



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 An Unconditional Surrender: Evelyn Waugh on *Acedia* (*Acedia*, pp. 45-55)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Intimate Separation (*Acedia*, pp. 56-57)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Acedia in the Modern Age

Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, an engaging saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback during World War II, is enlightening not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage the vice causes, but also for its remedy in virtue.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:1-8

Meditation†

Acedia is a soul-sickness, a loss of any connection with spiritual things. Practices mean nothing. Boredom is too weak a word. Perhaps aversion or repulsion regarding the spiritual dimensions of life and living better describe the effects of *acedia*. ... The chief benefit of facing *acedia* can be to purify my motivation. It can cause me for the first time to start doing spiritual exercises for the right reasons rather than for subtle self-gain.

Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B.

Reflection

At the heart of *acedia*, or sloth, is a mystery: "The malice of Sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty...but in the refusal of joy," Evelyn Waugh notes. "Man is made for joy in the love of God, a love which he expresses in service. If he deliberately turns away from that joy, he is denying the purpose of his existence."

It is difficult to imagine how a person could reject joy, could be "fully aware of the proper means of his salvation" yet refuse "to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust." This is why rich narratives that depict how the vice of *acedia* functions are particularly helpful.

Guy Crouchback, the protagonist in Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, is a poignant, humorous illustration of how one might fall into both the lethargic, inactive form of *acedia* and its frenetic, distractive counterpart. Guy's deep-rooted apathy began as instinctual recoil from the pain of divorce and financial failure. He goes through the motions of his Catholic faith, but his distorted gestures towards effort are poisoned by *acedia* and actually prevent true healing. In the sacrament of Penance he is indolent and unengaged, preferring to confess in a second language so "There was no risk of going deeper.... Into that wasteland where his soul languished he need not, could not enter."

World War II shakes Guy out of "eight years of shame and loneliness" with a chance to fight in what he thinks is a just war. He joins the army to find a path back to purposeful action in the world that requires no compromise of his personal honor. Guy's newfound passion for justice, patriotism, and loyalty are significant goods, but for him they are secondary goods that serve to distract him for a few years from his underlying attitude of despair. Guy has found bustling activity to replace his lethargic sloth, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love. Now trapped in a distractive form of *acedia*, he is still at odds with his true identity and *telos* to love and serve God.

Guy's hope in earthly justice is damaged irrevocably when England forms an alliance of convenience with Stalin's Russia. Guy's foray into



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the world through just war has been as unsuccessful and disheartening as his foray into marriage. With the distraction of army life gone, he reverts to his old apathy until a letter from his father forces Guy to reflect on the state of his soul: "his father had tried to tell him.... [t]hat emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity.... Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*."

Finally recognizing his *acedia*, Guy responds with a simple prayer to God: "Show me what to do and help me to do it." Guy abandons his presumptuous refusal to participate when God does not work in ways he accepts; he acknowledges with humility that "Even he must have his function in the divine plan." In his new openness to vocation, Guy has found the only true solution to *acedia*: to actively pursue the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to love and serve God.

Our actions ultimately matter because we are astonishingly permitted by God to join in his work and become instruments of his will. The vice of *acedia* would defame and distort this terrible gift. But as Guy finally learns, it is possible through love and obedience to embrace that ultimate *telos* we all share: to serve God in joy through our individual vocations.

Study Questions

1. How does Guy Crouchback manifest both the inert and energetic forms of *acedia*? What can we learn from his story about the causes, expressions, and consequences of *acedia*?
2. In the Christian tradition, the proposed remedy to *acedia* is a renewed commitment to and obedience in the daily tasks God calls us to do. How does this fight against *acedia*? How does Guy Crouchback provide an example of this remedy?
3. What can Matthew 20:1-8 teach us about vocation and *acedia*? How does this passage reshape Guy's view of his vocation?
4. Consider the apparent relational *acedia* between the man and woman in Edward Hopper's *Room in New York*. Do you see parallels with Waugh's depiction of Guy Crouchback?

Departing Hymn: "Take My Life and Let It Be" (verses 1 and 6)

Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise,
let them flow in endless praise.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1874)

Tune: HENDON

† Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B., *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 107 and 99.

Acedia in the Modern Age

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see how *acedia*, in its lazy and distractive forms, refuses to love and serve God in joy.
2. To discuss how being open to and pursuing our particular vocations is a remedy to *acedia*.
3. To consider how literature can clarify the causes, manifestations and consequences of *acedia*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Acedia (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Take My Life and Let It Be" locate the familiar tune HENDON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Reading from the Trilogy

Guy Crouchback is at his father's funeral when he acknowledges and responds to his *acedia*.

"For many years now the [spiritual] direction... 'Put yourself in the presence of God,' had for Guy come to mean a mere act of respect, like the signing of the Visitors' Book at an Embassy or Government House. He reported for duty saying to God: 'I don't ask anything from you. I am here if you want me. I don't suppose I can be any use, but if there is anything I can do, let me know,' and left it at that.

"'I don't ask anything from you'; that was the deadly core of his apathy; his father had tried to tell him, was now telling him. That emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity in [his army unit] the Halberdiers. Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*.

"In the recess of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came. They also served who only stood and waited. He saw himself as one of the labourers in the parable who sat in the market-place waiting to be hired and were not called into the vineyard until late in the day. They had their reward on an equality with the men who had toiled since dawn. One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created. Even he must have his function in the divine plan. He did not expect a heroic destiny. Quantitative judgments did not apply. All that mattered was to recognize the chance when it offered. Perhaps his father was at that moment clearing the way for him. 'Show me what to do and help me to do it,' he prayed." (Evelyn Waugh, *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994], 540)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to increase your sensitivity to his direction in your life and give you strength to overcome *acedia*.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 20:1-8 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Though the features of *acedia* are mysterious, they can be illuminated by rich narratives like Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*. Members may need a brief summary of the plot, but they will quickly recognize the causes, manifestations, consequences, and potential remedies of *acedia* in the protagonist in these novels, Guy Crouchback.

Study Questions

1. Form two groups—one to recap from the article how Guy Crouchback exhibits a lazy form of *acedia*, the other to review how he exhibits a distractive form. Guide the first group to block quotes about Guy's isolation (p. 46) and habits of confession (p. 47), and the second to the summary and quotes about Guy's identity and self-conception in the army (p. 49). Ask them to report on what they learn about the causes, expressions, and consequences of *acedia*.
2. *Acedia* is a resistance to the demands of God's love. If the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to love and serve God are not clear to us, *acedia* would prevent us from ever finding them out. Thus, seeking to love God through the opportunities and responsibilities in our family, community, work-place, and congregation is a sure way to fight against *acedia's* damage. Like Guy Crouchback, we may not always know exactly what God is calling us to do, and we may not have a vocation to religious life or marriage, but we can become more sensitive to God's call through obedience to God's presence.
Guy's prayer, "Show me what to do and help me to do it," is a simple expression of how our wills intersect with God's. This humble and obedient posture prepares Guy to recognize the opportunities God puts in his path to become an instrument of his suffering love and self-giving mercy for the world.
3. Review Matthew 20:1-8 and the quotation in "Reading from the Trilogy" above. Discuss the diligence of the landowner who seeks workers for his vineyard throughout the day, and brainstorm the possible motivations of the laborers. Why were some "standing idle in the marketplace" later in the day? Did they slothfully resist earlier calls to work? Or were they neglected through no fault of their own? Why might the landowner pay the latecomers for a full day of work? This parable draws our attention more to the generosity of the landowner than the merit of even the best laborers.
Guy relates to those laborers called to work late in the day. He realizes that he is at least partly culpable for this late work: he spent eight years in a slothful stupor after his divorce and several more years seeking distraction in military life while neglecting his own soul. When Guy finally becomes sensitive to opportunities to do God's work, however, he pursues them despite the sacrifices and humiliations they require. Humbly open to God's will for his life, he is able to become an instrument of a love and mercy which far exceed his own. He recognizes that no matter how late his work comes, it will be accepted by God.
4. In Edward Hopper's *Room in New York* (on the cover), the building's column and window partly frame the couple, both putting them on display and isolating them from the viewer. The artist uses bright, warm colors (reds and yellows) for the room interior, which makes it pop forward from the cooler, blue building frame; as a result, the image seem almost unbalanced. The man and the woman are seated facing each other, but they turn toward their individual activities: he leans forward, seemingly completely absorbed by his newspaper; she looks away from him towards the piano. Is she playing a note on the piano? Does he not notice? The figures faces are blurred, "allowing them to serve as types rather than specific individuals," Heidi Hornik notes. Consider how the figures might express a human analogue of *acedia* by resisting the demands of one another's love. The man seems distracted from the woman, while the woman seems slothfully inactive—attentive neither to her music nor her companion.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.