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

10.24.08: The Importance of Choosing One’s Burdens and Master Wisely

Just last week, we had the good fortune to hear Sister Judith Andrew’s excellent presentation on lectio divina. At its completion, she had us practice it using well-known scriptures that she had printed out for this occasion. My side of the room was assigned one of my favorite passages, namely Matthew 11:28-30:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Apart from the startling fact that these beautiful words form the climax and the conclusion of Christ’s powerful condemnation of that generation that did not heed the Baptist’s call for repentance, this passage has always reminded me of one very simple reality about being human, namely that subjection and service are essential to the description of our nature, and that, consequently, we must choose wisely the burden we bear and the master we serve. Allow me to explain.

If my studies have taught me anything, they have confirmed what I have always known, namely that we are woefully incomplete, that we stand in utter need of completion. This always comes to mind when I hear someone describe himself as a “self-made man” (it’s always a man — women are too intelligent to make this mistake). I chuckle at the hubris that underlies his judgement (namely, that what he is, owns and has accomplished is wholly explained by his efforts and by his efforts alone, as if he had carried himself to term, birthed himself and grew by suckling at his own teats), and I cannot help but smile at the judgment passed upon him by the wise, namely that “the man who believes that he is self-made has a fool for a god.” To any decent thinking person, our nature stands in need of far more than we could ever provide individually for ourselves. Here we find the foundation not only of the whole of culture and society, but also of the argument that our need defines our nature.

The traditional definitions of our nature bears this out. Aristotle defines the human person not only as a rational animal, but as a political animal, that is to say, an animal requiring the society of others if he is to live a good life, practicing and acquiring the virtues so necessary for his happiness. Revelation, moreover, teaches us that we are created in the image and likeness of God, something which reveals not only the true and full beauty and dignity of being rational and volitional, but that our happiness ultimately consists in a personal union and communion with that fundamental community at the heart of all reality, namely the Trinity that God is. But, as Augustine so profoundly realizes, we are beings who, having been drawn out of nothing, are ever in danger of resolving our lives into that from which we first arose. In this, we find ourselves, like Odysseus, tied to the mast of our ship, drawn throughout the entirety of our lives by the siren call of our nothingness, that threatens us with shipwreck if we heed its call, and is never silent in our yearning and striving for home, hearth and happiness. We encounter here the most primal dynamism of being human, namely that of our directionality. In this, having been drawn from the abyss by the Source of all Being and brought into the light of day, having been beautifully established
in such a way that we even walked and talked with God, having fallen into a condition bereft of the tranquility of order which characterized our original state, having been thrown headlong into the abyss from which we had been drawn, only to have been caught, reclaimed, reoriented by the salvific act of Christ, we understand that our lives have been redeemed, the gates of heaven are open to us, but that to every act, to every sin, there are consequences, and the consequence that the original sin places before us (which the salvific act did not take away), is that the whole of creation is subject to futility, that it stands in need of that final reclamation, the final reestablishment of that order that existed before the fall, wherein every tear will be wiped away, every stain of sin will be washed clean, the lion will lie down with the lamb, all wrongs will be righted, and all mysteries will be revealed. It is in light of all this that Gabriel Marcel can be understood when he states that “a stable order can only be established on earth if man always remains acutely conscious that his condition is that of a traveller.” Thus, the dynamism of our directionality finally takes form in the description of our nature as homo viator, man the wayfarer, the one who is on his way.

When we understand our nature in these terms, it becomes quite obvious that our incompleteness is something woven into the very fabric of our nature, that it is a constant intended by God, existed before our fall and has remained substantially untouched by the fall itself. Our lives only begin to take shape as we discern that wherein our completeness and perfection reside, that which worthily suits our nature, is deserving of pursuit, and eventually of the price that must be paid so that we might be clothed elegantly, beautifully and worthily (not seeking the nakedness of our original parents — something lost forever to us by their sin — nor suffering the nakedness of the emperor in his new clothes). Therefore, in the face of our incompleteness, we have no choice but to vow, bind and serve.

The self-made man quickly realizes that the god he worships is indeed a fool — no one truly finds himself to be sufficient in all ways for one’s happiness. Yet the temptation to nurse this illusion remains and is as old as time. This illusion has many forms, most specifically to consider ourselves as little gods, as the determiners of our own fate, as beings which are wholly and absolutely free to do as we please, and that the meaning, value, and excitement of the things we do are a direct consequence of the deeds themselves, nor of the things with which they are concerned, nor in any duty that attaches to them, but rather in the fact that we ourselves have chosen to do them. As little gods, we believe that we invest meaning and value in things because we have chosen to do them, something which is akin to those who think the description or definition of something consists in how they feel about it, their opinions concerning it, or the majority view, rather than the conformation of the mind to the intelligibility that lies latent in the thing being defined or described. We can see how patently wrong this position is in the intellectual life, but so often miss its manifestation when it comes to our moral and spiritual lives.

And so we return to Matthew 11. The lives of all people, since the creation of the human species, are defined by the burdens we carry, burdens that denote the disciplines that we have taken upon ourselves as a consequence of our vision concerning what is best in life, and the journey that we undertake so that we might honor and achieve what we behold. In this we find our completion, our perfection and our happiness, the manifestation, addressing and fulfilling of our nature. The yoke that was placed upon the shoulders of our first parents was easily, nobly and lovingly carried. But with the fall and the consequent loss of this most blessed of yokes, the burdens they took on were many, oppressive and in all ways oriented to the nothingness from which they arose; dis-orientation entered into creation and manifested itself within man’s nature in both ignorance and strife — we
know that we stand in need of completion, and are ready, willing and desirous to take up the journey, but know not where to go, nor how to proceed. Our consciences, thoughts, feelings, and even our members, are engaged in continuous warfare, both among themselves and ultimately with the being himself who has them. This is the condition of fallen man; a disoriented, disordered, embattled traveller impelled by his very nature to wander amidst a creation subject to futility by the sin of his first parents, torn by conflicting passions within his person and subject to the confusion of competing yet seemingly reasonable visions of that in which our happiness consists. The confusion and despair of man is something that goes to the very heart of being human in a fallen world (something about which Hans Urs von Balthasar writes beautifully and terrifyingly in his short book The Christian and Anxiety). The anguish of the apostles, of men in the cold grip of this condition, can truly be felt as they say to Jesus “To whom shall we go? You have the word of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69: note the order — belief precedes and is the condition for understanding, something Augustine knew well). In response, Jesus does not offer relief from the fact that we are travellers. Nor does he offer a life free from the woes and cares of this world. In fact, in following the Way, the Truth and the Life, we become even more afflicted by the fallen nature of this world, the sin of man, the anxiety and despair at the heart of a culture of death, and even persecution at the hands of those who hate both God and all who walk and talk with Him. Instead, he says “Come to me, all who labor” under the weight of sin, anxiety, despair and death (the wages of the fall of man), “and heavy burdened” by the angst which ever so tightly grips your lives, “and I will give you rest.” How? “Take up my yoke,” the one that I, the author of your being, offer you this day. And if you question the necessity of taking this yoke upon your shoulders, remember that “I,” being “meek and humble of heart,” have taken upon myself, in my incarnation, the burden of all flesh, have taken upon myself the form of a slave so that I might suffer death for the sake of your reclamation, your perfection, your happiness. In this yoke, “you will find rest for your souls,” a rest for which you yearn but up until this point have not found among any of the created goods of this world. So, do not be anxious for what you need, nor despair of the desire for your completion. Rather, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), and this as you take upon yourself the only burden worthy of a son or daughter of God, a yoke noble to one who has been created in the image and likeness of the heavenly Father. Begin, then, to live the perfect life which inevitably, in the living of it, will draw you up into your perfection, your completion, and your happiness, that final delivery from the nothingness that bites at you heals, and the tyranny of your pretensions to become little gods. In this light, indeed “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

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email: Stephen.Loughlin@desales.edu