



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

April 1988

## SLOTH

We live in an age of great busyness. And yet we also find that we rarely get done everything we think we ought to get done. When it comes to our spiritual disciplines, we often feel that many important things are getting left out. And we may also feel that this is due to negligence or laziness on our part.

When we fail to do what is required of us through negligence or laziness, then we are guilty of sloth. Examples are no doubt familiar to us: failing to get up early enough in the morning to get our prayers said before having to go off to work or the responsibilities of the day; not giving our attention to our work and so failing to perform it as well as we might; neglecting the devotions to which we have committed ourselves in our rule of life. We are especially prone to omit that which is most difficult for us, usually a daily self-examination (difficult because our sins are unpleasant to look upon) or our time of quiet (difficult because it leaves us alone with God). Sometimes we are negligent about the preparation which we know we ought to do before receiving Holy Communion, because that is something which is easily pushed aside by other concerns seemingly more pressing. We may also be negligent in failing to persevere in some spiritual discipline which we have set ourselves: carrying through our Lenten rule, perhaps, or a program of correcting some bad habit of ours.

Sloth has two forms: negligence and laziness. In the case of negligence, we have failed to properly establish our priorities as Christians. When we are just lazy, our priorities may be correct but we fail to carry them out in how we live.

Negligence is all too familiar to us in our busy lives. Things which are less important crowd out the things which are more important. We fail to achieve a proper balance among our responsibilities, so that the essentials of Christian practice are important enough to get done regularly. We are not meant to spend all our time in prayer and Christian works, for then we would not eat or sleep and our life would cease to be human. On the other hand, we cannot omit the necessary works of Christian life (prayer, fasting, moral discipline, the Eucharist) and expect to live as Christians.

We need to order our lives along proper Christian principles. Christian teaching about the essentials of prayer must be applied to our particular situation in life. This requires the discernment and discretion involved in making up a Rule, which will cover the basic responsibilities of Christian life: attendance at the Eucharist, daily set prayers (the Daily Office), a time for meditation (quiet time), fasting, Sacramental Confession, and so on. How and when each of these is to be fit into one's routine needs to be worked out. Rule is a great help, since it sets us a reasonable pattern. Without it, our prayer tends to become hit or miss, and we ever feel that we are not quite getting it all in.

We must also beware of the temptation opposite that of negligence: scrupulousness. We cannot cure sloth by being scrupulous. We are being scrupulous when we feel guilty about not doing things that there is no reasonable expectation that we should get done. This happens to all of us sometimes. When things go wrong, we blame ourselves, even though there is no way we could have known things would turn out as they did. We feel guilty about things which are not actually our responsibility.

We know that we are guilty only for those sins for which we are responsible: sin is an abuse of our freedom. So when things go wrong through no fault of our own we must be careful not to let our sadness become a feeling of guilt. Our true guilt is due only to our sin: all else is temptation of our adversary.

In the spiritual life, scrupulousness becomes a problem when we feel guilty for not getting done all sorts of things which we might be doing spiritually. In particular, we claim that we are sinners (through negligence) for not getting done many devotions. We feel it a great sin not to say both Morning and Evening Prayer. Or we feel that we are not really measuring up in the Christian life if we go to Communion only on Sundays. Or we feel guilty because we know of others who manage to spend more time in spiritual reading and meditation than we are able to. While all these devotions might all be good in themselves, that does not mean that we are called to partake of them as a matter of obligation. Our situation in life may well preclude our doing them on a regular basis, because of the time and opportunities available to us. There may be no realistic possibility of our doing of them. The problem is that instead of admitting this and ad-

dressing ourselves to that which we can do, we become scrupulous. We become preoccupied with that which we don't do to the detriment of that which we can, and heap upon ourselves the guilt of our omissions.

Scrupulousness is an expression of pride. 'We are saying that somehow we ought to be doing all these things. When we claim that we are guilty, we are claiming that we are condemned by our failure. And that implies that we must save ourselves from condemnation by our deeds. This is the worst form of pride: thinking that we save ourselves by our works rather than being saved by God's free gift of grace. Moreover, we lose the proper focus of our life on God: instead of being a means to God, our devotions become an end in themselves. Thus scrupulousness makes us self-centered rather than God-centered. And that is what pride is all about.

If we are to avoid both scrupulousness and negligence, we must set ourselves a reasonable Rule of life, and then by God's grace try to live it out. The rule must be neither excessive nor too slight. It must make some demands of us without being overwhelming. The aim is to establish for us the priorities of Christian life. Without a Rule, the devotions we wish to do will get crowded out by other things seemingly more pressing. We will feel (rightly) that we are not living as fully Christian a life as we would like. But the Rule is not an end in itself, but a means for us to learn Christian discipline, and so learn to love God. Because a Rule is a means for establishing properly ordered priorities for our life, it is a corrective to spiritual negligence. It is a support in keeping us from neglecting our Christian responsibilities in favor of other things actually less important to us.

The other kind of sloth is due to laziness. Here we know what we need to do, but fail to take the effort necessary to accomplish it. Our priorities are rightly ordered, but we fail to carry them out. Sometimes this is willful: "I'm just not up to saying my prayers tonight; I'll watch television instead." More often, things just happen by default: we end up puttering around during the time we might have said our prayers, and then cannot make it up afterwards.

Such things happen to everyone on occasion. The danger is when they become habitual. The pattern of sloth in the spiritual life is the real danger. Then we must commit ourselves to God's hands for the training of the will. We must submit to His discipline, and seek His grace to carry out what we are too weak to do on our own. We are to give ourselves to Him, that His power may be made perfect in our weakness.

Among other things, this means submitting our feelings to the discipline of our Rule. So often we do things only because we feel like doing them at the moment. (Much of our culture has concluded that this is not only good but necessary.) But Christian life is

based on the will (formed by grace) and not on the whim of the moment. This is inevitable since Christian life includes bearing the cross after Jesus. Moreover, we all find that if we leave it to the whim of the moment, we never get around to things (like prayer) that we know are important for us to do.

To cure spiritual laziness, we need to accept the authority of a Rule of life, and then ask God's grace to fulfill it. We must admit that left to ourselves we will fail. Then day by day, we can ask for the specific grace we need to say our prayers. Our pride may suggest to us that we ought to be able to do this by ourselves -- but in fact we cannot nor should we want to do it by ourselves. When we instead ask His help, we will feel His power working in us every time we say our prayers. What a blessing it will be to draw so near to grace each day -- even if we draw near in weakness rather than in strength.

Our habit of sloth is based on depending on ourselves when we are negligent and lazy. This habitual pride of self-dependence must be replaced by the habit of depending upon God. To do this, we must cultivate thankfulness and love. Our motivation in Christian life -- the reason we do all those things that we do as Christians -- is the love we receive from God. We love because He first loved us. Everything we do is response to Him. So we must learn to be thankful, and to know the extent and power of His love for us. We must properly value His love and His deeds on our behalf. Then sloth will lose its attraction.

For sloth generally attacks us when our love for God has grown cold. Sometimes our hearts wander off from Him into our own devices and desires. Then it is easy to be negligent and lazy in the things pertaining to God. There is also a more subtle temptation. As our love for God matures, it may lose some of its initial passion -- just as the love of a husband and wife may lose some of its passion and overt expression as it deepens over the years. Then we may be tempted to think that we do not love as we once did, and whether we are aware of it or not, we become susceptible to the temptations of sloth. For the initial ardor of our love for God no doubt sustained us in the early stages of Christian discipline. When the ardor subsides (and by grace is transformed into something deeper and more permanent), then our discipline may go with it. Rule will then be a support to us, and we will need the structure more than we did at the first.

But the touchstone remains the love of God. So long as we practice Christian thanksgiving, so long as we trust in the love of God for all that we do, then sloth will not be more than an occasional temptation. In our love for God we will wish to please Him. The more we love the more we will be ready to do everything we can to shape our lives in accordance with His wishes. Our delight will be in His service. And sloth will have no power over us.