



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

April 2022

Acedia

When the holy Abba Antony lived in the desert he was beset by (Acedia) Despondency and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, “Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?” A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, St. Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down again and plaiting a rope, then getting up to pray again. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct him and reassure him. He heard the angel say to him, “Do this and you will be saved.” At these words, St. Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved.

“Noonday demon” mentioned in the Psalms with whom the desert ascetics had to do battle before they could grow spiritually. By far the most famous description is found in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), “The demon of acedia – also called the noonday demon – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk and besieges the soul. First of all, he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [or lunchtime], to look this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that love has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred (of the place). He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time and brings before the mind’s eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and it tempts the monk to forsake his cell and drop

out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.”

What are the manifestations of acedia?

Acedia presents itself as being a deep dissatisfaction with everything in life. It's a kind of limited spiritual depression, and it's a very specific temptation. It's a temptation to leave the good things in what we're doing. In fact, when we leave sinful situations, we can be sure it's the Holy Spirit at work: it's the opposite. As we look at each situation, we need to draw certain conclusions about it.

Acedia attacks fundamental spiritual practices. It attacks a person's basic life of prayer and promotes a kind of hopelessness about it. There's a low level of irritability combined with a kind of hopelessness, a limited amount of despair. We can feel it when we are being driven from good spiritual practice, usually with a kind of pride.

For example, when the demons are tempting the monks and telling them to go to another monastery, they're usually adding in there, number one, that the other monks that they're with are just no good in the spiritual life: “You're never going to get anywhere with them. If you want to get ahead in the spiritual life, you've to be with ‘good monks,’ ones who are really advancing, because, let's face it, you are capable of advancing. You are not like them. You've got potential, great potential, but your great potential has been frustrated by doing simple things. So go to another monastery that's bigger, better organized. Find a new spiritual father who's more dynamic and active and who will understand what kind of potential you have. Find some monks who have more zeal for God and more committed, because surely you belong with them. The reason for all of your irritation is that you're not in the right place. Once you make the move, you're going to love it. You're going to be great. There's not going to be anything better than that. Yes, you need a new monastery. You need a new cell, a cell that promotes real inner peace that makes a true prayerful monk.” That's Acedia at work.

You see it's very different from someone who, praying for God's wisdom, asks God meekly, “What ought I to do?”

I think we learn again from its symptoms and from the feeling that comes with it, because acedia has that kind of annoying part about it where we just don't feel like anything fits or is right or is good, and we're under a wrong impression that moving is going to fix it, when really what it presents is a kind of escape from the spiritual life. In acedia we're always tempted to

make the jump on our own, because we become convinced that we have the best picture of the situation, we don't require any advice from our spiritual father, and we know how to handle it. So, there's a rebellious, and a disobedient side to it as well, where we declare ourselves against, really, the wisdom of our spiritual father.

On the other hand, acedia is a spiritual malady. It's a sin, treated with repentance, Tears, Prayer, Manual work, Hope and perseverance.

Tears are therefore a remedy for acedia, inasmuch as they are the physical, external manifestation of the fact that one needs to be saved. We find this again in the first saying of the Alphabetical Collection, attributed to Saint Antony. Antony says: "I want to be saved, but my thoughts do not let me go." In reality, in saying that he wants to be saved, he has already, somewhere, conquered the demon of acedia! But tears have a second meaning: they are like water that falls on a hard rock and, over time, manages to penetrate it. They are like water that flows over the shell of our stony heart, so that it might become a heart of flesh. Little by little they will transform our heart so as to make it docile to the Lord. They will make a notch so that mercy might pour into that gap, into that wound, just as the mercy of God was engulfed in Christ's wound of love on the Cross.

Hope and Perseverance, good hope is a slayer of despondency; with this sword of hope], "teaches St. John Climacus." And Evagrius counsels: "When we meet with the demon of acedia...we are to sow seeds of a firm hope in ourselves while we sing with the holy David: 'Why are you filled with sadness, my soul? Why are you distraught? Trust in God, for I shall give praise to Him. He who saves me. The hope to be implemented is not only that of being delivered in the long run from this passion and of obtaining rest, but also the hope of receiving future blessings, which--as St. John Climacus notes--constitutes the judgment of this passion? and its "utter death." Another essential remedy is repentance, mourning, and compunction. If man remembers his sins, God is his helper in all things and he does not suffer from acedia," teaches an elder. For his part, St. John Climacus advises: "Let this tyrant be bound by the remembrance of your sins," and he continues: "He who mourns over himself does not know despondency." The tears that follow on repentance and spiritual mourning clearly appear to be an even more powerful remedy. Evagrius notes: "Acedia is quelled by tears," The Prophet David applied this remedy wisely to his passions when he said, I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.

Among the remedies prescribed by the Fathers, we must also mention manual labor. Such work can help man avoid boredom, instability, torpor, and sleepiness, which in part make up this passion. Manual labor can contribute to establishing or maintaining the diligence and the continuity of presence, effort, and attention that are presupposed by the spiritual life and that acedia seeks to break. Above all, such work is directly opposed to idleness, one of the main forms that acedia takes, and a source of innumerable ills. Prayer and work, Give thought to working with your hands, if possible both night and day, so that you will not be a burden to anyone, and further that you may be able to offer donations, as the holy apostle Paul advised (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). In this way you can also overcome the demon of acedia and eliminate all the other desires inspired by the enemy.

Finally, prayer constitutes the most basic cure of acedia,' for man cannot be completely freed from this passion except by the grace of God, which cannot be received except by asking for it through prayer. Without this last remedy, the efficacy of all the others remains incomplete, since they draw all their strength from prayer. For this reason, the fight against the passion, the resistance one offers it, the patience one demonstrates, the hope that one manifests, the mourning and the tears, the remembrance of death, the manual labor--all of these must be accompanied by prayer, which grounds them in God and ensures that these efforts not remain merely human means. Meanwhile, a difficulty arises from the fact that acedia drives man to abandon prayer and prevents him from having recourse to it. Thus, it is essential that one resist this temptation with all one's might, guarding one's prayer if it has not yet been abandoned, or taking it up again if it has already been lost. The simultaneous practice of prostrations is especially recommended in the case of acedia, as it straightway causes the body (which the passion numbs at the same time as the soul) to take part in the prayer and contributes to drawing both body and soul out of their lethargy. Psalmody appears to be an especially efficacious mode of prayer against acedia,' as does the prayer of the heart when practiced with watchfulness and attentiveness.

By the means of these remedies, we arm ourselves against this passion for once it is conquered, we experience inexpressible joy and peace. May God give us the strength and help us to overcome this passion and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.