
ABBAS GENERALIS

Prot. N° 01/AG/07

THE SADNESS CORRODING OUR DESIRE FOR GOD

(Circular letter to the members of the Order)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During recent months after my cerebral hemorrhage, I have had both the time and the opportunity to read and ponder, experience and combat, analyse and clarify a classic vice familiar to us all, namely *acedia*. In this year's circular letter, I would like to share my reflections with you, because it strikes me that this is a typically monastic evil, which is prevalent under different forms in today's world because of certain excesses or defects of our culture.

I hasten to say that it is not easy to speak about *acedia* because of its complexity, which is much greater than that of gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness or pride. So it is important to clarify our point of view. There are at least four different opinions as to the fact and experience of *acedia*, depending on the approach one takes:

- An internist could diagnose an organic loss of energy.
- A psychologist would speak about depressive symptoms due either to an inner endogenous factor or to a traumatic situation.
- A moralist will think that it could be a sin, the gravity of which will depend on the subject's full awareness and deliberate will.
- A spiritual companion will perhaps discern whether it is a question of one of the eight *logismoi*, which attack those who search for God with all the strength of their heart.

All of these people are dealing with the same phenomenon and each one gives their opinion from their particular point of view. All are partly right, which leads us to the fact that discernment in a particular case requires taking into account all the aspects mentioned. In a culture that stresses psychology, like ours does, it might be necessary to remember that there is an objective reality which is evil, hostile, intelligent and personal. We call it the devil, Satan.

In the present letter I am talking about spirituality understood as a living, incarnate faith. As a result, I look on *acedia* as an evil which interferes, blocks and misguides us in our search and discovery of God. *Acedia* goes against perseverance in Christian and monastic life. It is very sad to say so, but more than one departure from consecrated life has been unconsciously caused by this corroding vice.

I am also talking in a context characterized by spiritual combat and monastic asceticism leading to purity of heart in our pilgrim's progress toward our true fatherland in the heart of the Father.

I will begin by identifying with the traditional reference to "capital vices and sins" in general and to *acedia* in particular. Then I will try to underline several aspects of this tradition, perhaps enriching it so as to hand it on, above all to the younger generation.

1. Our Received Tradition

1.1. The Capital Sins

The monks of the Egyptian deserts teach us that there are disordered tendencies which become the source of other similar inclinations. This puts us at the beginnings of the traditional teaching about the “capital sins.”

Evagrius Ponticus (+399) was the first to systematize this doctrine. He speaks of eight evil thoughts or tendencies which the hermit will be forced to confront and overcome. John Cassian (+425) translated this teaching into the cenobitical context of Western Europe.

We are all familiar with the history of this classification of the vices and the capital sins, starting with the *Institutes* of Cassian. Saint Gregory the Great (+604) played a fundamental role in this evolution. He follows Cassian, but with some adjustments of his own: he changed the order of the vices, so that acedia disappeared from the list, even though some of its expressions reappear as manifestations of sadness. He adds envy to the list, but removes pride, since he considers it to be the root and the beginning of all sins. In this he follows the Sapiential Books as expressed in the Latin Vulgate: *Initium omnis peccati est superbia* (“The beginning of all sin is pride.” Cf. Sir 10:13). Later, vainglory and pride are united into one, which brings us to the traditional list of seven capital sins and is the classical formulation in the West since the 13th century. John Climacus (+650) and John Damascene (+749) communicate this teaching to the Eastern Churches.

The following table helps to clarify what has just been said. I ask you forgiveness for transcribing the Greek and for using Latin. Those who are unfamiliar with them will understand what I mean.

Evagrius Ponticus -Hoi genikotatoi logismòì (<i>Practicós</i> 6-14)	John Cassian -Eight spirits or vices (<i>Institutes</i> 6-12; <i>Conferences</i> 5)	Gregory the Great -Seven capital sins (<i>Moralia in Job</i> 31)
- <i>Gastrimargía</i>	- <i>Gastrimargía: ventris ingluvies (gluttony)</i>	- <i>ventris ingluvies</i>
		- <i>Envy</i>
- <i>Porneia</i>	- <i>Fornicatio</i>	- <i>Luxuria</i>
- <i>Philargiría</i>	- <i>Philargiría: amor pecuniae (avarice)</i>	- <i>Avarice</i>
- <i>Lype</i>	- <i>Ira</i>	- <i>Anger</i>
- <i>Orge</i>	- <i>Tristitia</i>	- <i>Tristitia (+ aspects of acedia)</i>
- <i>Akedía</i>	- <i>Acedia: anxietas, taedium cordis, otiositas</i>	
- <i>Kenodoxía</i>	- <i>Cenodoxia: iactantia, vana gloria</i>	
- <i>Hyperephanía</i>	- <i>Superbia</i>	- <i>Superbia</i>

The differences between the eastern and western lists are insignificant. Actually, envy is a kind of sadness over the fact that something good belongs to someone else. Acedia became a part of sadness and its aspect of laziness or unhealthy idleness was stressed. To sum up, we can say that the viewpoint of the Latin writers is more dogmatic and moral, while that of Eastern spiritual writers is principally practical, on the level of the spiritual life.

Some medieval theologians explained this teaching in a masterful way, among them: Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, of whom the last mentioned deserves special attention.

Several centuries later, John of the Cross in his work on *The Dark Night* masterfully describes how these vices and sins appear in the persons who have grown in the spiritual life and begin to suffer the “passive night of the senses.” Saint Ignatius of Loyola, writing in his *Spiritual Exercises*, recommends that the capital sins be described to those who practice the *Exercises*, so that they can meditate on them. Saint Francis de Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, offers an interesting practical exposition of the matter.

And the history continues. We can sum it up with a text from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 1866): *Vices can be classified according to the virtues they oppose, or also be linked to the capital sins which Christian experience has distinguished, following St. John Cassian and St. Gregory the Great. They are called “capital” because they engender other sins, other vices. They are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth or acedia.*

Let me say one more word in order to continue by opening up a road toward a new future. Contemporary psychology has studied in depth the motivation and expressions of these vices. Sociology has shown us that they often take social forms conditioned by the culture, to the point that they are even encouraged and thought of as respectable, as in the pride hidden behind self-esteem, or anger disguised as assertiveness. We can also ask about the criteria for judging these vices as capital. Are there not other sins which are often more fundamental and generate other evils? One could also wonder whether these capital sins also correspond in the same way to disordered tendencies of women, or are as easily applicable to other cultures or religions.

1.2. The Evil of Acedia

Let us attempt to sketch an overall global vision of the history of acedia. I am only interested in a few spiritual masters, who laid the foundations on which we build, even today.

The great doctor of acedia is **Evagrius Ponticus**. His theories express his gift of conceptualising his lived experience and of putting it into words. Evagrius presents the different manifestations of acedia with penetrating zeal. We are all familiar with these texts and it is not necessary to quote them here, since they have been studied in recent years with penetrating clarity.

For our purposes, it is enough to point out several key aspects of Evagrius’ teaching. Acedia is a complex mixture of thought and emotion. It feeds simultaneously on both the irascible and the concupiscible appetites, and usually stirs up all the other vices. This explains why its manifestations can appear to be extremely contradictory: it can cause both laziness and activism, paralysis and frenzy, frustration and aggressivity, escape from what is good and dedication to evil. The result can be a sort of inner disintegration.

Sadness, or self-pity, is the twin sister of acedia. They are similar in some respects, but not identical. The sad person finds relief more easily, whereas the one besieged by acedia is trapped.

Sadness is a temporary, part-time experience, but acedia is global and permanent. In this sense it is opposed to human nature.

The chief symptoms of this devilish “scourge that lays waste at noon” are inner instability and the need for change (with wandering fantasies of a better place), excessive care of one’s own health (with special emphasis on one’s food), escape from manual work (with laziness and inactivity), uncontrolled activism (under the appearance of charity), neglect of the monastic practices (reducing observance to a minimum), indiscreet zeal in a few ascetic exercises (with extreme criticism of one’s neighbor), generalized discouragement (with the beginnings of a depression).

Since acedia stirs up all the other vices, it cannot be cured by a single contrary virtue. What is needed is a varied, multi-layered therapy: tears of compunction (and non-verbal cries for saving help); recourse to God’s Word (to oppose the inroads of vice); meditation on death (to evaluate the present in the light of eternity); patient, persevering resistance (avoiding little compensations and putting one’s trust in the Lord). It is easy to see that all these remedies or weapons lead to an encounter with God. In the last analysis, acedia is a flight from God and is only cured by the patient, practical search for his Face.

John Cassian, when writing about acedia, is dependent on Evagrius, whose teachings he spread to the West. He follows Evagrius’ doctrine, systematizes it and simplifies its characteristics. He uses the Greek name and translates it as boredom and anxiety of heart. He thus strengthens the relationship between sadness and acedia, so that the sisters become twins or even “clones.” He puts too much emphasis on a single symptom, laziness, thus stressing the need for the medicine of manual work. The result of his treatment of the subject is that he innocently lets the devilish noontime scourge hide itself – or try to – for ever and ever.

However, Cassian’s teaching on acedia, or boredom, has some original features. The most interesting one concerns the “sons and daughters of acedia,” namely idleness, sleepiness, inappropriateness, unrest, wanderlust, instability of spirit and body, verbosity and curiosity.

The importance of Cassian in relation to acedia is twofold. Thanks to him, the asceticism of the Egyptian deserts was embodied in western monasticism in a way which was cenobitical and culturally suitable. And thanks to his efforts in systemizing the teaching he received, its influence was felt for many future generations.

Saint Gregory the Great is an heir of this tradition. His teaching was a landmark, as we mentioned before, because acedia disappears from his list of capital vices, although some of its elements are integrated into the vice of sadness, or self-centred sorrow. Moreover, Gregory tells us that the malice of acedia comes from its being sorrow for God’s own goodness and for all goods related to this eternal good. In other words, the judgement of reason has been perverted: good is perceived as evil and evil as good.

Saint Benedict, in his Rule, only mentions acedia once: in Chapter 48 dedicated to manual work and reading. This simple fact makes us realize how dependent Benedict is on Cassian. The chapter begins with these words:

Idleness is the soul’s enemy, so therefore at determined times the brothers ought to be occupied with manual labor, and again at determined hours in lectio divina (RB 48, 1).

We can see that the vice to be struggled against is idleness or laziness. The weapon we are offered is the alternation between work and lectio divina. Later in this chapter Benedict will tell us that:

*During the days of Lent.... one or two seniors should surely be assigned to patrol the monastery at the times when the brothers are free for lectio. They should be on the lookout for the **bored** brother who gives himself over to **frivolity** or gossip and is not serious about*

lectio. Not only is he useless to himself, but he leads others astray as well. If such a one be found out – perish the thought! – let him be admonished once and again a second time. If he does not improve, he should undergo the regular discipline in such a way that others will be afraid. Nor should the brothers fraternize at improper times.

*Just so, on Sunday all should be free for lectio, except for those who are assigned to various tasks. But if someone is so negligent and **slothful** that he will not or cannot meditate or read, he should be assigned some work to keep him busy.*

*As for sick or fragile brothers, they should be assigned a work or craft so that they will not be **idle**, yet not so crushed by heavy labor that they flee. The abbot must remain aware of their weakness. (RB 48, 14-25)*

In the above text, Saint Benedict contemplates three different situations. The first one takes place during Lent, which Benedict thinks of as a paradigm for the whole life of the monk (RB 49, 1). The punishment to be received by the bored brother shows us that his experience is culpable, not simply one of laziness or weakness. It is more a question of lack of interest, disgust for spiritual realities, whereas he has plenty of energy and interest in giving himself over to things that are useless for his monastic journey.

The second situation takes place on Sundays, when there is less time for work and more for reading and meditation. If anyone should be negligent or slothful, whether wilfully or not, he should be given some work to do, to keep him from indulging in his laziness. The purpose of this work is more ascetical and therapeutic than practical and productive. We should be aware that the brother's negligence, lack of attention or poor application can be caused by a lack of motivated desire. In Benedict's mind, the brother who is bored is also lazy. He is blocking the consoling action of *the Holy Spirit* and is not waiting Easter *with the joy of spiritual desire!* (RB 49, 6-7).

In the third situation, where Benedict treats of the sick and weak brothers who can easily fall prey to laziness, he recommends some light work appropriate to their strength.

There is another series of texts in the Rule about sadness, self-pity, or sorrow. The cellarer is incisively reminded not to *scandalize* the brothers so that, in more general terms, *no one will be upset or vexed in the house of God* (RB 31, 6-7; 18-19). The weaker brothers should be given help in their service in the kitchen, *so that they do not lose heart in this work*, because *merit is increased and love built up* in this type of service (RB 35, 1-3). The Rule says something similar concerning work in the fields. *They should not be sad*, because that would keep them from being *true monks* and from imitating the Fathers and the Apostles, who worked with their hands! (RB 48, 7-9). These three texts point to the context of work as the place where sadness can develop, which is often the prelude to acedia. In such a case, the sickness nullifies the remedy and work fails as a medicine against laziness.

On the other hand, among the *tools of the spiritual craft* we find the following ones: *do not indulge in excessive sleep,... do not be a loafer,... fear Judgment Day,... long for eternal life with the desire of the Spirit,... keep your eye on death every day,... listen intently to holy readings,... do not act out of envy,... never despair of God's mercy* (RB 4). Don't these good works refer somehow to the noontime scourge of acedia?

Benedict's concept of acedia is fairly close to that of John Cassian in his *Institutes*, where acedia, laziness and sadness are always found together and manual work is the generic medicine that cures them. But the Rule adds two points that are both original and important. It presents acedia as an obstacle to *lectio divina*, through which the monk or nun tends toward God. Acedia chills the palate and prevents savouring the taste of heavenly realities, even the sweetness of God himself. The second point is the great Benedictine medicine against acedia, namely "the monastic enclosure and stability in the community"! (RB 4, 78).

The twelfth century Cistercians were faithful witnesses to this teaching of their patriarch Benedict, without prejudice to their own originality. Here is what Aelred of Rievaulx says: *Idleness is indeed the enemy of the soul, the enemy which more than all others the recluse must be on her guard against. It is the mother of all evils, it engenders passion, fosters the urge to roam, and nourishes vice; it nurtures spiritual weariness and encourages melancholy. It is idleness that sows evil thoughts in the mind, that kindles and inflames illicit desires, that breeds distaste for quiet and disgust for the cell. Never then let the evil spirit find you idle. But as in this life we are all prey to inconstancy, as we never remain long in the same state of mind, we will best avoid idleness by the alternation of exercises and safeguard our peace by varying our occupations* (Rule for a Recluse 9. Cf. Isaac of Stella, Sermon 14, 1-4).

Saint Thomas Aquinas, who knew the tradition that had gone before him very well, treats acedia in a twofold perspective in his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II,35), where the vice is rendered in English as “spiritual apathy” or “sloth”. In the first place, he considers acedia as *a kind of oppressive sorrow which so depresses a man that he wants to do nothing. Thus things that are acid are also cold*. More specifically, acedia is one of the sins against internal acts of love, that is, it is *to be sorrowful about the divine good, which charity rejoices in*. The result of this sorrow is a *sluggishness to act*, which paralyzes the thrust toward God and toward the things of God. As we can see, the seriousness of acedia consists in its opposition to the queen of the theological virtues, charity, which is friendship of humans with their God. We also dare to say that Saint Thomas teaches us to defend our own spiritual joy and to foster that of other people according to our possibilities.

Taking Saint Gregory as his guiding principle, Thomas then attempts to harmonize the different known lists of sins derived from acedia. Thus he speaks of desperation (mistrust of the help of grace to overcome evil), pusillanimity (cowardice of heart in struggling against temptation), torpidity (sluggishness in observing the Commandments, the precepts of the Church and the duties of one’s state of life), spitefulness (indignation directed against the virtuous and against one’s spiritual director), malice (hate for the goods of the Spirit), straying of the mind after illicit things (instability, loquaciousness and idle curiosity).

Acedia occupies a central place in the moral teaching of Saint Thomas as a whole. This vice attacks the dynamics of action, that is, love. In fact acedia goes against the desire for God and, above all, the joy that comes from union with him.

We can add one more word about this self-centred sorrow, which will help us understand acedia better. According to Saint Thomas, the object of such self-pity is one’s own unfortunate situation, but it can happen that someone else’s good fortune is taken as one’s own misfortune. In this sense we can be sorrowful about the good of someone else, since it lessens our own glory or excellence. This is what we call *envy* (ST II-II, 36, 1).

All of this helps us understand why acedia is associated with sorrow, laziness or idleness, and envy. More succinctly, acedia:

-Is principally a theological form of self-pity and envy. This is the thrust followed by Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Thomas. For them, laziness or idleness is a result of acedia.

-Secondarily and in practice, it is a type of laziness related to divine things. This is the line taken by many spiritual and monastic authors who write on a more practical level and judge acedia by its concrete daily results.

For many centuries, acedia was almost missing from the vocabulary used by spiritual authors, which does not mean that it did not exist in practice. **Saint Ignatius of Loyola** does not use the word, but he is well acquainted with the evil involved. In his Rules for spiritual discernment (Spir.Ex. 313-336), Ignatius presents the work of divine grace under the name of “consolation” and its opposite as “desolation.” Judging from the description he makes of the latter, it is easy to conclude that he is dealing with acedia. Here is what he says:

I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one’s soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord. (Spir.Ex. 316)

I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. (Spir.Ex., 317)

It is characteristic of God and His Angels, when they act upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy, and to banish all the sadness and disturbances which are caused by the enemy. It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasoning, subtleties, and continual deceptions. (Spir.Ex. 329)

Once the evil is identified, Ignatius offers the remedy: don’t make changes, keep going, resist the evil by means of its opposites, be patient. Then he explains the possible causes of the problem: voluntary spiritual laziness, a trial which can help self-knowledge, a lesson for learning that all spiritual good is a divine grace (Spir.Ex., 318-322). At the end of his Exercises, Saint Ignatius offers an antivenin against acedia, namely, “Contemplation to arrive at Love”. This contemplation is an exercise for persevering in what is good, a way to preserve and to stimulate a life of joy and consolation in charity (Spir.Ex., 230-237).

In the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** we read that *acedia or spiritual sloth goes so far as to refuse the joy that comes from God and to be repelled by divine goodness* (2094). Even more concretely, in the context of temptation against prayer it also says that *acedia is understood as a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart* (2733). It is easy for us to see in these two texts the influence of the Angelic Doctor and of the tradition leading up to him.

2. A Tradition Offered

A living tradition is one which renews itself. I am not sure if what I will now say is new, but I can assure you that it is the fruit of living. If it enlightens and stimulates, it has fulfilled its purpose.

2.1 Meaning of the Words

Acedia is a Greek word with the basic meaning of carelessness, negligence or lack of interest. However, our interest here is with the Latin term used to translate it, namely, *taedium* (boredom). Webster’s dictionary defines *tedium* as “the quality or state of being wearisome, tiresome or dull”. But there is also the word used in the spiritual literature of almost all the western languages, namely, *acedia*, the meaning of which is basically that of apathy (as opposed to diligence) and boredom (as opposed to joy).

In Latin, there is a family of words related to acedia, such as *acer* (sharp, bitter), *acetum* (vinegar), and *acerbum* (harsh) which, taken figuratively, makes us think that the persons suffering from

acedia have received a high dose of acidity, making them to be like vinegar. Just as when sweet wine spoils it becomes acid, so the joy of charity, when it sours, becomes acedia.

All this makes us able to say that the person with the vice of acedia has become acidulous or acerbic in relation to his or her religion or spiritual life. Going a step further in this home-grown etymology, and since acidity is related to coldness (as we saw in Saint Thomas), acedia makes us tepid, because it chills the fervour of charity.

The Japanese language follows a more direct course when it comes to translating the word, “acedia.” It uses the term, “*mu-ki-ryoku*,” that is: *mu* (lack), *ki* (energy), *ryoku* (strength, power). It can also be translated as *iya-ki*, which is *iya* (to stuff oneself, become tired, loath) and *ki* (energy). Those who know the importance of the word, *ki*, in oriental cultures are aware of the terrible tragedy of acedia. To have it is to be tired, de-energized and emasculated: full of hatred for any harmony with God, with others and with the universe.

2.2. Biblical Witnesses

Let us look now at two biblical texts related to our theme. Perhaps they can continue to enlighten us in our search for a better understanding of this malignantly impassioned thought pattern which wreaks havoc in monasteries and elsewhere.

The first text is taken from the Sapiential Books, specifically from the book of Wisdom, which was originally written in Greek. There we read: *God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it* (Wisdom 2:23-24). This text is rich in theology. The inspired author is telling us that the devil was envious of our being the image of God and therefore fights against us. But what is envy? It is sorrow for another person's good. Satan does not accept our inner dignity and is at war against the immense good of our union with God. Satan's followers, *who belong to his company*, experience the same envy and the identical spiritual death, which explains why *the world* cannot leave the children of God in peace. There will always be “Cains” who assassinate Abel; “Herods” who become sad and then violent when they receive the good news; “Isariots” who, in their cold logic, scold Mary of Bethany for her outpouring of love.

The second text is from the Psalms. The Latin version by Saint Jerome, the Vulgate, says: *Dormitavit anima mea prae taedio* (literally, “My soul slept from boredom”: Ps.118/119:28). We should note that the Greek word in the Septuagint, which Jerome translates as *taedio* (tedium, or boredom) is our word, “*acedia*.” What is the Hebrew word which underlies the Greek? It is *tugah*: sorrow, affliction. Modern English translations vary and use renderings such as: weeps in bitter pain; melts away for grief, for sorrow, for heaviness; pines away with grief. We can see from this text that Saints Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas were not mistaken. We can add that Cassian also associates acedia with sleep and Saint Benedict warns us: *Do not indulge in excessive sleep!* (RB 4, 37).

However, there is another way to understand this inspired word. The original Hebrew text can also be translated as: *My desire (nefesh) melts from sorrow*. In other words, self-pity oppresses my deepest desire to rush towards God. We know how the lazy man – a frequent personage in the book of Proverbs – is dysfunctional because his desire is closed in on himself and leads him to death row (Cf. Prov 21:25).

2.3. Combating Disordered Desires

Spiritual warfare began immediately after the arrival of original sin and will continue until the end of time: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he*

will strike your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen 3:15). Saint Paul places this ongoing combat at the heart of the mystery of salvation (Col 2:15; Eph 6:11-12; I Cor 15:24-26) and presents the appropriate spiritual weapons (Eph 6:11-17; I Thes 5:8; Cf. I Pet 5:8-9).

As monks, we have gladly received this heritage, so much so that the expressions, “fight for Christ” and “soldiers of Christ,” are applied to monastic life from its very beginning. Our Cistercian Fathers knew this very well. Saint Bernard recalls the Pauline text, “I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing” (I Cor 9:26) and exclaims: *This is truly the trumpet call. These are the words of a valiant captain fighting courageously* (All Saints 2, 2).

Human desires, since they show what we lack, are rooted in our feelings. In other words, desires move our affectivity and the latter, in its turn, stirs up our passionate thoughts. To close the circle, the thoughts can give rise to desires. Thus a passionate thought of anger, caused by a frustrated desire, can give birth to a desire for revenge... and behold we are at war!

That is why we can say that the classic battle against passionate thoughts, or *logismoi*, is basically a fight against disordered desires at the root of such thoughts, which give to the latter their high charge of passion. The great masters of the spiritual craft have referred to such desires in different ways as: spirits, demons, thoughts, afflictions, affections, passions, attachments, appetites, wills, vices, capital sins. These masters have taught us to fight them and kill them in a special combat using mortification, self-denial and humility. In the last analysis, it is a question of stripping off the old man so as to put on the new man with the help of divine grace.

Life and death are both found on the battlefield: life in God and death far from him. To put it another way, we have on the one hand a deep existential desire for God, which unifies us when we remember him and thus lets us achieve our human personhood. The movements of heart and mind which spring from this deepest of desires remain in relation with the Lord. At the other end of the battlefield is personal disintegration when we forget God. Near this end of the field is the cause of all our evils, namely, the desires, loves and thoughts defined by evil objects or twisted purposes. Whenever these passionate desires and thoughts invade us, they overshadow the memory of God, our interior life begins to disintegrate, and our deepest existential desire for God is weakened.

When we come to identify the main disordered desires, we find ourselves in the presence of the capital sins or vices:

- Disordered desires for food: *gluttony*.
- Disordered desires for sexual pleasure: *lust*.
- Disordered desires for material goods: *greed*.
- Unfulfilled desires and an active reaction against this frustration: *anger*.
- Weakened desire for God or inertia concerning spiritual realities: *acedia*.
- Disordered desires to appear as outstanding: *vainglory*.
- Disordered desires for one's own superiority: *pride*.

These desires usually follow a process in crescendo, which is relatively easy to recognize. It is not necessary to point out that the sooner we enter into combat with this process, the greater will be the chances of our victory. The battle will be along the following lines:

- Awakening of desires and the feelings connected with them.
- Dialogue with the resulting thoughts.
- Fascination with the possibility of following them and fear of giving in to them.
- Combat to throw them out or else coming to terms with the enemy.
- Defeat or victory in their regard.
- Captivity in case of defeat or freedom as the fruit of victory.

Let us examine three important general principles to keep in mind before entering into combat. The first and most important one is always to be aware that we are not our desires. The only desire we can identify with is the deepest one which constitutes us as persons, launches us toward the supreme Other and opens us to others in order to fulfil our deepest personhood. In the second place, these secondary desires come and go, just like the feelings and thoughts to which they give rise. Finally, if we do not feed them with additional desires, feelings or thoughts, they will dissipate like soap bubbles.

In a similar way, it is useful to know the four traditional techniques to fight against these disordered desires.

-The **first** one is to attack the desires as soon as they are recognized. This can be done by centering one's attention in something different or opposed to the object of the desire. This practice is often useful and advisable when it is a question of desires that give rise to repetitive or compulsive thoughts.

-The **second** way is to replace the disordered desire with the desire for God and his Kingdom. This is the most adequate solution for self-destructive desires and thoughts which lead to states of depression.

-The **third** way consists in simply observing attentively the development of the desire, the feelings which it brings and the resulting thoughts. This is how they will disappear without becoming strong enough to take us captive. In this case, we should remember that feeling is not consenting.

-And the **fourth** way is to dedicate oneself freely and generously to some good work of service which is useful to one's neighbor.

Let us conclude by saying that when these disordered desires become vices – that is, habitual forms of doing evil – they must be uprooted by steady, persevering practice of the opposite virtues: self-control, chastity, generosity, patience, diligence, modesty, humility and charity.

Despite all that has been said, one more word is called for concerning the fight against acedia. Since this type of inertia concerns God and the means which lead to him, it is hard to fight it just with virtues, distractions, charitable service or vigilance. Evagrius Ponticus, the great writer on acedia, and with him all the great spiritual masters of East and West, tell us with one voice: *hypomone, hypomone, hypomone!*, that is, "Patience and perseverance."

The time of temptation is not the time to leave one's cell, devising plausible pretexts. Rather, stand there firmly and be patient (hypomone). Bravely take all that the demon brings upon you, but above all face up to the demon of acedia who is the most grievous of all and who on this account will effect the greatest purification of soul. Indeed to flee and to shun such conflicts schools the spirit in awkwardness, cowardice and fear (Practicós 28).

Jesus himself almost makes this virtue of patience an absolute requirement for eternal salvation: *By your endurance (hypomone) you will gain your souls.* (Lk 21:19). I also make my own the voice of the Abbot of Clairvaux, whose exhortation, although coming out of a different context from our own, strikes me as most opportune:

Nothing now remains, dear friends, but for me to encourage you to continue as you have begun. Is it not only by perseverance that people earn their glory, and virtues, their reward? Clearly without it there can be no victory for the soldier or honour for the victor. It is the

backbone of character, and the crown of virtue; it is the mother of merits and mediator of rewards. It is the sister of patience, the daughter of endurance, the friend of peace, the link of friendship, the bond of concord, and the bulwark of holiness. Take away perseverance, and service will be without reward, kindness without favour, and valour without renown. It is not the person who begins, but the one who perseveres unto the end that shall be saved. (Letter 129:2 = B. S. James: n.131:2).

To conclude, we should all remember that what is impossible for us is very possible for God. He is waiting for us to receive his gift as best we can. So if we feel too small and too weak to fight the devilish scourge of acedia, we can at least begin by accepting the pain killer recommended by Saint Thomas Aquinas: a shower and a good nap (ST I-II, 38, 5).

Many points remain in my inkwell. Will there be another chance to continue on this theme of acedia? It will depend on two conditions: first, if I keep growing in experience; secondly, if this present letter is well received.

In the last analysis, dear brothers and sisters, acedia is a clearly defined interior state of soul, in spite of its many different expressions. This detestable mixture of passion and thought corrodes the joy of love and of belonging to the Lord. However, the most unfortunate quality of this particularly satanic vice is that it paralyses, freezes, tortures and kills our deepest desire for God. Our search for God's Face is based precisely on this desire, which is what makes monastic life what it is meant to be: a life ascetically oriented toward the divine Mystery, so as to taste it mystically.

With brotherly affection in Mary, wife of Saint Joseph,



Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General