

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 1: Humility

This article is part one of a twelve part series that I am going to write on C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters. Lewis, a supporter of Catholicism and one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, has become popular once again thanks to the release of the movie, "Narnia." The Screwtape Letters was written by Lewis in 1942 and consists of a series of fictional letters sent from a demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, Wormwood. Through this book, Lewis offers his readers a unique view into the subtly of evil. Over the course of the next twelve months, we are going to explore twelve spiritual themes that Lewis included in his book. The first theme, and the first important movement in spirituality, is humility.

One of the very first temptations that Screwtape encouraged his nephew to employ was pride, especially as it manifests itself in hypocrisy. At the beginning of the book, Wormwood is given a new "patient;" a new person to tempt. Since the man is a churchgoer, Screwtape suggests that his nephew tempt him to think poorly about the other people who sit next to him at church. Screwtape writes:

Provided that any of those [people] sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.¹

Screwtape, a seasoned demon, knows quite well that most Christians find it far easier to see the faults and sins of others as opposed to their own. We are often tempted to think more highly of ourselves by looking down on other people. Even when we avoid doing this (thru the grace of God), we frequently find ourselves being prideful about our humility.

I remember a friend of mine in college coming to my room to share his disappointment about his faculty evaluation. His evaluation was great, except the professors told him that he needed to grow in humility. He protested their suggestion, declaring to me, "I'm the humblest person in the world!" I began laughing, only to realize that he wasn't joking. Screwtape suggests tempting people with pride, through false humility. He encourages Wormwood, writing:

Catch [your patient] at a moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, 'By jove! I'm being humble', and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt—and so on, through as many stages as you please.²

Through his ingenious writing, Lewis reminds us that pride is one of the very first sins we will struggle with as we live our faith, as well as, one of the last. Oddly, the virtue of humility is one that we cannot strive to achieve, but rather, we must resign ourselves to receive. And, frequently, those who have it don't know it, and those who think they have it don't. What God hopes to do in our souls is "bring [us] to a state of mind in which [we] could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than [we] would be if it had been done by another."³

¹ The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 6.

² Ibid., pg. 69.

³ Ibid., pg. 71.