

26. February 2024

LENTEN ITINERARY

Day 13: "The fight against sadness"

In our Lenten itinerary, we continue today with the struggle against vices, which is part of the purgative way. On this occasion, we will focus on the vice of "tristitia", i.e. sadness.

6. Fight against sadness

"Chase sorrow far away" says the sage Ben Sirach, "for sorrow has been the ruin of many, and is no use to anybody" (Sir 30:23).

We can define "tristitia" as a disordered sadness, as opposed to that "sadness facing God" which we may feel, for example, for our sins and which leads us to a deeper conversion (cf. 2 Cor 7:10), or sadness at the death of a beloved one, or even a "holy sadness", such as that felt by St. Francis of Assisi when he realised that "love is not loved", as he puts it.

Disordered and harmful sadness, melancholy - however it has entered us - distances our heart from the state of purity, constricts it and weakens the strength of the soul to its very root. It prevents the heart from being filled with inner serenity in prayer. It prevents one from being balanced and affable in one's dealings with one's neighbour. It causes one to perform one's duties unwillingly and not to be receptive to any good advice. It can even lead to despair" (John Cassian).

"Like a moth in a garment, and a worm in wood, so the pain of a man wounds the heart" (Prov 25:20).

Disorderly sadness can arise as a result of an unfulfilled longing, of a desire that has not come true, or it can come upon us suddenly and bring us down, or it can be a generalised state of melancholy.

In any case, we must never let ourselves be carried away by it, because it brings even worse things: "Sadness has lost many". This means that it has plunged them into grave

sins. That is why some teachers of the spiritual life describe it as "the devil's den". In the midst of the darkness and confusion caused by sadness, the devil can easily do his work. This is the state of mind he awaits to attack the soul with all kinds of temptations. St. Francis of Assisi said in this regard: "The devil takes great pleasure when he finds a man's heart sad, for then it is easy for him either to plunge him into despair, or to instil in him again the desire for worldly pleasures and enjoyments".

When a person is carried away by melancholy, temptations to impurity will attack him or her more easily. St. Gregory explains it this way: "The soul cannot be without any satisfaction. Either it seeks it in the low and vile, or in the noble and lofty. Therefore, if it no longer finds joy in heavenly things, the devil, who knows so well our natural inclination, offers it sensual and unseemly things, and persuades it that by means of these sensual pleasures it will be able to relieve its sadness."

St. Paul also warns us, exhorting us to be vigilant, "*no root of bitterness should begin to grow and make trouble; this can poison a large number*" (Heb 12:15).

The reason why Holy Scripture and the masters of the spiritual life warn us so much against sadness is precisely because it is the source of countless evils and sins. That is also why the devil does everything he can to bring us into a melancholy mood, because he knows that he can then easily precipitate us into sin.

"The fight against sadness, then, is just as important as the fight against all the other vices mentioned, because it makes us apathetic, impatient, hard, full of resentment and fruitless affliction, hopelessly desperate" (John Cassian).

As in every struggle, the first thing we need is the decision not to let ourselves be carried away by "worldly sadness", behind which lurks a devil, if it is not the devil himself who has provoked it. It is necessary to renounce in the Name of the Lord all these states of mind, to invoke the Holy Spirit, to devote ourselves to the Holy Scriptures and to prayer.

If we sincerely turn to the Lord and renounce all selfishness and disordered self-love, which are often connected with this sadness, then the light will shine again in our souls.

A final spiritual remedy John Cassian advises is to think of the hope of our eternal future and to look forward to the joy that awaits us. His advice is to focus on what is eternal and has a future: on the hereafter. This is what we should constantly keep in view, with joy and without faltering.

Meditation on the reading of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/a-proper-confession/>

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <http://en.elijamission.net/give-and-there-will-be-gifts-for-you/>