THE NOONDAY DEVIL

ACEDIA, THE UNNAMED EVIL OF OUR TIMES

“The demon of acedia, also called the ‘noonday devil’ is the most oppressive of all demons.”
—Evagrius of Pontus

FOREWORD BY MARC CARDINAL OUELLET

IGNATIUS
THE NOONDAY DEVIL
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Abbot of Saint-Wandrille

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Acedia, the Unnamed Evil
of Our Times

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Acknowledgments

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Very early on, the monastic tradition became interested in a strange and complex phenomenon: acedia. Spiritual sloth, sadness, and a disgust with the things of God, a loss of the meaning of life, despair of attaining salvation: acedia drives the monk to leave his cell and to flee intimacy with God, so as to seek here and there some compensation for the austere way of life to which he felt called by God. The psychological and spiritual subtlety of those who first studied this phenomenon—the Desert Fathers and Evagrius of Pontus in particular—cannot fail to challenge our contemporaries who, although they are no longer familiar with the term acedia, no doubt still experience the terrible symptoms of it. For acedia, the monastic sin par excellence, is certainly not to be considered as something from another era. On the contrary, might it not be the gloomy evil of our age?

Weariness, melancholy, feeling overworked, discouragement, instability, activism, boredom, or depression: these various manifestations of the “noonday devil” are enough to convince us of the relevance of an evil that causes a man to lose his relish for life and paralyzes his interior dynamism. Left to his own devices, man ultimately despairs of ever being able to find a meaning for his existence and runs the risk of sinking into a mediocrity that is just the symptom of his rejection of his own greatness as an adopted son of God.
This book by Father Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., for which I am pleased to write a preface, is a compact presentation, for a broader reading public, of a long study on acedia that I personally found very interesting and enlightening when I read it some years ago. The author had the insight that acedia, against which his monastic formation had warned him, was not just the concern of monks but threatened people in all states of life, and that it directly affected the relationship between men and God. Indeed, far from being mere distraction in prayer or a lazy nonchalance, acedia appeared to him, over the course of the study, to be a terrible evil that directly concerned the ultimate end of human life, that is, participation in the very life of the Trinity. The simple, direct style of the work makes the reader feel involved and challenged to consider anew what is essential in his existence.

In the first chapter, starting from delectable texts by the first monks of the desert, we are led to discover the multiple facets of an obscure malady that the monastic tradition rightly considered one of the most pernicious that can afflict us. Whereas the various manifestations of acedia make us shudder because of their contemporary relevance, the remedies proposed by the Fathers are striking in their simplicity. In reading these pages, we definitely feel very close to those anchorites of the desert!

A second chapter dwells at length on the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose perspicacity is not at all diminished when he speaks about acedia. The great theologian of the thirteenth century, heir of the long patristic and monastic tradition, proves to be prophetic when he
assigns to acedia a strategic position in our understanding of Christian action. As a sin against the joy that springs from charity, affecting the frontier between the flesh and the spirit, acedia can be considered the major obstacle to enthusiastic Christian witness. Saint Thomas does not hesitate, however, to propose an astonishing method of overcoming it . . .

In the last two chapters, the author examines the current relevance of acedia, first of all in Christian life in general, then in the different states of life. This hitherto unpublished presentation of his research leads us right to the heart of the spiritual and sometimes confused quest of our times. It reminds us of the importance of the spiritual combat in our life and shows us how acedia can threaten the growth and flourishing of the human person.

Confidence, however, has the last word, for, as Evagrius already wrote in the late fourth century, when someone has resisted acedia, “a state of peace and ineffable joy ensues in the soul after this struggle.”

Marc Cardinal Ouellet

Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops
Abbreviations

CCL  \textit{Corpus Christianorum Latinorum}

DC  \textit{Documentation catholique}

FOC  Fathers of the Church (series published by Catholic University of America Press)


PG  \textit{Patrologia Graeca} (ed. J. P. Migne)

PL  \textit{Patrologia Latina} (ed. J. P. Migne)

SC  \textit{Sources chrétiennes}

ST  Saint Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}
Introduction

Even though the subject was at first the topic of a thesis, this book is the work, not of a ‘‘specialist’’, but rather of a monk who, like the readers and together with them, is trying to seek God unceasingly. In response to repeated requests that he has received to present his reflections on acedia to a wider public, the author gives us here a livelier, more contemporary version of his study. The spoken style, which reflects the conferences on which this book is based, has been preserved.

At Saint Wandrille’s Abbey,¹ the monks have preserved the custom of reciting, before study, and most especially before the prayerful study of Sacred Scripture, the traditional invocation to the Holy Spirit, the _Veni sancte Spiritus_: “God, you have instructed the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit; grant that through that same Holy Spirit, we may always be truly wise [literally, _savor_ what is right] and _rejoice_ in his consolation.”

This prayer asks two things of the Holy Spirit: to make us _relish_ or _savor_ (in Latin: _sapere_) what is right, what is true; and, on the other hand, that we may _rejoice_ (in Latin: _gaudere_ ) in his divine consolation. _Savor_ and _joy_: these are

¹ The Abbaye de Fontenelle, founded in 649 by Saint Wandrille, a high-ranking dignitary of the Court of King Dagobert, is located on the bank of the Seine River between Rouen and Le Havre. It houses a community of thirty-five Benedictine monks who lead a life of prayer, silence, and work, while following the _Rule_ written by Saint Benedict (480–547).
the two poles around which this reflection intends to revolve.

Let us begin with two quotations. The first is taken from a book on the virtues and the faith, written in 1994 by a moralist from Milan, Father Giuseppe Angelini:

Overlooked by preachers and catechists, and not even known by the spiritual masters, acedia is absolutely and completely ignored in all works dealing with moral theology.²

The second quotation is taken from the retreat preached in 1996 at the Vatican by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn:

It seems to me that the deepest crisis in the Church today is that we no longer dare to believe in what God can do for the good with those who love him (cf. Rom 8:28). The spiritual masters traditionally call this torpor of mind and heart acedia.³

Here are two statements that paradoxically appear to be contradictory: on the one hand, acedia is the most forgotten topic of modern morality; on the other hand, it is perhaps the root cause of the greatest crisis in the Church today.

What prompted me to delve a little into this topic of acedia is precisely my reading of the book by Giuseppe Angelini: *Le vertù e la fede*. On opening it, I discovered the title of the first chapter: “Acedia”. That title piqued my interest. I should point out that when someone enters the novitiate, the novice master gives the newcomer several texts on this

subject: the *Institutes* of John Cassian, for example, in chapter 10, or the *Praktikos*, a treatise on the ascetic life by Evagrius of Pontus, chapter 12, or else *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus. The notion itself of acedia was therefore not unfamiliar to me, but what I found difficult to understand was the fact that there could be some relation between acedia and the virtues: How could a book dedicated to the virtues start with a chapter on acedia? This chapter cited a very famous passage by Evagrius, to which we will have reason to return; but most importantly, several pages farther on, I was surprised to find a reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the *studium* at Saint-Wandrille, I had studied Saint Thomas a little, but I had no idea at all that he had devoted a question of his *Summa Theologiae* to acedia. For him, acedia was not unimportant, since he labeled it a sin against charity, more precisely the sin against the joy that springs from charity.

I noticed then that Saint Thomas cited four authors: Saint John Damascene, John Cassian, Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Isidore of Seville. So it was that I had the idea of doing a little study on the monastic and patristic sources of Saint Thomas’ teaching on acedia. At that time I could hardly imagine the depths to which that study would lead me! Today I thank God for having brought to completion that work, which was a gift that I received rather than a personal choice. I might add that familiarity with the Fathers of the Church and with Saint Thomas Aquinas is a special grace, which has enabled me to turn this study into an occasion for contemplation and prayer. For this, too, I give thanks to God.
Most of our contemporaries know nothing about acedia. Few people are aware that this is what tradition identified as the famous “noonday devil” feared by those who are going through the well-known “mid-life crisis”. However, although the term “acedia” has been forgotten, the phenomenon that it designates has not disappeared. It is enough to delve into the colorful texts of the first monks of the desert to find that out. The very expression “noonday devil” ought to catch our attention. Usually, indeed, the demon is associated with the night and not with broad daylight! Could it be precisely this unexpected character of a demon who comes to attack in the middle of the day that makes acedia a particularly terrible evil? Although the midday sun comes to bathe everything in its dazzling light, acedia, like an obscure malady, plunges the heart of the person that it afflicts into the gray fog of weariness and the night of despair.