

Remedies to *Acedia* in the Rhythm of Daily Life

BY AMY FREEMAN

The primary remedy for *acedia* is being faithful in the demands of daily life that God's love calls us to face. When we perform them with the humility of prayer, even quotidian works can enkindle the fire of God's love in us and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of this vice.

How can we possibly overcome a vice that is as spiritually deep-rooted as *acedia*? The twin symptoms of idleness and the restless activity through which this “noonday devil” often reveals itself are only the surface; *acedia* is essentially “resistance to the demands of God’s love.”¹ For this reason the primary remedy that spiritual directors have long recommended for *acedia* is *stabilitas*, which is “sticking to your post” or being faithful in the demands of daily life that God’s love calls us to face.

This advice goes back to the fourth-century desert Christians. For example, Evagrius of Pontus notes that *acedia* “instills in [the monk] a dislike for the place [i.e., his cell] and for his state of life itself” and tries to persuade him to flee.² He urges monks to resist these temptations by persevering in prayer, manual labor, and whatever other work their community life entails each day.

His protégé, John Cassian, offers similar advice, but focuses especially on the element of manual labor. This is because Cassian thinks *acedia*’s two opposing symptoms—sleep, inactivity, and surrender on the one hand, and instability, fecklessness, and agitated activity for activity’s sake on the other—generally occur in this order: not working is the root, and then restlessness and “acting as busybodies” spring from this root.³ He draws this analysis from his reading of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, where the Apostle Paul “castigated those who were sick [with *acedia*], lest they give in to idleness and spend themselves in disquietude and meddling.”⁴

Cassian's advice became the basis for St. Benedict of Nursia's prescription in the sixth century that his monks live out a rhythm of prayer and manual labor. This early stream of guidance—from Evagrius to Benedict—later lent itself to the famous motto that is now popularly used to describe Benedictine spirituality: *ora et labora*, "pray and work."

Like those early monastics, we are often tempted to flee the demands of God's love in daily life, in ways big and small. Evagrius, Cassian, and Benedict speak to us, too, when they counsel "stick to your post." Being faithful in our regular times of prayer, study, office tasks, cleaning the house, changing diapers, and other works that we may be called to do each day can seem dry and discouraging. Yet it is precisely in these quotidian tasks of life that a remedy for *acedia* is found. The discipline of reforming our outer activity can be a means, with God's grace, to inner transformation.

FAITHFULNESS IN ORDINARY WORKS OF DAILY LIFE

Cassian tells a memorable story about a monk named Abba Paul. During his days of solitude in the desert, Abba Paul lived near a garden that provided plenty of food to nourish him. Every day he collected leaves from a date palm and stored them in his cave as if he were going to sell them in some town's market to support himself, even though he lived too far from any people for this to be feasible. At the end of each year he burned all the leaves that he had collected and then he began the process again. Why would Abba Paul continue in this seemingly pointless task? Cassian explains that it was because the revered monk saw in daily labor a means of "purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving out *acedia*."⁵

For the same reasons that Abba Paul found collecting his soon-to-be-burnt palm leaves to be curative, Cassian and Benedict recommend manual labor for their monks. Not only can such work support the monastery and help feed the hungry, it is a preventative and remedy for *acedia*.⁶ For Benedict's monks "manual labor"—from Latin *manuus* (hand) and *labor* (work)—referred broadly to harvesting crops, caring for guests, performing various crafts, and doing whatever was needed to keep the monastery in good order.

This remedy for *acedia*, which is based on the close relationship between body and soul, addresses the two primary symptoms of the vice. On the one hand, physically working our bodies can help us break out of an idle spirit; furthermore, focusing our bodies in a coordinated effort can help us work out our psychological distractions. Have you noticed these twin benefits of manual work in your experience? After chopping vegetables for cooking, for instance, I seem to be less tempted by a spirit of apathy and less distracted when I need to sit down to do assigned reading.

Although Cassian and Benedict stress the importance of manual labor, all of the practical affairs and forms of service in our daily life can become a

remedy to *acedia* if we stick with them. Recall that *acedia's* first symptom is a tendency to idleness.⁷ This may take several forms. If our task seems boring, difficult, or useless, we may be tempted to waste time lazing around instead. When our task is tedious, we may be tempted to procrastinate. Sometimes we do not wholly abandon our task but intentionally give only a half-hearted or sloppy effort. In all of these situations, faithfully doing our work helps us to resist *acedia's* temptations.

Acedia's other symptom is welcoming needless distractions, engaging in restless activity, and being overly busy. These are not the necessary interruptions that are a part of everyday life, the needed breaks in the middle of our work, and especially not the regular times of relaxation and recreation that are part of flourishing as a human being. (Indeed, "people who work must take time to relax, to be with their families, to enjoy themselves, read, listen to music, play a sport," and so on.⁸) Rather, by needless distractions I am referring to things like playing videogames and browsing Facebook when one should be working, or aimlessly checking one's phone during free moments of the day. They can take more sinister forms, such as needlessly sharing the faults of our neighbors or mentally dwelling in rash judgments and comparisons. Sometimes distractions disguise themselves as times of productivity; for instance, I have often distracted myself from difficult points in paper writing by checking my email excessively. Attempting to multi-task is another problem. In my experience, it is not unusual for students to be working on a paper while viewing a link on Facebook, reading an email, sending a text message, and maybe even watching television. As much as we may resist admitting it, most of us do sloppy work when we try to multitask in this manner.⁹

Even if we could do acceptable work in the midst of restless activity, faithfulness requires us to give good attention to the work at hand since we do it all for the glory of God. As St. Francis de Sales writes in the seventeenth century, "Therefore, my daughter, be careful and diligent in all your affairs; God, who commits them to you, wills you to give them your best attention."¹⁰ The demands of daily work then become an opportunity to cultivate the mental focus and loving attention that *acedia* tries to dispel.

Faithfulness to our daily work also means that we avoid over-busyness. Evagrius comments that *acedia* leads a monk to desire other places where he can "pursue a trade that is easier and *more productive*" (italics added).¹¹ Even when we do not abandon the work we are called to do, we may constantly switch activities or willingly spread ourselves too thin in an attempt to "be more productive." We may be tempted to spend unnecessary hours at work, take on too large a course-load, or engage in excessive physical exercise. These temptations are heightened for us by "the competitiveness imposed by a consumer society"¹² and by the modern "cult of the body" in which people "sacrifice everything for [the body's] sake, idolizing physical perfection and success at sports."¹³

As Christians we can even become overly busy with Bible study groups and ministries. We can fall into the trap of thinking that the more activities we do for God's sake, the more we show that we love him. This is a "spiritualization of work" that forgets that we, through God's mercy, only participate in a small way in his saving work.¹⁴ Furthermore, spreading ourselves too thin comes with a cost to our work, health, relationships with family and friends, and spiritual life. Being faithful to our calling involves saying no to many things, sometimes even good things.

When we are consumed by a spirit of productivity, we become too focused on our own affairs and overemphasize their importance. We may even lose track of the ultimate purpose of all that we do, which is "to know [God], to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven."¹⁵ And when this happens, our daily work begins to look more and more like the empty busyness of *acedia*. Indeed, "all efforts in this world, whether for spiritual service or practical work, are empty unless fully subsumed in our love for [God]."¹⁶

FAITHFULNESS IN WORSHIP

When Aquinas turns to the question of whether *acedia* leads us to mortal sins—that is, to actions that sever our love for God—he considers someone's objection that *acedia* cannot be all that bad because it is never mentioned in (and therefore must not violate) any of God's commandments. Oh, but it does violate God's law, Aquinas replies: it "is contrary to the precept to keep holy the Sabbath, which as a moral precept commands repose of the mind in God."¹⁷ While the objector (like most people today) seems to think of *acedia* or sloth as innocently catching some rest, Aquinas sees it as our refusal to rest as we should—that is, in God, and especially through Sabbath keeping.

How can sloth be a refusal to rest? Aquinas's view is less paradoxical when we remember that he is using the concept of rest

as early Christian theologians did. "Resting," for them, did not mean total inactivity, but an immersive enjoyment in humanity's proper activity. We are resting in this sense when we are doing what we were created to do and so deeply want to do, when we are being who we were meant to be. Thus, Augustine opens his autobiographical *Confessions* with this prayer to God: "to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir

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man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."¹⁸ Now *acedia* produces its spiritually deadly effect by resisting the Lord's gracious efforts to draw us to that end, to lead us into this sort of rest. In his book on leisure Josef Pieper explains that a person overcome with *acedia* "does not want to be what God wants him to be, and that means that he does not want to be what

Sabbath rest, and the communal worship that constitutes its most important aspect, are not a departure from truly human activity, but the culmination of it. While everything we do should be a form of praise, "our relationship with God also demands times of explicit prayer..."

he really, and in the ultimate sense, is."¹⁹ We were created to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2 Peter 2:9, NIV).²⁰ How vigilant we should be, therefore, to give praise to God in the rhythm of daily life.

Sabbath rest, and the communal worship that constitutes its most important aspect, are not a departure from truly human activity, but the culmination of it.²¹ While everything we do should be a form of praise to God, Pope John Paul II notes that

[our] relationship with God also *demands times of explicit prayer*, in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue, involving every dimension of the person. 'The Lord's Day' is the day of this relationship *par excellence* when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation. This is precisely why it is also *the day of rest*.²²

Furthermore, he writes, "Through Sunday rest, daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspective."²³ God calls us to prayer and praise, and issues the third commandment for our wellbeing; as Christ teaches, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

With various stratagems, *acedia* tries to cloud our thinking about regular Sunday worship. For instance, to persuade us that other activities would be fulfilling, it might whisper, "All things are sanctified by the Lord, and one could just as well worship on the golf course as in a sanctuary made by human hands."²⁴ Or, *acedia* may suggest that we are too busy to make time for worship this week, because we are doing other good things. (It conveniently forgets that we can entrust our schedules to God, the maker of time.) When all else fails, *acedia* will call attention to how boring or spiritually dry the

sermons, prayers, and songs of worship have been of late. (It distracts us from the thought that through worship we are participating ever more fully in the life of the triune God, which are far more significant than what we might be feeling week by week in our weaknesses.)

While the most important part of the Lord's Day is when we gather together to celebrate Christ's resurrection, the "characteristic joy and necessary rest for spirit and body" of communal worship is meant to extend in through the whole day. Pope John Paul II explains,

In fact, the Lord's Day is lived well when marked from beginning to end by grateful and active remembrance of God's saving work. This commits each of Christ's disciples to shape the other moments of the day – those outside of the liturgical context: family life, social relationships, moments of relaxation – in such a way that the peace and joy of the Risen Lord will emerge in the ordinary events of life.²⁵

The joy of resting in God can spread through the week as we spend some time each day in prayer, even if our state of life allows only brief moments for it. Combining contemplation with active work or ministries in the world is an example of what Walter Hilton in the fourteenth century called the "mixed" life. In this vocation, a person "learns to make time in the whirl of everyday practical affairs for a true spiritual inwardness."²⁶ This time can be likened to a mini-Sabbath each day in which our souls are refreshed.

Of course, the vocation of the "mixed life" faces all of the opposing temptations of *acedia*. It is not easy to find time for prayer in the midst of a busy life. Additionally, we may become discouraged when faced with distractions or dryness in our prayer. Some of the external distractions, such as ringing cell phones, we can shut off. Other distractions, especially mental distractions, are beyond our control. In this case we should either address the distraction in prayer or calmly collect our thoughts as much as possible and carry on, resisting any kind of discouragement. We must resist all of these temptations to give up. Faithfulness to prayer involves "a disciplined determination to really look at Jesus, to 'contemplate' him," even as we were made to do.²⁷ It is during such times set aside for prayer and praise that God teaches us how to rest in him.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: WORK AND WORSHIP

Even if we remain faithful in our times set aside for prayer, we may be tempted to compartmentalize them from the ordinary work that we do each day. Ideally, however, our Sunday worship should "in a way [become] the soul of the other days"²⁸ and our times of prayer should overflow into all the other moments of the day. This would help us to maintain a proper perspective on our work, avoid the restless activity of *acedia*, and allow everything we do to draw us closer to the Lord.

Monks learn habits of praying during the ordinary works of daily life. St. Francis de Sales invites all believers to join them, advising laypersons that “when your ordinary work or business is not specially engrossing” – perhaps such as washing the dishes or doing yard work – “let your heart be fixed more on God than on it.”²⁹ Along these lines, a fourteenth century Yorkshire pastor gives the interesting counsel that if we discover that we cannot pray during our manual labor, then we need to slow down a bit.³⁰ We can pray while walking from place to place, he suggests, telling good stories to our walking companions, speaking of the Scriptures, reciting the Psalms, or simply lifting “up your heart unto the Lord and just pray to Him in your thoughts with a happy mind,” to give thanks for all that God has done.³¹ Since we cannot develop these kind of disciplines easily and quickly, we must be patient with ourselves and trust God to teach us to be people of prayer.

When our work demands our full mental attention, St. Francis de Sales suggests we occasionally pause from work to mentally place ourselves beneath the cross or to think on the Lord in some other way. Father Thomas Dubay commends what he calls “life-triggering prayer” in which “all sorts of diverse happenings can...ignite a short sentiment directed to God.”³² For instance, we might pray, “Lord, grant me patience” in a difficult situation, or praise God when we admire the beauty of a flower garden. Another good habit is to pray before and after each task that we do, however briefly. In this spirit, several professors have advised me to pray a prayer composed by Thomas Aquinas when I begin to study.

Whether or not we are able to pray (aloud or to ourselves) during our practical affairs, spiritual directors like Walter Hilton emphasize offering all of our work as a gift to the Lord in prayer. We do this by remembering that our part is only to do faithfully and as best we can the specific work God has given to us. We entrust the rest to him.

Hilton often employs a favorite image, drawn from the writings of Augustine, for the gift of God’s love in us: it is the fire of love in the soul. In one of his letters Hilton instructs a layman to fulfill his responsibilities and do good works, and then afterwards to “lift up your heart to God, and pray that in his goodness God will accept your works that you do to his pleasure.”³³ The man is to offer them humbly, realizing that they are nothing on their own, but they can be offered to God because of God’s mercy. When done with this sort of humility, all of the ordinary works of daily life can be as little sticks that enkindle the fire of love in our soul and thereby strengthen us against the temptations of *acedia*.³⁴

NOTES

1 I borrow this phrase from Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung’s writings on *acedia*. See, for example, the chapter on sloth in her *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

2 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, VI.12, in Robert E. Sinkewicz, trans., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99.

3 John Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.13, in Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian, The Institutes, Ancient Christian Writers Series*, 58 (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2000), 227.

4 Cassian, *The Institutes* 10.15, in Ramsey, 228.

5 Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.24, in Ramsey, 233.

6 On feeding the hungry, Cassian writes in *Institutes*, 10.22 (Ramsay, 232-233): "...the Fathers throughout Egypt in no way permit monks, and especially the young men, to be idle. They measure the state of their heart and their progress in patience and humility by their eagerness to work. Not only do they not allow them to accept any of their sustenance from anybody else, but from their own toil they also take care of brothers who are visiting and who are from afar, and they even collect an immense quantity of provisions and food to places in Libya that suffer from barrenness and hunger as well as to cities where people are languishing in squalid prisons, in the belief that they are presenting a spiritual and true sacrifice to the Lord, from the fruit of their hands, by way of this kind of offering."

7 The following are "symptoms" of *acedia* when they result from our willfully resisting the demands of love. They should be distinguished from similar behaviors that result instead from physiological causes, such as (physical or mental) fatigue or depression.

8 The quote is from Jorge Bergoglio (now Pope Francis) in Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2013), 19-20.

9 Of course, there will be exceptions. For example, classical music helps one of my friends to read, while for me it usually distracts.

10 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.10, www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life (accessed July 30, 2013).

11 *Praktikos*, VI.12, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 99.

12 Jorge Bergoglio, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio*, 20.

13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), § 2289.

14 I borrow the term "spiritualization of work" from Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's "The Vice of Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love," *theotherjournal.com: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* (November 15, 2007), theotherjournal.com/2007/11/15/the-vice-of-sloth-some-historical-reflections-on-laziness-effort-and-resistance-to-the-demands-of-love/ (accessed August 5, 2013).

15 *Baltimore Catechism* (1891), 1.1.6.

16 This is David Jeffrey's comment on the counsels of Walter Hilton in *Toward a Perfect Love: The Spiritual Counsels of Walter Hilton*, translated by David Lyle Jeffrey (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), xxii.

17 *De Malo*, Q 11, a 3, reply to objection 2, in Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 368. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q 35, a 3, reply to objection 1.

18 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

19 Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, translated by Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998 [1948]), 28.

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21 See Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, 28.

22 John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Dies Domini / On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy (July 5, 1998)*, § 15, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html (accessed August 5, 2013).

23 *Ibid.*, § 67.

24 R. R. Reno, *Fighting the Noonday Devil and Other Essays Personal and Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

25 John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, §§ 67 and 52.

26 David Lyle Jeffrey, *Toward a Perfect Love*, xxii.

27 *Ibid.*

28 John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, § 83. The Pope recalls with approval "the insight of Origen that the perfect Christian 'is always in the Lord's Day, and is always celebrating Sunday.'"

29 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.10.

30 Richard Rolle of Hampole, "Works of Doubtful Authenticity: Our Daily Work," from *English Prose Works of Richard Rolle: A Selection*, edited by Carl Horstman (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Digital Library Production Service, 2003), 142, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/rollewks> (accessed January 16, 2013).

31 Anonymous, in *English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif*, translated and edited by David Lyle Jeffrey (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 263.

32 Thomas Dubay, S. M., *Prayer Primer: Igniting a Fire Within* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ignatius Press, 2002), 53.

33 Walter Hilton, *Mixed Life*, edited from Lambeth Palace MS 472 by S. J. Ogilvie-Thompson (Saltzburg, Austria: Institute für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1986), 36. This translation into modern English is my own. For a translation of the entire work, see Jeffrey, ed., *Towards a Perfect Love*, 7-34.

34 *Ibid.*, 37.



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