

"You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday." (Psalm 91:5–6)

We have reached the mid-point of our lenten journey. The Feast of Annunciation that we just celebrated and the Procession of the Holy Cross that will take place this Sunday remind us that Great Lent is not an isolated spiritual exercise. Its rigors have meaning only within the context of the remembrance of God's salvific acts.

To illustrate, let me relate an incident I observed during my years of study at the seminary. A student in his last semester sang softly in Byzantine chant "Christ is Risen," as he perused the official seminary news on the bulletin board. A first-year student passing by sharply rebuked him, claiming his singing of the Paschal hymn was totally inappropriate in the middle of Lent. The senior's rebuttal was memorable: "If Christ is not risen," he said, "then Great Lent is nonsense."

Although Pascha and other liturgical celebrations during the lenten cycle provide context, encouragement, and direction during the Great Fast, it nevertheless is true that ascetical labors become more rigorous and temptations become more numerous as we draw near the Feast of Feasts. One of the most dangerous temptations that is likely to beset us during the middle of our journey is the spirit of despondency, for which the ancient Greeks used the term "*accidie*." Many of the church fathers connect it to the "demon of noonday" mentioned in Psalm 91: 5–6.

In the first of his *Thirty-eight Sayings* St. Anthony the Great admitted that this particular demon had overcome him. St. John Climacus dedicated the entire thirteenth chapter of his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* to this malady. He called it "tedium of the spirit" and described the condition: "...the paralysis of the soul, a slackness of the mind, a neglect of religious exercise, a hostility to vows taken...It is a voice claiming that God has no mercy and no love for men...it reminds those at prayer of some job to be done, and in its brutish way it searches out any plausible excuse to drag us from prayer..." He adds that it can even tempt us to do good in order to avoid the "one needful thing."

St. John Cassian, who numbered despondency among his "Eight Vices," was more descriptive:

[Despondency] is a wearied or anxious heart. It makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell, and also disdainful and contemptuous of the brothers who live with him or at a slight distance, as being careless and unspiritual. Likewise it renders him slothful and immobile in the face of all the work to be done within the walls of his dwelling. It does not allow him to stay still in his cell or to devote any effort to reading. He groans quite frequently that spending such a long time there is of no profit to him and that he will possess no spiritual fruit for as long as he is attached to "that group of people"....

For the person whom it has begun to conquer...it causes him to be slothful when it comes to any kind of work and to go around constantly to the cells of the

brothers with no other reason than somewhere or somehow to discover something to eat. (*Institutes*, 10th Book)

Clearly, each of these church fathers wrote specifically for monastics. Although most of us are not monastics, we would be shortsighted and naive if we believed that we are not just as susceptible to this danger. To one degree or another, each of us has experienced the spiritual state of despondency.

Accidie manifests itself in numerous ways: spiritual listlessness, negligence, sluggishness, and dryness; the desire to be elsewhere; a laxity or departure from our best laid plans for lenten discipline; a preoccupation with food; constant activity in order to overcome boredom; preoccupation with a past life or with other places; and a desire to drop out of the spiritual fight. *Accidie* causes us to question and doubt the benefit of spiritual discipline and "keeping the course of the fast." We hear ourselves say, "What is the use?"

The Fathers are of one mind when they describe *accidie*: they speak of it as the gravest of dangers. They also prescribe remedies, mostly adjuring us to fight and to avoid flight.

St. John Climacus encourages the reading of Psalms and the use manual labor. St. John Cassian tells us that the Apostle Paul's directive to "aspire to be quiet, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands" will overcome the "itch" for something beyond one's current time and place (1 Thess 4:11). St. Seraphim of Sarov instructs that this malady can be overcome only through "meekness of heart," which he defines as firm and calm conviction and an unchangeable state of mind during the throes of inner turbulence (*Little Russian Philokalia*). And the Lord Himself instructed St. Anthony in the cure for *accidie*: He showed him a simple monk who simply kept the routine of prayer and work, and told St. Anthony to imitate him.

As we progress through our Lenten journey, let us be attentive when the seed of despondency begins to lodge in our hearts. Let us heed the wisdom of the saints on how to be victorious over it. Let us stand firm, calming our minds and our bodies, and fight the noon-day, or mid-point, demon.

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