

The All-Day Devil

Tracing the Roots of the Present-Day Spiritual Crisis

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IN EARLY 2015, I rented my own solo apartment for the first time. Up until that point, I had either lived with my parents or shared a room or house with college classmates, so it seemed like quite an exciting adventure to have living quarters completely to myself. I lived alone for about eighteen months before deciding to attend graduate school, after which I stayed for fourteen months with a friend to save money and help her with her mortgage. Shortly after my program started, I moved again into a series of solo living situations that saw me through the next two years. As of the end of 2019, however, I finally moved back in with my parents, as a transitional arrangement until my wedding in May. Living with others again has given me time to reflect on the experience of living alone, leading to some surprising revelations.

During the past four years while I rented my own places, you see, I found myself struggling consistently with cellphone addiction. When I first moved out, I actually did not even own a smart phone, but even so I caught myself checking my flip phone constantly, rereading old texts, looking at my call history, and otherwise acting as if monitoring my phone would force someone to contact me. After I purchased a smart phone in June 2015, thinking it would be a good tool during an upcoming trip to Europe, my behavior worsened, as I added emails and websites to the list of things I constantly checked. In 2017, with the advent of graduate school where most events are planned and announced through social media, I started Facebook and Instagram accounts and then found myself regularly visiting them. At various

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times, I have also relied almost solely on YouTube for relaxation, scrolling and checking constantly in the hopes of finding new content from the channels I enjoy.

Throughout the entire four-year period, I have spent a fair amount of mental effort trying and failing to figure out why I felt so addicted to a form of entertainment and communication that I don't even really enjoy. Even while compulsively scrolling, I would often notice how bored I was, how dissatisfied with any of the content I found. Sometimes I would put my phone down and move on to other and better things, but after a while, as soon as I felt the need for a break from reading or cooking or sewing or working, etc., I checked my phone again—taking the usual tour through all the apps or sites I follow, as if new and stimulating content might have appeared in the last forty-five minutes.

Spoiler

alert: it seldom had. Yet I continued to check for it—and also continued to ask myself why. Being beholden to technology is, after all, in no way nurturing for one's spiritual life, love for God or neighbor, or even sense of self-worth.

Only recently did an answer about the root cause of such an addiction begin to emerge. I attended a meet-up for young adults in our parish at a local pub, and the topic of the evening's discussion was technology. As we discussed the pros and cons of using technological devices and internet- or data-based applications, such as social media platforms, an antidote to addiction was suggested: high-quality leisure time. The Greek philosophers—and many Catholic thinkers since then—believed that man can only attain virtue, learning, and civilization if he has leisure on his hands. If every aspect of life is consumed by mere work and survival, there is not enough time and mental space to sustain a prayer life, cultivate good friendships, weed out bad habits, nurture creativity, appreciate the finer things, or pursue education. Thus, some leisure time is an important component of man's elevation and even salvation. In his book, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Fr. Jean-Baptiste Chautard suggests that the more active a life is in service of God, the more crucial is some leisure time consecrated to meditation, prayer, and learning.

As we discussed these considerations at the young adult meet-up, it became clear to me that two major obstacles to a successful pursuit of high-quality leisure activities exist in the modern world. First, much of life—especially for single people—is actually consumed by mere work and survival. To use myself as an example, ever since I moved out on my own, I have been solely responsible for every errand, every meal, every chore, and every duty in my life. Besides working to provide my own living, which, with travel to and from workplaces, consumes seven to nine hours of my day, I must also do all my own cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, and home maintenance. None of the latter tasks are particularly onerous, but combined and averaged across the week, they add another three or so hours of work to any given day. Of course, dressing and personal hygiene also take some time, so that once all the necessary activities involved with my mere survival are tallied, I may have spent as much as thirteen hours of the day completing them. Supposing I sleep for eight hours a night, that leaves three free hours, of which at least one is

taken up by a basic prayer routine. In the remaining two or fewer hours, I often feel so worn out by the rest of my daily tasks that the thought of high-quality leisure activities such as further spiritual exercise, reading, studying, socializing with friends, or pursuing various hobbies is downright discouraging. Such things require their own mental engagement after all, so they can look almost impossibly daunting to the tired brain. As a result, the easy, constantly present, mind-numbing entertainments available on a phone suddenly becomes almost inescapably alluring. Fallen man, after all, is usually inclined to take the path of least resistance, especially when tired.

The second (and closely related) challenge is solitude. Modern technology makes it possible to choose an almost eremitic lifestyle. People move out on their own in their early twenties, work entirely or partly from home, make enough money to afford a solo living space, or get married later in life (sometimes all four), which means that days can pass in which they do not see or interact with anyone. And yet, no one quite realizes the extreme isolation in which he or she exists because at the fingertips the cellphone is always waiting, ready to stream content from the entire globe directly into the brain. In fact, I would go so far to say that the best term for the modern lifestyle is *cellular*, both because it is largely defined by the existence of the cellphone, and because it turns us into something analogous to cells—discreet, self-contained units of life. Interestingly, the word ‘cell’ also denotes the isolated rooms in which monks and hermits used to live.

The reason I bring up this connection to hermits relates to the title of my piece—a play on and expansion of the psalmist's phrase: ‘*daemonium meridianum*’ or ‘midday demon’ (Psalm 91, 6). Monastic and eremitic thinkers of the early Church identified this demon as the vice of *acedia* (Greek for *negligence* or *indifference*), which St. Thomas Aquinas equated with the capital sin of sloth and defined as “an oppressive sorrow, which...so weighs upon man's mind, that he wants to do nothing” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 35:1). Hermits in their solitary lives were especially warned to be careful of this vice, which was purported to manifest in idleness or distraction from duties and was prone to attack the soul around midday, when the first tiredness after morning duties and activities often arises. Sustained *acedia* becomes a sort of spiritual depression, where the soul can find no energy or motivation to accomplish its duties of state or pursue eternal goods.

Continued Next Page

