Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

03.12.09: My Ordinary and Common Life

I first discovered that I had a gift for self-expression during what we used to call the “sharing” moments that took the place of the homily during the Saturday morning liturgy in the minor seminary in which I was housed during my undergraduate studies. It was my first time away from home, friends and all the familiar things that had supported my life up to that point, and I was, needless to say, a bit out of my element. The Gospel, on that occasion, found Jesus walking upon the water and calling Peter out of the boat. It recounted the apostle’s progress, his consequent doubt and descent into the troubled waters, his calling out to the Lord, his deliverance and lastly our Lord’s gentle rebuke of him. Now when it came time for me to “share,” I drew the comparison between what I took each and every person in that room to be feeling to Peter’s situation in the Gospel, that we, like him, were embarking upon a new chapter of our lives, were full of wonder and apprehension, and yet were hardly up to the task, finding ourselves drowning in our work, the expectations of others and of ourselves, and the fear of what the future might and might not bring. I ended with the vivid image of all of us upon the water calling out to Christ to save us in our time of need, of a group who, in love and youthful optimism, had left the little boats that had brought us safely this far, not wanting to return to the old and familiar, but quailing nonetheless before what we had gotten ourselves into.

To this day, what remains with me was the two-fold way by which my sweeping rhetorical presentation was received. First, there was simply the profound impact that the words had upon all present, that I was able to present so effectively the deep feeling that afflicted these men (boys really) but at the same time to direct it so powerfully to its resolution in the arms of Christ. This was the first time that I realized that emotion was, so to speak, a tangible material that could be shaped morally and thus be harnessed, made intelligible, and put to good service. It is a lesson that I learned well and has been personally and professionally of great use. The second reaction manifested over time in the ways by which I was treated by one and all thereafter, consequent upon the recognition that I had this gift. Some grew to love me dearly, and I them, resulting in a mutual growth and appreciation for which I am so grateful even to this day. For the most part, though, the majority fell into two different ways of dealing with me. The first feared me and were thus very cautious in their handling of me, especially as they perceived that I was capable of exerting a strong influence over the other young men. This was a concern to them given that they had a very definite view concerning the spiritual and religious life (radically liberal) that they judged (quite rightly) that I did not share, and that what I had exhibited that first week of the program did not bode well for their formation of this group of men, naive in the ways of the wider Church and its politics. I grew in recognition and understanding of this form of manipulation, and once again learned well how to counter it in a charitable way. It was the second group’s manner of dealing with me that has always disturbed me, namely that I was at one and the same time desired yet discounted, that although they were strongly impacted by what they had heard, they nonetheless flew seemingly irrationally from the very things that threatened to draw them out and give them light and life.

This dismissal took various forms. Besides the charge that “it’s all just rhetoric/fancy language/high-falutin’ nonsense/showboatin’/not to my taste/and so on (the bleatings of those who have, as they say, “checked out” of
rational discourse a long time ago), the most common evasion was the reduction of who and what I was to the category of the *unique* or the *special*, the view that what I said or how I witnessed was something that, although enjoyable and erudite, was nonetheless particular to my person and my faith experience, and thus did not have a wider relevance to the lives of others “less gifted” or “less intellectual.” Frankly, I found and continue to find this evasion infuriating and this, not on a personal level, but rather from a moral and spiritual perspective. Allow me to explain.

I recall, once, being part of a discussion in this same seminary concerning Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Everyone naturally admired the beautiful and practical manifestation of the Gospel in her care of the sick and dying. What struck me, however, was the assessment by one fellow (one shared by many others) that while this was admirable, that nonetheless such a witness was particular to her and was not something that should be emulated by others. Why? Because it was the result of graces that had been bestowed upon her and her alone, something which he judged himself not to have, and thus as something to which he himself should not aspire in his life. Knowing this fellow well, I understood that the comments came from a certain awe that he had of this living saint, and that he recognized in himself a great distance between the virtue of Mother Teresa and his own. Nevertheless, this situation, and many similar encounters since then, have taught me how readily people despair over the goodness and virtue to which they are called, judging these as something reserved for the holy and the good, and certainly not something for which they themselves should ever hope, being found to be of such a lowly and sinful state, and thus unworthy. “Better to be satisfied with my lot,” they say, “and to work humbly and anonymously for the Kingdom than to grasp arrogantly for those things that are simply above us.”

I have learned over the years that this attitude is not to be admired as it constitutes that most dangerous of vices to which the Christian is susceptible, namely that of *acedia* or sloth, one of the most effective ways by which hope can be destroyed.

Now, hope is a basic human emotion that constitutes our personal standing before those goods which we have judged to be difficult to acquire but can, with effort, be achieved. Thus, many hope to overcome the difficulties involved in obtaining a degree from Desales University, a good to which many aspire as they judge that they are up to the challenge and apply themselves accordingly. Hope, theologically described, considers not just any good but that which is highest among all goods, namely the acquisition of Him in Whom is found our perfection and our happiness. The difficulty of this good is compounded by the fact that it cannot be achieved by any act that we perform. It is achievable, nevertheless, based upon the promise of God’s gift of Himself to those who seek Him out, who love Him with all their hearts and who desire to behold Him as He is. In this promise and the consequent hope that we hold so deep within our hearts, we seek to live a life of virtue and contemplation of the divine things, so that we might be found ready to receive that Gift so freely given and so undeserved.

When, however, we judge that the difficult good to which our hope is addressed turns out to be something that we cannot achieve, we experience the opposite of hope, namely despair. And so, some people judge after their freshman year that they are not up to the work required for a degree at DeSales University, that what they had hoped for is something that they cannot attain, and despair ensues. The seriousness of despair in the life of the Christian, however, is made all the worse by reason of the Good over which he despairs. *Acedia* has long been recognized, especially in the monastic tradition, as that sadness that arises as the Christian, in faith, catches sight of the divine good in human nature, but is then thrown into a kind of spiritual apathy where ne neither seeks to
investigate all that is implied in this vision, nor acts so that it might be attained. The person afflicted by *acedia* is one who lacks courage for the great things that are proper to the nature of the Christian. It is a kind of anxious vertigo that befalls the human individual when he becomes aware of the height to which God has raised him. One who is trapped in *acedia* has neither the courage nor the will to be as great as he really is. He would prefer to be less great in order thus to avoid the obligation of greatness. *Acedia* is a perverted humility; it will not accept supernatural goods because they are, by their very nature, linked to a claim on him who receives them. Something similar exists in the sphere of mental health and illness. The psychiatrist frequently observes that, while a neurotic individual may have a superficial will to be restored to health, in actuality he fears more than anything else the demands that are made, as a matter of course, on one who is well.\(^1\)

Note these words carefully, for they contain much that stands as a rebuke to a great deal of the well-intentioned advice that we receive today concerning our moral and spiritual growth.

In the throwing off of the greatness of our humanity and the responsibilities that this greatness carries with it, the person ensnared by *acedia* begins to detest the very goodness of the divine both with respect to God Himself, and as it has to been manifested in him, which then leads him to wish that God had not bothered to ennable him in the first place, but rather that He had simply “left him in peace.”\(^2\) However, in light of the fact that this wish does not change the fact that he is created in the image and likeness of God, and intended for something far greater than he wishes, *acedia* amounts to a denial of what the human person really is, of what God wants him to be, and ultimately of God Himself. It is little wonder, then, that the despair which *acedia* constitutes is counted as one of the sins against the Holy Spirit, and thus plays an important role in the situating of one wherein even the forgiveness of God cannot reach. For in despair, one begins to close the ways to forgiveness, and if left unchecked will eventually manifest in what Thomas calls a “persistent, blasphemous resistance to grace.”\(^3\)

These are strong words, seemingly lacking in compassion. This judgment, however, can be made only insofar as one judges the primary agent in the Christian life to be that of the human person himself. While our freedom is important and partially definitive of our humanity, it is not something that is absolute, but, rather, allows us to be free for the understanding and acquiring of the greatness that is ours in our humanity, and for the hope of God’s gift of Himself to those who love Him. When I look at the course of my life, I find it in many ways to be very ordinary and even somewhat common. I did not come from money, was not born into privilege, and was not gifted with a great intellect. I am a child of this age, and thus suffer from its typical defects and vices. I am middle-class in my tastes, was a C– student in high school, and frankly could think at that time of little else than my friends and my music. I was for all intents and purposes utterly self-centered, self-absorbed and narcissistic. And I was depressed. If, in my search for joy, I had listened to those who tried to affirm me as I found myself to be, I would still be in that sorry state, confirmed in my solitude and despair, and nursed only by the illusion


\(^2\) ST. II-II. 35. 3, quoted by Pieper at p. 120.

\(^3\) ST. II-II. 20. 4, II-II. 35, and Pieper, p. 117.
of freedom. Instead, I was inspired to aspire to be good, to be wise and to love. And in this aspiration, I was gifted with so many things that I still do not understand them all (or myself, or what I have become), something that I unpack on a daily basis, and discern the ways in which these things can be best put to use. “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” These words resonate ever so deeply in my soul, and I am forever grateful that I asked, I sought and I knocked. Charles Péguy, the French poet and essayist, once said that “Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately: not to have been a saint.” When we read the stories of the saints, or behold those loving depictions of them in film, we should never think that only a few are called to such greatness. Instead we should understand that the saints and all holy people are put before us as demonstrations both of the dignity to which we, as children of God, are called here and now, and of the bountiful gifts that our loving Father bestows upon us. Desire, then, to be a saint, and aspire to nothing less, and let not the fear of inadequacy on your part ever blind you to the action in your life of the Giver of all gifts. Let not the perverted humility of acedia hold you back from seeking the highest things and acting upon them with all your heart and strength. “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” For as you seek Him in all that you are and all that you do, so will you be filled with graces and blessings beyond your imagination and, frankly, beyond any desert on your part.

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email: Stephen.Loughlin@desales.edu