

The Capital Sin of Sloth

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SLOTH

As I researched each of the seven capital sins in preparation for the mission material, I searched each topic on the internet. I was amazed at what I found. Unfortunately, sloth is not only one of the seven capital sins, but it's also a three-toed, monkey-like animal. After considerable research, I'm still not sure which came first—the sin or the animal. What I found very interesting is that there are many sermons on the internet that compare the sin of sloth to the animal. While I appreciated the humorous comparisons that these preachers made, I don't think we do justice to either the sin or the animal by comparing the two. While the three-toed sloth is slow, lethargic, and sleeps a lot, the capital sin of sloth really has nothing to do with speed, laziness, or time spent in bed. The capital sin of sloth is the need to avoid duty. It has very little to do with whether or not we're doing something, and everything to do with *what* we're doing. Sloth is when we aren't doing what God wants us to be doing at any given moment.

THE FATHER'S BUSINESS

There is nothing slothful about today's first reading. Abraham offers to us the perfect example of what it means to live God's will. Abraham didn't shy away from his duty, but followed God's command to sacrifice his son, even though it was a huge sacrifice. Abraham took care of the business God asked Him to take care of (thankfully, God asked Abraham to stop short of actually sacrificing his son). God blessed Abraham's faithfulness by making his descendents as numerous as the stars. You and I are called to follow God's commands by living His will. It is in God's will that we find our duty. And it is in living our duty that we avoid sloth.

Another wonderful example of obedience is Jesus Christ. Even at a very early age, Jesus understood what it meant to be about his Father's business.¹ At the age of twelve, he remained in Jerusalem teaching and listening to the elders in the Temple. Even though Mary and Joseph were quite disturbed and troubled to realize that Jesus wasn't among their relatives as they journeyed from Jerusalem, Jesus explained to them that he was doing his Father's business. Jesus put his Father's business first, and you and I are called to do the same. Sloth is anytime we are not about our Father's business. Saint James said it best when he wrote, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17).

¹Lumen Gentium, π57: "When the Child Jesus was lost and they had sought Him sorrowing, His parents found Him in the temple, taken up with the things that were His Father's business; and they did not understand the word of their Son. His Mother indeed kept these things to be pondered over in her heart."

FATHER SLOTHFUL

I experienced the sin of sloth first hand last year (I'm sure I experience it firsthand every day, but I usually ignore it). I finished Mass one Sunday evening and I knew that I needed to go straight home and get packed for a retreat that I was leaving for the next morning. In order to be refreshed and awake for the early morning departure the next day, I knew I needed to pack quickly and efficiently and then go to bed. I knew what I needed to do. I knew what God wanted me to do. But I didn't do it. I did everything BUT pack. I cleaned the house. I watched television. I rearranged the living room. I organized files and books. I stayed quite busy for hours, but never did what I was supposed to be doing! I was slothful. In my heart I knew what God wanted me to be doing, but I didn't do it.

AMERICAN SLOTH

My experience with sloth is a very American one. In the United States, the sin of sloth is most commonly found in our busyness rather than laziness. We tend to busy ourselves with everything except what we need to be doing—We work on the computer when we should be unloading the dishwasher. We unload the dishwasher when we should be cleaning the house. We clean the house when we're mad and should be reconciling with someone. We call someone on the phone when we should be enjoying a momentary silence in the house. Our phone conversation ends, so we continue drowning out the silence by watching television. We watch television when we should be sleeping. We sleep when we should be praying. We pray when we things get bad enough that doing anything else seems hopeless. This is American sloth at its best (or is it worse?).

Another great example of the American style of sloth is Martha. When Jesus went to visit Martha and Mary, it was Mary who followed God's will. Martha distracted herself with many tasks and then complained to Jesus that Mary wasn't helping her. Jesus pointed out her sloth by saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42). Sloth is the need to avoid duty, and most we usually do that through our busy distractions.

A SLOTH AMONG SLOTHS

But busyness isn't the only way sloth can manifest itself. It can also appear as: 1) procrastination, 2) criticalness, 3) fatigue, 4) withdrawal, 5) complacency, and 6) tardiness. Sloth can invade any and every part of our lives.

We can invite sloth into our intellect through daydreaming or having a "drowsy" mind. In the epic book, The Divine Comedy, Dante depicts sloth as a dreamy sleep, where thoughts wander here and there. The main character describes his train of thought by stating, "a new thought started forming in my mind, / creating others, many different ones: / from one to another to another thought / I wandered sleepily, then closed my eyes" (*Purgatorio* 18.141-44). As his mind wanders from one frivolous thought to another, his intellectual sloth becomes a gateway to other sins.

We can also invite sloth into our wills. This may manifest itself in the ways I mentioned earlier-- laziness, procrastination, and skirting our duty. But it may also appear as not putting forth the effort that God is asking from us. As the television commercial I once saw confirmed, "It's not just what we do, it's how we do it."

And, we can be slothful stewards by not keeping up the things God has given us, including our bodies. One way in which we can check to see if we're becoming slothful, is to look at our house. It is a common spiritual principle that our outside world often reflects our inner life, our spiritual world. Therefore, it is pretty safe to say that a person with a very disorderly house or room is also experiencing a lot of inner disorder. If we haven't been doing our duty in keeping our homes, rooms, or cars orderly, we may not be doing our duty in maintaining our spiritual life either. Whether it pertains to our belongings, vocations, commitments, or spiritual lives, any avoidance of dutifully doing God's will is sloth.

OVERCOMING SLOTH = DISCERNMENT & OBEDIENCE

So how can we avoid the sin of sloth? The answer is ultimately, of course, to do the will of God (i.e.- to do our duty). But we can't know what our duty is if we don't know the will of God. We call coming to know God's will "discernment." Discernment can be as simple as being able to tell deep within us what we should or shouldn't be doing. This is sometimes the voice of God speaking through our conscience. Our discernment can be as difficult as spending hours in prayer trying to figure out if the "inner voice" we heard belonged to God or us. Regardless, it is through discernment that we come to know what God desires and expects from us. But it's not enough to know God's will; it's not enough to know our duty. We have to live it.

This is where obedience comes in. Obedience crushes the sin of sloth. While sloth tries to avoid duty, obedience embraces it and follows it through to the end. The word obedience literally means to listen, which fits quite well with what I just mentioned about discernment. I recently visited the house of a married couple in our parish. Their little girl wanted to show me her large, "grown-up" bed. At her urging, I followed her into her room. She proudly presented her nice bed, and then hopped onto it and began jumping up and down. After I told her how nice her bed looked, I asked her if she was supposed to be jumping on it. As she bounced up and down, she matter-of-factly answered, "No," and continued bouncing. While you and I often know what God wants us to be doing, sometimes we respond like that little girl. Without using words we tell God, "No." Obedience is our whole-hearted, "Yes!" to what God wants. Saint Benedict made the connection between obedience and sloth when he wrote, "The labor of obedience will bring you back to Christ from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience" (Prologue to his Rule).

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote about why we should be obedient to God. He explained, "We owe God obedience:

a. Because of His dominion—"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Exodus 24:7b).

b. Because of His example—"And being found in human form, [Jesus] humbled

himself and became obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:7-8).

c. Because obedience is good for us—
“[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:9).

Ultimately, sloth is something we should visit at the zoo and not see in our lives. Through discernment we can come to understand our duty. But knowing something isn't the same as doing it, and doing it isn't the same as living it. God wants us to obediently live His will each and every day.