

IV. SLOTH & ZEAL

When we come to the Cornice of the Slothful, we come to the “dead center” of the entire Divine Comedy, midway up Mount Purgatory and midway through the poem. This place, like the eye of a hurricane, is the fitting spot to discuss sloth, which St. Thomas defined as sorrow or indifference to spiritual good, and which medieval people called the “noonday devil.” Sloth is when a human heart becomes bored with and inert to the things of God. It is not the same thing as mere laziness. A person can be mired in the depths of sloth while filled with energy for video games, TV, workaholism, money, and all the other distractions the world provides to keep us numb to the voice of God and the desire for happiness and holiness. Fr. Barron reminds us that the antidote for sloth is zeal for God. This is best kindled by fervent prayer for God to reveal our mission in life, coupled with the vigorous pursuit of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Read Psalm 73. In what ways is the psalmist tempted to be slothful? How does he deal with these temptations, and what does he conclude?
2. Read CCC 2733. What is “presumption,” and how does acedia (that is, sloth) work to attack and break down our prayer life? How is this destructive of a relationship with the living God?
3. Read Luke 1:39-45. As they run in Dante's Purgatory, Luke 1:39 is the passage the penitent slothful hear. Why was Mary in haste? Who was she going to see? What does this image show us about Christian calling?
4. Read CCC 2447. What are the corporal (bodily) and spiritual works of mercy? Why are they important to our spiritual life?
5. Read Matthew 25:31-46. Does Jesus see the corporal works of mercy as something strictly for “religious” people? Does Jesus see our works of mercy mattering only if we do them for “religious” people?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you or someone you know ever been indifferent to the workings of God? What are the characteristics of that indifference? How can it be overcome?
2. People often confuse the sin of sloth with laziness. Fr. Barron points out that frenetic interest in the things of this world can often mask our indifference to the things of the Spirit. Have you ever found yourself wrapped up in extreme busyness? What was that like? What did you do to fight it and make sure it didn't separate you from the things of the Spirit?
3. One aspect of sloth is the tendency to say that truth doesn't matter. Are there places in your life or in the surrounding culture where relativism and the denial of truth are used as a kind of escape hatch for responsibility? How can this be fought?
4. Review the list of corporal and spiritual works of mercy from Q. 4 above. Where do you practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in your life? Are there particular works of mercy that you focus on? Why? Are there particular works of mercy you neglect? Why?
5. In John 2:13-21, Jesus' zeal for the house of God led him to drive out the money changers from the temple and make clear that the true temple was not a stone building, but the temple of his body. In what ways can you be filled with zeal for the house of God, which is the Church?