

Clare Wilson/Continued...



This acedia, I think we must admit, sounds strangely like the state of mind which leads modern people to cellphone addiction. It also seems possible to conclude that it somehow relates to a solitary or isolated life. Granted, for the fourth and fifth century Desert Fathers, this was a spiritual affliction that they endured and struggled against as part of the sacrificial nature of their hermit lives. For modern people, it is more a symptom of an even deeper-lying problem. After all, we moderns have not actively chosen to become hermits for God. Instead, a host of factors from political polarization to the technological revolution to massive inflation have forced people into isolation. We do not agree with each other and we fear those with whom we do not agree; our jobs and educations and entertainment have moved online; our currencies do not stretch as far to allow us to socialize or partake in group activities. As a result, we are often alone and thus terrifyingly lonely; moreover, we are often overworked and thus cripplingly exhausted.

Acedia or sloth may well be the midday devil, and certainly we wrestle with it in the modern world, but even more pervasive is a state of exhausted loneliness in which many people exist—the all-day demon which I named in the title of this essay. Moreover, in our day and age, while acedia does take hold of us, perhaps driving our cellphone addictions and moral flaccidity, it does not seem to be the root cause of our bad behavior. Instead modern acedia is itself rooted in permanent loneliness and exhaustion. The former is incompatible with charity; the latter is incompatible with the quality leisure time which leads to a healthy spiritual and cultural life.

So the question, then, is whether tired and lonely modern man is simply doomed to wither away in sloth and idleness and all the other vices and addictions which creep into our lives

under their skirts. Obviously not—God never casts souls into situations in which their salvation is literally impossible. At the same time, the modern conundrum is not easily solved, and doubtless for each person the remedy will look a little different.

Based on my own experience, however, I would now say that one major step toward healing or altogether avoiding the crippling loneliness of modern life is simply not to live alone. I give this advice after learning it the hard way: looking back on the past four years of my life, I realize now that the only portion of that time when I felt fairly peaceful and content was the period I spent rooming with my friend. Even just seeing each other in the evenings for a few minutes when she got home from work was enough to alleviate the sense of isolation that otherwise is so pervasive in our culture. On a practical level, too, the presence of another person in the house meant responsibilities were spread between us. I did the cooking and dishes. She did the cleaning and home maintenance. Overall, I was not as tired and certainly not as lonely.

As it has moved toward the present era, Western culture has more and more prioritized the individual and his or her independence. Historically, however, and even today in many Eastern cultures, such independence has not been prized so fanatically. Children lived with their parents until marriage without shame. Sons partook in the family business and brought their wives home to their parents' house rather than setting up their own establishment. Even children who had religious vocations did not abandon all forms of community but instead substituted a spiritual for a natural family. Through loving and supporting each other, the burdens and sufferings of human life can be spread equally across all shoulders so that none of us end up so exhausted or so lonely. Thereby, also, a host of spiritual dangers can be avoided,

since isolation and emptiness leave the door open for the devil at all hours of day or night.

Of course, I am not implying that no one should ever live alone. Many factors might make such an arrangement necessary—for example, in my own case, I needed to move closer to my university during my graduate program, but also did not want to room with my secular classmates, for fear of becoming complacent about sinful choices they might make in my presence. When we do live alone, then, we must make the resolution to spend more time with good friends and carefully allot our time so that we are not too exhausted to engage in enriching leisure activities. I know that in my own case, when I enjoy a pleasant outing with a friend, I completely forget my phone until well after the event. Moreover, when I am living with a friend or my family, or especially when my fiancé visits, I can leave the phone aside for hours at a time, only taking a moment here and there to answer a text or phone call, or perhaps twenty minutes at the end of the day to check the news. Community itself seems to be a single antidote to the double attack of the all-day demon that haunts our lives.

So the somewhat unexpected concluding advice I have for Catholics trying to resist the poisonous atmosphere of loneliness and exhaustion which surrounds us is to live at home as long as you can! Or at least, look for a good roommate when moving out to a new place. Don't put off marriage for years in favor of career or education. If you must live on your own, visit your family frequently and invite your friends to come over as often as possible; dare I say that even a pet might help stave off soul-crushing loneliness? Aristotle defined man as the social animal, after all, and I believe that God confirmed this definition when He made charity the defining virtue of Christian perfection.

The modern world almost goes so far as to praise overwork and isolation—working from home is touted as highly desirable, after all—but the Catholic soul must be wiser than that. “Bear ye one another's burden's and so you shall fulfill the law of Christ,” wrote St. Paul to the Galatians. Let us therefore strive to create strong, close-knit communities of the Faith in which we may share the duties of virtuous life and the responsibility of fending off the all-day demon now rampant in the world. ■

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