

*ACEDIA* VS. THE JOY OF THE INCARNATION

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## *Introduction*

When St. Thomas Aquinas addressed the notion of *acedia* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the vice had already undergone a millennium and more of diligent criticism among Christians. As Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., relates in his recent book on *The Noonday Devil*, this disorder of the soul was recognized for its gravity by the early desert Fathers, who dedicated many well-spent hours writing of its dangers.<sup>1</sup> Today, the vice is enjoying some revived notoriety among theologians alarmed by its deep-set presence in modern-day culture. While the Fathers saw this state as a “general lack of care” in spiritual matters,<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas would define it more damningly as a “sorrow for spiritual good” (II-II, Q.35. art.1). Strikingly, too, the Angelic Doctor would situate his thesis on the vice of *acedia* in his treatise on the theological virtue of *caritas*, insisting that this sin opposes the greatest virtue in the “joy that springs from charity.”<sup>3</sup> One can understand, then, why spiritual guides of all times have warned against this vice so adamantly, and advised various means for its defeat.

In the essay that follows, we will explore, first of all, the desert Fathers’ summary on the manifestations of this vice so as to unveil its misery and understand well how it might be recognized. Secondly, we will look carefully at St. Thomas’ consideration of the topic and where he situates it in moral theology so as to define it more extensively. Finally, we will reflect upon the “definitive remedy” that the Saint proposes for conquering this evil on the battlefield of the soul. Refreshingly, we will find that the divine answer given to man in his unfortunate state of *acedia* will be God, Himself. We will be reminded that when “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” our broken humanity,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B., *The Noonday Devil : Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times*, (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

with all its depravity, was redeemed—so that “from his fullness we have received grace for grace” (John 1:14,16). *Acedia* will no longer have any rights over man’s soul.

### ***Acedia’s Past-time of Preference: the Menacing of the Monks***

“I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them?”  
(CC 5:3)

The early Fathers of the Church took up the study of *acedia* and the best remedies to combat it with a healthy vigor—which was, in itself, the first and most necessary response to its attacks. St. John Cassius, in his *Institutes of the Coenobi*, writes that this vice is “especially trying to solitaires, and a dangerous and frequent foe to dwellers in the desert.”<sup>4</sup> *Acedia* would be considered by some as the most hazardous vice for the cenobite, driving him by this disgust for the things of God to escape his cell and run from his lofty vocation. The concern is understandable. One can imagine the temptations fit for the desert: the place, as Abbot Nault recalls, “of intimacy with God and spiritual combat” simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> Long days, months, years were spent in a cramped hut (or little more than that), where one was under vows to remain—working, praying, fasting, alone and without human comfort, in heat and in cold. They ate once a day, in the late afternoon, by which time they were quite hungry, but also tired, over-heated or shivering (depending on the climate), dreadfully lonely at times, and perhaps, bored of the mediocrity of it all. The power of the “first love” which had driven them into that land of solitude with God could wane over the passage of time, and the total lack of sensible relief could become an unbearable burden. The “Noonday Devil,” as the Fathers dubbed the vice, came in the middle of the day, or the middle of a life, to feed on the monk’s weariness. With his corporeal

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<sup>4</sup> John Cassius, *The Twelve Books on the Institutes of the Coenobia and the Remedies for the Eight Principle Faults*, Book X, online edition: [http://documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0360-0435,\\_Cassianus,\\_Institutes\\_Of\\_The\\_Coenobia\\_And\\_The\\_Remedies\\_Vol\\_3,\\_EN.pdf](http://documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0360-0435,_Cassianus,_Institutes_Of_The_Coenobia_And_The_Remedies_Vol_3,_EN.pdf), accessed on December 4, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Nault, 21.

passions in such a state of torture, the “demon of *acedia*” was able to play havoc on his spiritual passions: “it [took] advantage of the weakness of the body so as to affect the soul.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Fr. Nault, the manifestations of *acedia*, as the Fathers interpreted them, could be grouped into five main expressions. Monks suffering from this vice would undergo temptations in the form of 1) a certain interior instability, 2) an exaggerated concern for one’s health, 3) an aversion to manual work, 4) a neglect in observance of the rule, and 5) a general discouragement.<sup>7</sup>

One can imagine the reasons for this.

Long, silent days, spent again and again without human consolation could leave one vulnerable to thoughts of flight. “Instability” might shake the soul into fear of the years yet to come of nothing but the same. Seemingly “inspired” plans of visiting a sick neighbor or dejected family-member might threaten one’s perseverance to remain where he knows he’s been called.<sup>8</sup>

Health was also an easy target for *acedia*, especially for the monk who fed himself but once a day, late in the afternoon, on mere herbs and vegetables. He was likely to grow rather tired of the fare, and might worry over diseases that could overtake and kill him alone in the desert. As a result, he could convince himself that a more lavish menu was a necessity in consideration of his weakened strength. What lay beneath, however, was a spirit of selfishness, evading the goods of the soul in favor of those of the body.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 30-37.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, manual labor was not merely tedious; it was sometimes futile—at least in its palpable effects. Often, the monks would weave baskets in order to sell them—but what was not sold, was undone, only to be re-woven on the following day.<sup>10</sup> The work was undertaken, of course, as a simple and peaceful means by which to leave the mind open and free to contemplate the mysteries of God; but this did not alter the monotony of the labor, itself, nor the sense of fruitlessness. One can understand the temptations to run to the side of a sick-bed or administer to a family in need as occupations seemingly more spiritually fecund than basket-weaving!

Once the onset of *acedia* had begun to take hold, more dangerous manifestations might arise. Slackening one's efforts in keeping the rule is an especially perilous move in the journey of a religious soul. The weight of "listlessness," however, can become so heavy that a monk might begin to accede to carelessness, especially in his acts of prayer. Fr. Nault cites Evagrius of Pontus on the laziness in prayer to which a monk troubled with *acedia* might succumb: "The monk afflicted with *acedia* is lazy in prayer and will not even say the words of a prayer. As a sick man cannot carry about a heavy burden, so the person afflicted with *acedia* will not perform a work of God [with diligence]."<sup>11</sup> The unhappy monk lost interest in the things of heaven, as though they were too great a load. He forgot, in a sense, the words of Our Lord, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light." (Mt. 11:28)

Finally, we can understand how *acedia* would show itself, in its final torture of soul, in a general discouragement. Many a surrender to sloth, to "listlessness," to a selfish agony over one's state, as if it were a veritable prison, inhuman and intolerable, if it had not yet sent the monk into flight,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 34. Quoted from Evagrius of Pontus, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues*, in *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 60-65 at 64.

would crush him in a spirit of total dejection. He became, to himself, doomed to a life of misery. He would be reduced to his own unhappiness, which forced him, again, either to attempt flight, or to attempt stabilization. Turned so much in towards himself, blinded to his own blessed state, any choice only left him more dejected and miserable—any choice, of course, except the choice to recognize the holiness to which he had been called. Monastic life is a veritable highway to holiness, and the One Who called him, Who came for him, Who died for him, Who so loved him and watched over his path as a Father his son, was his very God. To search and awaken, to turn his gaze back to the Incarnate Christ would be his redemption, but there was a battle to be fought.

### *A First Love Lost*

Having now reviewed some of the manifestations of this vice as it is most powerfully experienced “in the desert,” we might ask ourselves: how, then, does this vice emerge from a soul, and how do we categorize it in moral theology? In order to consider this, we need to look briefly at the foundations of moral theology, the phenomenon of the human passions, and then the virtue to which *acedia* is most eminently opposed as these subjects are expounded by the great medieval theologian known as the Angelic Doctor.

St. Thomas Aquinas begins his treatise on fundamental moral theology by considering man’s end, which he defines to be happiness—found in “knowing and loving God” (I-II, Q.1, art. 8). Every other question related to man’s actions and choices will stand on whether or not it leads him to or away from this ultimate purpose. The first experience man has of happiness is found in pleasure, which is to say that the reality of pleasure deserves some pause. Pleasure is an object of the passions, the affective experiences of man, the most fundamental of which is that of love.<sup>12</sup> St. Thomas

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<sup>12</sup> Nault, 63.

concludes that “every agent ... does every action from love of some kind” (I-II, Q.28, art. 6). Love is, therefore, fundamentally present in every one of our truly human actions, drawing us towards some object perceived as good for us (I-II, Q.27, art. 4). Love is the appetite of attraction to the good. Joy, then, is the passion which we experience when the good to which we are drawn in love is united to us. In fact, it is joy that is first in the order of *intention*, because, as Thomas says, “the pleasure intended is what causes desire and love” (I-II, Q. 25, art. 2). We rest in that good, and we find joy (I-II, Q. 25, art. 1). We experience this at the level of the sensitive appetites, the human passions.

When, then, we are speaking of the *love of friendship*, we are speaking of the rational appetite or the *will*, whose acts of love, desire and joy are metaphorically relatable with the sensible passions.<sup>13</sup> In friendship, the good to which we are drawn and with whom we seek union is a person for whom we, first of all, *will the good* (II-II, Q. 23, art. 1). We desire their happiness. This alone, however, does not suffice for friendship, as Thomas points out. In order to “rest” in the good of friendship and experience its joy, other characteristics must apply. Reciprocity, whereby each one is willing the good for the other, must be present in friendship. Furthermore, in the love of friendship, there must be something in common, the *communicatio*, as St. Thomas calls it, which allows for a union between the two persons and the fruit of joy that results. Ultimately, it is precisely this type of love which draws man toward and enables him to rest joyfully in his final end.<sup>14</sup>

In Fr. Nault’s book, he points out that St. Thomas would be the first to recognize the virtue of charity as a type of friendship.<sup>15</sup> This very unique insight will be the source of several others the Saint will make with regard to this virtue, as well as its opposing vices, such as *acedia*. Thomas found in

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<sup>13</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “The Passions,” online edition: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11534a.htm>, accessed on December 4, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Nault, 66.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

charity, that is the love between man and God, 1) the love of benevolence (or well-wishing), 2) the reciprocity enacted in friendship, and 3) the “*communicatio*,” or the “something in common” necessary for the union of friendship which results in joy. Now, clearly, the first two characteristics are relatively easy to recognize. God certainly loves me with a love of benevolence. My love for him, as Fr. Nault puts it, is “divided between the love of God for his own sake and the love of God for what he has promised me—namely, participation in divine life—but there is nevertheless a love that is truly the love of benevolence.”<sup>16</sup> Reciprocity is likewise acceptable given the above: God loves me; I love God.<sup>17</sup> As for the question of “something in common,” however, the characteristic is harder to recognize immediately. Thomas, however, finds the answer in God’s gift of beatitude:

Since there is a communication between God and man, inasmuch as he communicates his happiness to us, some kind of friendship must be based on this same communication, of which it is written (1 Corinthians 1:9): ‘God is faithful, by whom you are called unto the fellowship of His Son.’ The love which is based on this communication is charity. (II-II, Q. 23, art. 1)

In other words, God willed that the beatitude to which he called man would be the real participation in His own divine life. Thus, man is enabled by God’s gratuitous grace to share that “something in common” with God, and enjoy a real friendship with Him.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, we can understand that the *gaudium de caritate*, or the joy of charity comes forth from this “interpersonal communion” or friendship that we are able to share with God, Himself, which will be most perfectly fulfilled in the eternal happiness of the Beatific Vision.<sup>19</sup> There are, nonetheless, two joys of charity that can be recognized in the Christian life, as Fr. Nault reminds us: 1) the joy of perfect union with God or perfect participation in His divine life which we will only

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<sup>16</sup> Nault, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Nault, 70.

experience eternally in heaven, and 2) the joy of union with God that we experience on earth when we participate in His life through our prayer, the sacraments, and all means of grace. Having explained, then, the source for the springs of joy found in the love of charity, we can look more carefully at the problem of its direct opponent, *acedia*.

Earlier, we spoke of the passion of love, the attraction to the good, which finds its terminus in the joy of resting in the beloved object. Opposite this passion is that of sadness which is a “rest” in the passion of hatred or the repulsion we feel towards a present evil. Hatred “is a dissonance of the appetite from that which is apprehended as repugnant and hurtful,” and sadness is at the terminus of this passion (I-II, Q. 29, art. 1). Fr. Nault writes simply: “Whereas joy is an affective reaction to a present good, sadness is an affective reaction to a present evil.”<sup>20</sup> Where, then, does *acedia* enter into the scenario? What is the object of the sadness of *acedia*? What evil is present for which the soul steeped in *acedia* is sorrowing over? According to St. Thomas, the evil which threatens that soul is precisely the *bonum divinum* (II-II, Q. 35, art. 3)! The highest, the culmination, the perfection of all goods, the very joy of union with God, is shunned in sadness by the individual who rests in *acedia*.<sup>21</sup>

The situation leaves us in a quandary (as all sin ought to do when exposed to reason and grace). Man’s nature is such that he acts out of love for the good. How, then, can man become sorrowful in the presence of his ultimate good?<sup>22</sup> Fr. Nault explains Thomas’ response to this question as follows:

Man is capable of being sad in the presence of God because, for God’s sake, he must renounce other goods that are carnal, temporal, limited, apparent goods, which on the scale, though, will

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 71.

weigh more than spiritual goods, which may seem much less concrete than some particular good that is immediately attainable.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the greatness to which man is called is recognized as being too arduous and too distant. The problem is still no less deadly. At the heart of it, *acedia* is sadness about God and our call to beatitude. Josef Pieper, in his treatises on the theological virtues, makes several references to this particularly unflattering and extraordinarily deadly human failing. *Acedia*, as Pieper describes it, is “a kind of anxious vertigo that befalls the human individual when he becomes aware of the height to which God has raised him.”<sup>24</sup> He quotes C.S. Lewis when he says that “we may well wish sometimes that ‘God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny.’”<sup>25</sup> We would prefer, sometimes, not to be so much loved. The love that is offered us demands an intense activity of will and being. And this leads us into another aspect of the work of *acedia* in the soul: the problem of spiritual paralysis.

The Angelic Doctor, when explaining the vice of *acedia*, specifies that it is evil “on two counts: both in itself and in point of its effect” (II-II, Q. 35, art. 1). Sorrow over the spiritual good, which we have just outlined, is evil in itself. The inactivity that results from this sorrow is likewise evil—for the sorrow “so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good deeds” (II-II, Q. 35, art. 1). We can see more clearly now how the various manifestations of *acedia* referred to by the desert Fathers came to the surface. Josef Pieper, commenting on this type of weakness, which he calls “a sadness because of the God-given ennobling of human nature,” acknowledges its fruit of inactivity and discouragement; however, he is quick to clarify that the “activity” to which *acedia* is opposed is not mere “industry and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2012), 119.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 192. Quoted from C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York, New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 29.

diligence.”<sup>26</sup> The activity in which St. Thomas would have us engage is a “being in act” in a most excellent way—the being in act of the life of virtue. Beatitude, participation in the life of God, is the most perfect way in which man is “in act”; and a participation in that beatitude, as we mentioned earlier, is through the activities of prayer, the sacraments and all means of grace (charity and the virtues). Fr. Nault explains how, for St. Thomas, “human acts are a preparation, and even more, an anticipation: we already see God in human activity ... The activity of man—particularly the activity of the saints—reveals a true revelation of God’s face.”<sup>27</sup> Keeping this in mind, we can understand, once again, the tremendous hazard of a vice which opposes the activity of beatitude.

We can look at this more deeply still. The activity of the virtue of charity, which is the life of beatitude, can also be described as the activity of the Holy Spirit, since it is He who confers the grace of friendship between God and man (II-II, Q. 24, art. 2). To be “in act” in the virtue of charity, one must allow the Holy Spirit to perform His work within the soul. Thus, the paralysis of activity caused by *acedia* stands in the way of the Holy Spirit, blocking the soul from the activity of charity.<sup>28</sup>

With all of these elements laid down, one can see the tremendous danger of this vice which is so deeply “theological”: *acedia* inhibits us where our life with God is most profound, where our union with Him would otherwise be perfected.

### ***The Incarnation: Remedy of Mercy***

Given the unfathomable hazard of the vice and the prospect of spiritual paralysis that it engenders, it would seem that a very powerful remedy must be proposed for its defeat. The desert

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>27</sup> Nault, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 80.

Fathers and many spiritual writers offered weapons for battle whose practical efficacy has stood the test of time: “tears” and remorse, prayer and work (the performance of one’s duty), meditation on one’s ever-approaching death, and stalwart perseverance are commanding observances in the struggle against the enemy of acedia. Apparently, however, Fr. Nault discovered the most adequate remedy not in the practical suggestions of spiritual writers, but in St. Thomas’ work, *Summa contra Gentiles*, wherein he considers the appropriateness of the Incarnation. The Angelic Doctor will suggest three theses that will help man to recognize not only a reason to hope, but furthermore, a reason to rejoice!<sup>29</sup>

First of all, the Saint considered the Incarnation of God as “the most efficacious assistance to man in his striving for beatitude.”<sup>30</sup> For, one might ask, how can finite man, with his finite intelligence, attain the fullness of God, to become like Him, divinized, beatified in union with Him? God chose to become man so that man might attain the end for which he was created.<sup>31</sup> Saint Thomas states his proposal clearly as he considers the problem engendered by man’s recognition of his own weakness:

Thus, in the search for beatitude, a man would grow cold, held back by very desperation [*acedia*]. But the fact that God was willing to unite human nature to Himself personally points out to men with greatest clarity that man can be united to God by intellect, and see Him immediately.<sup>32</sup>

The Saint is reminding the Christian that, now that God has entered into our human nature, that same human nature has been elevated and made capable of a divine perfection, able to “see God.”

The mind of man can find its rest in perfect truth, which frees him and fills him with joy (John 8:32).

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<sup>29</sup> Nault, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 85. Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*.

Secondly, when man is faced with what seems to be the insatiability of his thirst for an Infinite Good, and so is tempted to lower himself, seeking pleasure in what Aquinas calls an “animal beatitude,” the Incarnation offers him the possibility of once again embracing his dignity as “son of God.” God, Himself, has become “like us in all things but sin,” and in so doing, has raised man to an incomprehensible dignity (Heb. 4:15).<sup>33</sup> Man is no longer enslaved to his passions, but is free to enjoy his full inheritance as a child of God (Rom. 8:17).

Finally, St. Thomas reminds us that “the Incarnation leads man to love God *better* (emphasis added).”<sup>34</sup> Man is given the opportunity to feel God’s mercy and closeness, His willingness to take upon Himself man’s very own life, his weakness, his limitations—and so be man’s friend. Man knows that he is loved, and this engenders in him a response of love, which in turn, engenders *joy*! “God’s love for men could be demonstrated to man in no way more effective than this: He willed to be united to man in person.”<sup>35</sup> In this light, we can reflect on the words of Our Lord from the Gospel of St. John, when He tells His disciples that “as the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love” (John 15:9). And what is the fruit of this “remaining”? *JOY*! “I have told you this that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

### ***In Conclusion***

Coenobitic fathers, so distant, so swept away from the world, remained in the desert, laying upon the Rock of Christ the first layers for the edifice of the Christian spiritual life. Perhaps the most common and deadly threat to haunt them was this despicable vice of *acedia*. Where were they to find their “life,” their freedom, their *joy*? It is no wonder that perseverance in the work for which they were

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

called into this radical state was most imperative in the will of the monk. Prayer and meditation on the Scriptures—that is, the Word of God Who became Flesh—had to be lived ceaselessly, for the thief of weakness was always knocking at the door.

Today, on account of their witness and because of the wisdom and insight of our beloved Doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, we are blessed with so rich a study and understanding regarding both the evil of this vice and the extraordinary goodness to which it is opposed. We can, without any hesitation, always rejoice! Christ has become man, and He has chosen to welcome us into His very own Life, His own Goodness, the *bonum divinum*. We can become like Him, divinized and perfectly fulfilled in the beatitude to which we have been called. In the Incarnation, we can rest assured: *acedia* has met its match.

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