's about making excuses when God prompts us to do something: "It's not a good time". "It's not my gift". "People will think I am weird". One excuse after another!

It's about avoiding conflict when conflict is called for. It's about waiting for someone else to step up. It's about dreaming of somewhere else instead of being present where you already are. While the simple diagnosis would seem to be lack of discipline, what it really boils down to is a lack of devotion and attention.



Cultivating the habit of attentiveness

By “attentiveness,” means making our way through the day with our eyes and ears open to what God might be showing us, with our hearts and hands ready for the opportunities He brings our way. It’s an attitude as well as an action. Listen to these words from the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians 5:13-14, “...but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, everything that becomes visible is light ... Sleepers, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” What a great response to the sin of sloth. Wake up, man! Open your eyes, woman! Stop sleep walking your way through life! These are probably the lyrics to an ancient hymn of the church, calling on believers to shake off their complacency and be changed. It’s an attitude of expectancy, of passion, of desire for Christ and His fullness. When opportunity comes our way, act on it! Seize the moment! Don’t stumble through life with our senses dulled and our actions slow. Be intentional. Let the Spirit of God move us, and when He moves us - do something! Being and doing. Passion and action. Compassion and movement. That’s how we were meant to live. Try to create a quiet space and pray a simple prayer out loud or in the heart, depending where we are: *Here I am, Lord. Is there anything You have to say to me?* And then just wait. We might take a walk or sit quietly. We might read some Scripture, or sing, or just listen to the wind. Sometimes there’s nothing - but sometimes there is a soft gentle nudge.

Fr. Andrew Wong, Spiritual Director
Veronica Nathan, Programme Manager/Counsellor

Get into the habit of attentiveness. If we care about someone, we act upon the opportunity to reach out and touch lives. When we sense a prompting to call a friend, or cook a meal for someone in need, or make a donation, or visit someone in the hospital, or join a small group, or volunteer to serve - do it! Right away, if you can! If not, decide when you will do it - and make a commitment to do it.

Sloth can deter, and over enthusiasm can smother. Discernment is needed. There are people we love and care about, people we have been praying for. Yet, we procrastinate making that call. We put it off - thinking it might not be the right time. Don’t let that happen during this Lenten season. Let us not regret and shudder to say we simply fall into sloth or simply for lack of care and effort. Or even worst, we repeat the line of Cain, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” (Genesis 4:9). Our suffering Messiah, has a special assignment for us during Lent and let it not be like water down a duck’s back. Jesus wants us to be with Him more intentionally - to attend to Him and allow Him to speak into our life.

Remedies for Sloth

In combating sloth, we must use violence against our inclinations to laziness, and seek help in prayer and the Sacraments. We must remember the Day of Judgment. Spiritual reading will help to stir up our sluggish will; but above all, devotion to the Holy Spirit will be effective, because fear, not love, motivates sloth, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Love, the Source to whom we must go to find the antidote to sloth, namely, Divine Love. We must beg Him to pour forth love into our hearts.

Scripture for eliminating sloth

- *The slacker craves, yet has nothing, but the diligent is fully satisfied* (Proverbs 13:4).
- *There is profit in all hard work, but endless talk leads only to poverty* (Proverbs 14:23).
- *But if anyone does not provide for his own, that is his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever* (1 Timothy 5:8)