



7. March 2023

LENTEN ITINERARY

Day 14: "The struggle against acedia and vainglory"

On our journey towards the great Feast of the Resurrection, we have to go through each day consciously and with God's grace, as a stage on the way. For this we need perseverance, for on our journey we may encounter a demon which the desert fathers called "acedia" or the "demon of the noonday". This acedia - which we can describe as a spiritual sluggishness or laziness - is related to the "tristitia" (sadness) we were talking about yesterday. The monks in the desert were attacked by acedia, but we too can be affected by it, so it is good to know at least something about it.

7. Fighting acedia

Acedia can manifest itself in different ways: physically and spiritually. Sometimes we can see its effect on young people, when they are unmotivated and nowadays often caught up in the multiple offers of the media.

"Laziness is the mother of all vices" - says a famous proverb. Therefore, it is important to engage in profitable work and to do good.

St. Paul's words "*We urged you when we were with you not to let anyone eat who refused to work*" (2 Thess 3:10), were a reason for monks to be always occupied with something profitable, so that the "demon of the noonday" would not attack them, wanting to distract their attention from God and making everything seem difficult and adverse. Acedia goes hand in hand with the temptation to believe that nothing makes sense, with a disinclination to pray, to work, etc...

Certainly one must also be careful not to fall, at the opposite extreme, into an obsession with work or an overload of work, which can also have negative repercussions on the spiritual life.

In Egypt, where the first communities of the desert fathers began, this principle has been applied since ancient times: a monk who works is pinched by one demon; one who avoids work is attacked by countless others.

Acedia is counteracted by making a firm decision of the will and invoking God's help. It may happen that one has to do violence to oneself to realise that slothfulness is really

very detrimental to life. If slothfulness is accompanied by sadness, then both vices must be rejected simultaneously with God's help.

At this point, I would like to make it clear that, in what I have said about the fight against these two vices, I am referring to people who are psychologically healthy, or at least do not have a psychological illness. In the latter case, a much more detailed analysis of the causes would be necessary and, consequently, a more specific and situation-specific way of dealing with these vices would also be proposed.

8. Fighting vainglory (cenodoxy)

On the one hand, this vice is very common; on the other hand, it is difficult to identify. It is usually not as obvious as other vices, and can hide behind all sorts of things. It is particularly harmful when it manifests itself in religious life. This was the temptation into which certain scribes and Pharisees fell, as the Lord points out repeatedly and clearly in the Gospel (cf. e.g. Mt 23:2-7).

If one wants to fight against something, one must first recognise it; and I might add, want to recognise it. This is where pride can get in the way, which we will have to talk about later.

John Cassian writes in this regard: "There is nothing noble, virtuous and pious that cannot become an occasion and stimulus for vainglory. Like a boulder hidden beneath the waves, it brings sudden and deplorable shipwreck to him who sails under a favourable wind, as soon as he neglects it and ceases to be on the alert."

How can we trace and identify vainglory, being thus a "multiform and ever-changing beast"?

In the first instance, it is important that we do not close our eyes to the evil of this vice; that is, that we are willing to acknowledge our faults and ask the Lord to grant us self-knowledge.

These simple questions might be helpful for an examination:

Are we one of those people who like to talk about ourselves and mention our good deeds? Do we like to boast that we know this or that famous person (even if only in our imagination)? This also applies to the religious sphere: "I know such and such a cardinal, such and such a bishop, such and such a charismatic figure, etc...?"

Do we react too sensitively when we believe that our honour has been offended? Are we very attentive to what others say about us?

We could list here many more questions that may point to vainglory, but we will bring them back to the table when we specifically address the issue of pride.

We are well aware of the advice given in the Gospel to combat vainglory. We must do things in secrecy (Mt 6:3,6,7), with our eyes fixed on God, as we saw on the third day of our Lenten journey. We should not draw attention to ourselves or want to please people; we should not impose ourselves or seek to be the centre of attention, but, for example, when we are in a conversation, we should perceive and wait for the moment when we are asked to make a contribution.

John Cassian mentions that, while all the other vices weaken with each time we overcome them, the opposite is true of vainglory, which attacks more strongly when we try to fight it.

It is therefore all the more important that we really track it down and, with God's help, overcome it.

Meditation on the reading of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/2022/03/15/>

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/2021/03/02/>