

# ACEDIA: ENEMY OF SPIRITUAL JOY

• Jean-Charles Nault •

“Acedia drives man to turn his back on the situation of tribulation, which is that of the Christian living *in* the world without being *of* the world.”

---

It is told that in the days of the desert Fathers, “one Saturday evening, the brothers were eating at the church of the Kellia. As they brought the soup to table, Abba Helladios the Alexandrine began to cry. Abba James said to him: “Why are you crying, abba?” He answered: “Because the joy of the soul has come to an end, that is, the joy of the fast, and now begins the satisfaction of the body.”<sup>1</sup> The conception of joy particular to these spiritual masters of Egypt, living in the fourth and fifth centuries, perhaps makes us smile. Undoubtedly we do not have the same experience of their main preoccupation, summed up in a single, fundamental question: how is one to be saved? Such was the goal of their asceticism and the deepest aspiration of their hearts. Such was the source of their joy, but also of their tears. In this their insight revealed to them an intimidating obstacle towering on the path of salvation. They named this obstacle *akèdia*, which literally meant: the lack of care for one’s salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Helladios S1, in *Les Sentences des Pères du désert. Collection alphabétique* (Solesmes: Éditions de Solesmes, 1981), 329.

What is acedia? How did the monastic and theological tradition understand and study it throughout the centuries? Does it concern a curse from another age, or is it still a problem today? These are the questions that we will attempt to answer in the following pages.

*1. Evagrius and the monastic tradition:  
the “hidden evil”*

Quite early, the monastic tradition focused its attention on the strange and complex phenomenon of acedia. Acedia may be defined as a spiritual laziness, an unhappiness with or aversion toward heavenly things, a half-heartedness in spiritual warfare. Acedia drives the monk to leave his cell and to run away from intimacy with God, in order to seek compensations for the austere regime of life to which he once felt called. The desert monks left us delightful stories about these appearances of the “midday demon,”<sup>2</sup> as they called it, and about the remedies necessary for curing such a sickness. The most famous text is undoubtedly the description left to us by Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) in his *Praktikos*, from which we note here the most significant passages:

The demon of acedia, also called the “midday demon” is the most burdensome of all; it attacks the monk around the fourth hour and besieges his soul until the eighth hour . . . . This demon forces the monk to stare continuously at the windows, to take flight from his cell . . . . Moreover, it arouses in him an aversion for the place where he is, even for his state of life . . . . The demon makes him long for other places, where he will easily find what he needs . . . . pleasing the Lord is not a matter of place: in fact, the divine may be worshiped anywhere, as it is written (Jn 4:21) . . . . This demon attacks with every weapon in his arsenal, as they say, such that the monk abandons his cell and runs away from the contest. This demon is not immediately followed by another: a peaceful state and ineffable joy take over his soul following the battle.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ps 90:6: “*daimonion mésèbrinon*,” according to the translation of LXX.

<sup>3</sup>Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 12 (SC 171, 521–527).

A second text taken from *The Eight Spirits of Wickedness*, also from Evagrius, defines the phenomenon in still more precise detail, even with a bit of humor:

The look of someone in prey to acedia frequently goes to the windows, and his soul dreams of visitors. When the door squeaks, he jumps. When he hears a voice, he looks out the window. He does not turn away until, overcome by drowsiness, he sits down. The acediac often yawns when he reads, and he gets tired easily. He rubs his eyes, he stretches out his arms, and he looks up from his book. He looks at the wall, then comes back to read a bit more. Flipping through the pages, he kills time looking at the end of the book. He counts the pages, calculates the number of fascicles, complains about the print and the design. Finally, closing up the book, he lays his head on top of it and falls asleep, but not into a deep slumber, because hunger stirs his soul once again, imposing upon him its own preoccupations.<sup>4</sup>

Evagrius does not seek to give a clear definition of acedia. He prefers to sketch the portrait of the monk suffering from the curse. Nevertheless, the cited passages—as well as many others—clearly show that acedia touches upon two fundamental dimensions of human life: space and time.

### 1.1 *Space and time*

The clearest symptom of acedia, according to the previously cited texts by Evagrius, is a certain *instability*, which manifests itself in the need to change cells, surroundings or activities.<sup>5</sup> The small cell in which the monk spends his entire day can easily become, understandably, unbearable. The result is a deep aversion for the place where he

---

<sup>4</sup>Id., *Huit esprits de malice* 14 (PG 79, 1160 A–B; trans. G. Bunge, *Akèdia. La doctrine spirituelle d'Évagre le Pontique sur acedia* [Bellefontaine, 1991], 83).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. also id., *De octo vitiosis cogitationibus* 12 (PG 79, 1457A): “It [the acedia demon] gives you ideas of leaving, the need to change your location and style of life, it depicts this other life as your salvation and persuades you that if you do not leave, you will be lost” (trans. P. Miquel, *Lexique du désert. Étude de quelques mots-dés du vocabulaire monastique grec ancien* [Bellefontaine, 1986], 21).

finds himself.<sup>6</sup> However, this temptation to wander physically is the tangible symptom of a deeper sickness that threatens every spiritual life: instability. Evagrius suggests this when he says the monk feels aversion not only toward his surroundings but also toward his state of life. External instability is thus the sign of an interior instability: there exists a clear and direct link between the act of keeping one's body within his cell and the act of keeping one's thoughts on the remembrance of God.

Added to this spatial dimension is a temporal dimension: acedia attacks the monk at the hottest time of the day, during the hours when the sun seems to have ceased moving along its course. The persistent heat gives the monk a glimpse of how lengthy will be his fight, how long his asceticism will endure, and drives him to abandon the struggle and to run away from the contest.

This is why the most efficacious remedy against acedia is *perseverance*: to persevere in the face of every temptation to escape.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the opposite of acedia is *hypomonè*, literally meaning the act of remaining under the yoke. Within the setting of monastic life, this word relates to the two dimensions indicated—the spatial and the temporal—for it signifies not only patience, passing through the test (duration), but also perseverance within one's cell and in the solitary life (space).<sup>8</sup> By virtue of this perseverance, acedia is destroyed down to its very root, called *philautía*, self-love. This perseverance is not a blind resignation, but a waiting truly conscious of God, oriented toward a direct and personal encounter with Him.

---

<sup>6</sup>Id., *Antirrhethikos* VI, 26: "Contrary to the thought that constantly seeks to find another cell to inhabit, since the first one is absolutely repulsive to him . . . ."

<sup>7</sup>Id., *Sententiae ad monachos* 55 (PG 40, 1279D): "If the spirit of acedia besieges you, do not leave your home, do not shirk the occasion to fight and succeed"; id., *De octo spiritibus malitiae* 14 (PG 79, 1160C): "Constancy cures acedia; to do everything with the greatest care and fear of God."

<sup>8</sup>Id., *De octo spiritibus malitiae* 13 (PG 79, 1157D): "The wave of acedia chases the monk out of his home; the one who exercises *hypomonè* dwells in *hésychia*" (quoted in P. Miquel, *Lexique du désert*, 20); cf. also *Praktikos* 28 (SC 171, 564–565): "One must not abandon the cell when temptations arise, however plausible the excuses may seem, instead one must remain seated inside the room, to persevere (*hypoménein*), and to receive with valiance each and every assailant, especially the demon of acedia who, because it is the most difficult of all, tests the limits of the soul."

1.2 *Acedia and sadness*

Acedia, as presented to us by Evagrius, is a complex<sup>9</sup> and contradictory phenomenon, a crossroads. Someone has called it the “obscure evil.”<sup>10</sup> It is a vice, a passion, which “blends frustration and aggressiveness in a particular way. It abhors *what is there* and fantasizes about what is not.”<sup>11</sup> Its desire cannot be satisfied for it is fundamentally against nature. While there exists in man a wonderful and insatiable desire for God,<sup>12</sup> a Trinity of persons in total mutual self-gift, unsatisfied, egocentric desire is, on the contrary, an obstacle to a perfectly realized and fulfilled existence. The monk becomes saddened by what should be the source of his joy: intimacy with God. Destroying the “well-being of the soul” and replacing it, on the contrary, with “slackness,” acedia is the principal enemy of contemplation.

If Evagrius distinguishes *acedia* and *sadness*, he introduces them nonetheless as twin sisters. The specificity of acedia is that it incites a simultaneous and permanent stimulation of two irrational faculties of the soul, the irascible and the concupiscent. Unhappy with the present and full of longing for the future, it looks, so to speak, back and ahead at the same time. Being the demon of noontime—of the bosom of the day—acedia touches the heart of man’s life, as it affects his spirit as much as his body, his relation with God as much as his relation to others, his prayer as much as his action.

Nevertheless, at the conclusion of his description, Evagrius notes “this is not immediately followed by another: a peaceful state and ineffable joy take over his soul following the battle.”<sup>13</sup> In other words,

---

<sup>9</sup>Id., *Scholia on the Psalms* 139: “It is through our thoughts that the demons wage war on us, setting in motion at times our desires, sometimes our anger, other times again both our anger and desires together, from which so-called complex thought is born. This only happens in moments of acedia, while others attack at intervals, one after the other.”

<sup>10</sup>This is the title of the Italian edition already cited in G. Bunge, *Akèdia. Il male oscuro* (Qiqajon, Magnano, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Christoph Schönborn, *Aimer l’Église. Retraite prêchée à Jean-Paul II au Vatican, en février 1996* (Paris/Saint-Maurice: Cerf/Saint-Augustin, 1998), 133.

<sup>12</sup>Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia Gnostika* IV, 50 (Ed. A. Guillaumont, *PO* 28, 159): “There is a desire that is good and eternal, which leads to real knowledge, and it is said to be inseparable from intellect.”

<sup>13</sup>Id., *Praktikos* 12 (SC 171, 527).

freedom from passion (*apathéia*) has been restored, which is, for Evagrius, the preliminary condition for contemplation of the Holy Trinity. This enables God “to make His home” in the soul purified of all evil passions,<sup>14</sup> and awaiting fulfillment in the face-to-face encounter of the beatific vision, that is, in the intimate communion with the Beloved.

## 2. *St. Thomas Aquinas: acedia as the enemy of spiritual joy*

The desert monks are not alone in having discussed the problem of acedia.<sup>15</sup> The Middle Ages gave it equal attention. This is also true of St. Thomas Aquinas, who dedicated an entire question to it in the *Summa theologiae*<sup>16</sup> and another in the treatise *De malo*.<sup>17</sup> Thomas situates acedia among the sins against charity, more precisely among the sins against the *joy* born of charity. For him, acedia has two principal characteristics: it is at the same time a sadness at the divine good (*tristitia de bono divino*) and an aversion to acting (*taedium operandi*). Let us quickly consider these two definitions.

### 2.1 *Sadness at the divine good*

St. Thomas first defines acedia as a sadness at the divine good (*tristitia de bono divino*). It is sadness caused by the good of spiritual life,

---

<sup>14</sup>Id., *Skemmata* 25: “From the holy David, we have learned which is the ‘place of God.’ Indeed, ‘His sanctuary is found in peace and his dwelling in Zion’ (Ps 75:3). The ‘place of God’ is thus the reasonable soul, his ‘dwelling,’ however, the brilliant intellect who has renounced worldly desires and learned to scrutinize earthly logic (things).”

<sup>15</sup>It is necessary to mention here John Cassian who, in his *Conferentiae* and particularly his *Institutiones*, introduces to the West the doctrine of Evagrius and the Syrian monks. With Cassian we are at the beginnings of cenobitic monastic life: his notion of acedia, compared to that of Evagrius, falls more along the lines of simple laziness, as such losing the sense of the abandonment of the cell and of spiritual combat. This evolution will be sealed by Gregory the Great and will enjoy a great future, to the point of causing the word *acedia* to disappear from everyday language.

<sup>16</sup>ST I-II 35, 1-4.

<sup>17</sup>Aquinas, *De malo* 11, 1-4.

that is, of life in union with God.<sup>18</sup> As this good is a true good, the supreme good itself, to be saddened by it is a sin, even a grave sin. Acedia, therefore, is a sin against charity insofar as it stands in opposition to spiritual joy (*gaudium*) born of charity,<sup>19</sup> the utterly exceptional love that God wishes to establish with His creature. For St. Thomas, the term *gaudium* possesses an especially particular meaning, which we must briefly sketch here.

*a. From unio affectus to gaudium*

It has been said that St. Thomas was “the interpreter of Antiquity, which conceived of morality as a response to the question of happiness.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the first question asked by Aquinas’ text, at the beginning of the *Secunda Pars*, frames its moral teaching in terms of the Sermon on the Mount itself: what is “beatitude,” what is happiness?<sup>21</sup> After having answered that it consists in a complete intimacy and communion with God, Thomas demonstrates that man can fulfill this vocation through his actions, which are like the steps that lead him to God. Although this destiny exceeds man’s hopes and power, he is nevertheless called to cooperate with divine grace, placing all the vitality of his being at the service of his free and intelligent action. Passions thus contribute, first and foremost, to the dynamic tension that impels man toward the experience of his Creator.

Now, at the heart of passion resides love.<sup>22</sup> For St. Thomas, love is the fundamental passion and source of all action: “every agent,

---

<sup>18</sup>*ST* II-II 35, 1, c.: “*acedia, secundum quod hic sumitur, nominat tristitiam spiritualis boni*” [sloth, as we understand it here, denotes sorrow for spiritual good]; cf. *ibid.*, a.3, c.: “*acedia autem est tristitia de bono spirituali inquantum est bonum divinum*” [sloth is sorrow about spiritual good in as much as it is a Divine good].

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, a. 2, c.: “*tristari de bono divino, de quo caritas gaudet . . . acedia vocatur*” [sorrow in the Divine good about which charity rejoices . . . is called sloth].

<sup>20</sup>S.-Th Pinckaers, “Les passions et la morale,” *RSPT* 74 (1990): 380.

<sup>21</sup>*ST* I-II, 1–5.

<sup>22</sup>In his treatise on the passions, St. Thomas dedicates three questions to love: I-II 26–28. Regarding the theme of love, see: A. Plé, *Par devoir ou par plaisir?* (Paris 1980); cf. also W. May, *L’amore e la volontà* (Rome: Astrolabio, 1971).

whatever it is, carries out all action in virtue of a certain love.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, love is found at the origin of a “circular”<sup>24</sup> movement that we can sum up in three stages: *unio affectus* (with the three stages of *inmutatio*, *coaptatio*, and *complacentia*), *intentio* or *desiderium* and finally *unio realis* or *gaudium*.<sup>25</sup> We will not analyze in detail here this circular dynamic of love.<sup>26</sup> It suffices to point out how acting is located exactly between the initial moment of passivity (a completely gratuitous and astonishing moment—“because it is Him, because it is me”—in which the subject receives the gift of an initial union [affective union]), and its fulfillment in real union with the desired and loved reality. In a word: action tends toward affective union with the beloved, it tends toward *gaudium*.<sup>27</sup>

#### *b. Acedia versus communion*

For St. Thomas, *acedia* completely opposes and hinders spiritual joy: *acedia* is truly a sadness about the divine good,<sup>28</sup> in other words a sadness about God who alone can satisfy the human heart’s aspiration for the Absolute. Our explanation of the circular movement of love enables us to comprehend the gravity of this sin. *Acedia* is directly opposed to the *gaudium* of charity, that is, the *unio realis* with the Beloved, the God of Love. In the particular case of charity, the joy of communion looks forward to the fulfilled union of heaven. *Acedia*, which paralyzes the dynamic of love in this world, is the chief obstacle

---

<sup>23</sup>*ST* I-II 28, 6, c.: “*omne agens, quodcumque sit, agit quacumque actionem ex aliquo amore*” [every agent, whatever it be, does every action from love of some kind].

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 26, 2, c.: “*appetitivus motus circulo agitur*” [the appetitive movement is circular].

<sup>25</sup>For an analysis of these terms, see H.-D. Simonin, “Autour de la solution thomiste du problème de l’amour,” in *AHDLMA* 6 (1931): 176–198.

<sup>26</sup>For further clarification, see Angelo Scola, *Il mistero nuziale. 1. Uomo-donna* (PUL-Mursia, 1998), 155–170.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 130: “Thus *amor amicitiae* displays desire’s true object: not pleasure, but *gaudium*, because it loves its own good—which is different from selfish self-love.”

Cf. also Karol Wojtyła, *Amour et responsabilité. Étude de morale sexuelle* (Ed. du Dialogue/Ed. Stock: Paris, 1978), 13–61.

<sup>28</sup>*ST* II-II 35, 2, c.: “*tristitia de bono divino . . . acedia vocatur*” [sadness about the Divine good . . . is called sloth].



to the *quies* and the *fruitio* to which every heart aspires. Because it is the sin against charity, against *amor benevolentiae*, par excellence,<sup>29</sup> acedia likewise paralyzes the gift of self and our openness toward the other.

If acedia stands ultimately in opposition to the *gaudium* of charity, that is, to the goal of the trajectory of love, we must also say that it touches graced union, given that total union with God is not possible in this world. This union in grace is the source of the goodness of our action. Acedia therefore destroys the communion realized in the total gift of the person. But that is not all: for St. Thomas, it is precisely within action *itself* that communion with God comes about.

## 2.2 Aversion to action

We thus come to the second definition of acedia proposed by Aquinas. It is an extension of the first: acedia is presented as an aversion to action, a *taedium operandi*.<sup>30</sup> This is a particularly interesting element, upon which it is important to reflect for a moment.

### a. The act of communion

In the Thomistic vision of action, man is oriented toward the beatitude, ultimate end and perfect act that enable him to find fulfillment. And yet he can in some way anticipate and prepare for this total participation in divine life by his action. Now, at the heart of action is communion with God in charity. Indeed, if charity is the highest of all virtues, it does so by ordering all actions toward their ultimate end by means of the other virtues. Because charity is a

---

<sup>29</sup>Cf. *ST* II-II 23, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, q. 35, a. 1, c.: “[*acedia*] ita deprimit animum hominis ut nihil agere libeat; sicuti ea quae sunt acida etiam frigida sunt. Et ideo acedia importat quoddam taedium operandi [sloth . . . is an oppressive sorrow, which, to wit, so weighs upon man’s mind, that he wants to do nothing; thus acid things are also cold. Hence sloth implies a certain weariness of work].

participation of the Holy Spirit,<sup>31</sup> we may conceive virtuous action as an obedience to, an agreement with, the Spirit who attracts us to the good.

We have seen that action is born from within the movement of love. Particular actions should therefore not be considered in isolation from one another, but rather within an intentional dynamic toward a communion of persons. The first act of freedom (*electio*) within this dynamic is precisely the choice of the friend, considered as an end in himself. Indeed, daily experience makes us aware that we carry out each act, even the simplest and the most ordinary, in light of a specific end, which we may call a “proximate” end. If we reflect a bit, we will see that this proximate end leads us to another end, which brings us to yet another, and so on . . . . The moment arrives, however, when the question “Why are you doing this?” no longer finds an answer in a further end, but is resolved in that end itself: “I do it, because I’m doing it.” We reach just this moment when we encounter the human person as a value in himself: “I do it for you.” The human person must therefore be considered as an ultimate end, one that is “relative,” however, to the ultimate, “absolute” end: God.

#### *b. The paralysis of action*

The foregoing helps us grasp the seriousness of acedia as an aversion to action (*taedium operandi*). Acedia, paralyzing the dynamism of action, impedes communion with the other and the gift of self that enables it. As a “torpor with respect to good works,” it concerns the beatitude to which these acts ultimately lead. Acedia is a sin against charity, precisely because it undoes the action of the Holy Spirit within human action, and it turns the human person away from his original orientation toward relationship with God and the joy which pours forth from it: it is truly a “theological” vice.

Acedia, then, is a profound withdrawal into self. Action is no longer perceived as a gift of oneself, as the response to a prior love that calls us, enables our action, and makes it possible. It is seen instead as an uninhibited seeking of personal satisfaction in the fear of “losing”

---

<sup>31</sup>Cf. II-II 23, a. 3, ad 3: “*Caritas est dignior anima, inquantum est participatio quaedam Spiritus Sancti*” [charity is superior to the soul, in as much as it is a participation of the Holy Spirit].

something. The desire to save one's "freedom" at any price reveals, in reality, a deeper enslavement to the "self." There is no longer any room for an abandonment of the self to the other or for the joy of gift; what remains is sadness or bitterness within the one who distances himself from the community and who, being separated from others, finds himself likewise separated from God.

### 2.3 *Christ saves us from acedia*

St. Thomas did not stop with this dismal vision of human action under the threat of acedia. His conception of man and of morality is thoroughly positive: if acedia is a grave illness, it is not irremediable for all that. The Angelic Doctor, in a superb text from the *Summa contra gentiles* on the fittingness of the Incarnation,<sup>32</sup> opens up for us new perspectives on action "in Christ." Countering man's despair at the enormity of a vocation that he feels unable to achieve, the Incarnation of Christ offers a new principle of action that rescues man from the *taedium operandi* and allows him to open his heart once again to the gift of divine friendship. Christ, both true God and true man, achieves within himself, in a singular and unique way, the union between Creator and creature that God desired and to which man is called, if he agrees to open himself to the gift of divine friendship.

Counteracting man's temptation to reduce the object of his desire to ephemeral worldly goods, the Incarnation resuscitates man's hope by revealing to him his dignity.<sup>33</sup> Called to participate in divine life, man requires a particular affective disposition that will allow him

---

<sup>32</sup>*Summa contra gentiles* (=SCG) IV, chap. 54 (Lethielleux, t. 4, [Paris, 1961], 282–287), English translation: *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, vol. 4: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*: "*Ad hoc autem deduci poterat quod rebus infra Deum existentibus inhaereret ut fini, ignorando suae dignitatem naturae. . . . Hanc igitur hominis dignitatem, quod scilicet immediata Dei visione beatificandus sit, convenientissime Deus ostendit per hoc quod ipse immediate naturam humanam assumpsit*" (Lethielleux, 282–285)[but man was able to be misled into this clinging as an end to things less than God in existence by his ignorance of the worthiness of his nature. . . . Therefore, this dignity of man—namely, that in the immediate vision of God his beatitude is to be found—was most suitably manifested by God by His own immediate assumption of human nature (O'Neil, 228–229)].

to achieve this fulfillment.<sup>34</sup> The *gift of wisdom* is given by the Holy Spirit precisely in order to import the knowledge by connaturality that enables its possessor to “judge all things” (1 Cor 2:15). The Incarnation already gives man a foretaste (*praelibatio*)<sup>35</sup> of what will be his ultimate fulfillment and allows him to enter into a more intimate friendship (*familiarior*) with his Creator.<sup>36</sup>

For St. Thomas Aquinas, then, acedia is the enemy of spiritual joy, the joy engendered by charity and that is its first fruit. This joy (*gaudium*) of charity is born of graced participation in divine life, that begins on earth and comes to completion in heaven and transformation in God. Extraordinarily dynamic, this joy powerfully enables action,<sup>37</sup> as it is the unfolding of love in the presence of the loved Reality, God himself. The one who brings us into relationship with the God of love is the Holy Spirit: it is through the Spirit, therefore, that spiritual joy

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.: “*Cum beatitudo hominis perfecta in divina fruitione consistat, oportuit affectum hominis ad desiderium divinae fruitionis disponi*” (Lethielleux, 286–287) [since man’s perfect beatitude consists in the enjoyment of divinity, man’s love had to be disposed toward a desire for the enjoyment of divinity (O’Neil, 230)].

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.: “*Quia beatitudo perfecta hominis in tali cognitione Dei consistit quae facultatem omnis intellectus creati excedit . . . necessarium fiat quandam huiusmodi cognitionis praelibationem in homine esse, qua dirigeretur in illam plenitudinem cognitionis beatae : quod quidem fit per fidem*” [since man’s perfect beatitude, furthermore, consists in the sort of knowledge of God which exceeds the capacity of every created intellect . . . there had to be a certain foretaste of this sort of knowledge in man which might direct him to that fullness of blessed knowledge; and this is done through faith (O’Neil 229)].

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.: “*Ad hoc igitur quod familiarior amicitia esset inter hominem et Deum, expediens fuit homini quod Deus fieret homo, quia etiam naturaliter homo homini amicus est: ut sic, dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*” (Lethielleux, 286–287) [therefore, to get greater familiarity in friendship between man and God it was helpful for man that God became man, since even by nature man is man’s friend; and so in this way, while we know God visibly, we may (through Him) be borne to love of things invisible (O’Neil, 231)].

<sup>37</sup>T.-M. Hamonic, “Acedia et l’ennui spirituel selon St. Thomas,” in *L’ennui. Féconde mélancolie*, ed. D. Nordon (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1998), 95–96: “Joy is the diffusion of affectivity, which expands, so to speak, in order better to appreciate and savor the goodness of the object, the goodness that the initial love had already sensed. Joy, particularly when it is spiritual, powerfully enhances action . . . . Moreover, insofar as joy is fed by the perfection of the work, it is in its interest to pursue its fulfillment as completely as possible. The sign of perfection attained, joy redounds as a principle of increased vitality.”

comes to us.<sup>38</sup> Having been saved from acedia by the Incarnation of the Son, we must allow ourselves to be moved by the Spirit, to be true children of God (Rm 8:14).

Until now, we have seen how two privileged witnesses of theological and monastic tradition, Evagrius and St. Thomas, regarded the seriousness and the menace of acedia. But how does it stand today? We rarely hear of acedia; it appears to be an outdated issue. However, if it is the chief obstacle to the full realization of man in God, shouldn't it still be relevant to talk about today? We will see that and how this is the case in what follows.

### *3. How acedia is still a problem for Christians*

Moroseness, lassitude, dejection, sadness, discouragement, disgust with life, melancholy, boredom, depression . . . . The list could continue indefinitely. "Acedia" means all these ills and there is no need to venture far to find any of them. Whether individually or collectively, good spirits are rare. Our purpose is not to analyze the causes of the disenchantment of today's world. We simply wish to suggest a few of the ways in which acedia is still a problem for *the Christian life*, in other words, in the life of the one who, by his baptismal vocation, is already a member of the Body of Christ and is oriented, even without his awareness, toward full participation in the life of God. We will concentrate here on the most radical and dramatic symptom: acedia may appear as a veritable disintegration of the human person.

#### *a. The loss of sense*

---

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *SCG IV*, chap. 22 (Lethielleux, 140): *Quia igitur Spiritus Sanctus Dei nos amicos constituit, et eum in nobis habitare facit et nos in ipso, ut ostensum est; consequens est ut per Spiritum Sanctum gaudium de Deo . . . habemus* [since, then, the Holy Spirit constitutes us God's friends, and makes Him dwell in us, and us dwell in Him . . . it follows that through the Holy Spirit we have joy in God (O'Neil, 126)].

It has been said “the moral life is the choice to give sense to passing time.”<sup>39</sup> This is true if we attribute to the word “sense” its double meaning of *significance* and *direction*. St. Thomas explained moral action as directed, focused toward one goal: the vision of God, that is, participation in His own life. It is this goal that endows action with its meaning, its sense, in such a way that this action may become an anticipation, a preparation for beatitude. From this perspective, acedia reveals itself as the temptation to view the moral life as (a) *non-sense*. We thus see acedia’s profoundly immoral nature: acedia is the claim that absurdity may be the final verdict on existence. Does it not thus come close to what Sartre calls “nausea”?<sup>40</sup>

Here we find ourselves face to face with what is surely the most dangerous aspect of acedia: the temptation to *nihilism*.<sup>41</sup> Nihilism is a hatred of being,<sup>42</sup> a dis-location of the human person from the universe of being, that is, an uprooting of man from his proper place: in a word, it is man’s departure from his home. We see here the most serious threat to the dignity of the human person, a genuine spiritual depression. Indeed, nihilism views reality as unintelligible, deprived of meaning in and for itself: the very concept of truth is refused as non-

---

<sup>39</sup>X. Thévenot, *Avance en eau profonde! Camet spiritual* (Paris: Cerf/DDB, 1997), 45.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *La nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 182: “The word Absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn’t find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn’t need it: I thought without words, *on* things, *with* things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent. Serpent or claw or root or vulture’s talon, what difference does it make. And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity.”

<sup>41</sup>On the subject of contemporary nihilism, see: S. Natoli, *I nuovi pagani* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1995), 83–98; V. Possenti, *Il nichilismo teoretico e la “morte della metafisica,”* (Rome: Armando Editore, 1995), esp. 15–35; 125–167; F. Volpi, *Il nichilismo* (Bari: Ed. Laterza, 1996).

<sup>42</sup>M. Léna, *Eloge du temps ordinaire*, in *Christus* 157 (1993): 18–28: “Here morosity finally removes its mask: its true name is nihilism, the loss of the taste for being as it offers and withdraws itself under the fragile “species” of “sensed”—that is, directed and meaningful—temporality. For the nihilist, the past is dead, and the future is moving towards death. Why bother remembering or making commitments, why bother hoping? When the sense of time is lost, in a muddle of boredom and satiation, it is the sense of being itself that is spoiled” (22).

sense, meaningless. Nihilism denies that there is any dynamism to human life. We see here how Thomas' intuition of the threat acedia poses to action demonstrates a remarkable perceptiveness: acedia blocks the orientation toward the ultimate end; nihilism confirms this blockage and goes even further, denying the possibility of an end in the first place. Acedia exhibits the desire to get rid of God. Man has attempted to assert his self-creation, yet the result has only been nonsense.<sup>43</sup>

*b. The temptation to despair*

When the sense of life disappears, acedia begets the first of its daughters, the most dreadful of all: despair! Unfortunately, such a loss of hope is alive and well today<sup>44</sup> and, what is worse, even among young people. Are we not here seeing the ultimate consequences of the new understanding of freedom introduced by Ockham? Freedom—no longer understood as the acceptance of our orientation toward the good, but as the possibility of doing what(ever) we want—has asserted its own limitlessness. But instead of generating happiness, it has only served to sharpen cruelly the feeling of dissatis-

---

<sup>43</sup>X. Emmanuelli, in *Famille Chrétienne*, 12 March 1998: "It is as if, approximately two centuries ago, we broke our implicit contract with God, and signed a pact with the devil . . . Satan offered us power, knowledge of good and evil, eternal happiness, on the condition that we renounce God. We renounced God, and the devil granted us our wish . . . We are now coming to the term of the contract, and we are realizing that we have been had. We possess everything, but we don't have God. We have power, but we have lost its meaning. Our society that sweats anxiety . . . is going to disappear."

<sup>44</sup>The last Synod for the European region correctly diagnosed an absence of hopefulness as one of the characteristics of our time. Cf. *Jésus-Christ vivant dans son Église, source d'Espérance pour l'Europe*. Instrumentum Laboris de la deuxième Assemblée spéciale pour l'Europe du Synode des évêques, n. 11–15, in DC n. 2210 (1999), 768–770.

faction.<sup>45</sup> The fall of the idols that man had constructed in order to replace God now causes man to sink into desperation.<sup>46</sup>

Now, St. Thomas demonstrated that the root of despair lies in acedia. Acedia is a lack of love, the lack of the greatest Love; it ruptures the *élan* of hope and can lead as far as the refusal of life itself: it is a genuine *flirtation with death*.<sup>47</sup> Acedia is at the core of contemporary despair in being, a true sin against the Holy Spirit in which the self refuses to be open to Love and forgiveness.<sup>48</sup> Evagrius was not wrong

---

<sup>45</sup>“Today, when the promises of unlimited freedom have been made the most of, we are beginning to understand afresh this saying about the ‘sorrow of the world.’ The forbidden joys lose their attraction the moment they are no longer forbidden. They had and have to be radicalized, the pitch increasingly raised, and nevertheless seem finally flat and stale because they are all finite while the hunger is for the infinite” (Joseph Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, trans. Robert Nowell [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991], 69).

<sup>46</sup>Cf. G. Danneels, *Intervention au VIe Symposium des Evêques d’Europe, à Rome, en octobre 1985*, in DC n. 1906 (1985): 1073: “Everywhere we are witnessing the fall of idols—science, progress—that have lost their halo. They have become—what they never should have ceased to be—tools in the hands of men with which to construct right and wrong, temples and tombs. All this has led among many people to a feeling of ‘disenchantment’ and disillusion, boredom, unhappiness, solitude, depression . . . . Our era is marked by a great spiritual ‘void,’ the ‘*taedium vitae*’ and ‘acedia’ are found among many of our contemporaries.”

<sup>47</sup>“The deepest root of this sorrow is the lack of any great hope and the unattainability of any great love: everything one can hope for is known, and all love becomes the disappointment of finiteness in a world whose monstrous surrogates are only a pitiful disguise for profound despair. And in this way the truth becomes ever more tangible that the sorrow of the world leads to death: it is only flirting with death, the ghastly business of playing with power and violence, that is still exciting enough to create an appearance of satisfaction. ‘If you eat it you must die’—for a long time this has no longer been just a saying from mythology [Gn 3:3]” (Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, 69–70).

<sup>48</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 43: “In the Christian system of virtues despair, that is to say, the radical antithesis of faith and hope, is labelled as the sin against the Holy Spirit because it excludes the latter’s power to heal and to forgive and thereby rejects salvation. Corresponding to this is the fact that in the new religion ‘pessimism’ is the sin of all sins, for to doubt optimism, progress, utopia, is a frontal attack on the spirit of the modern age: it is to dispute its fundamental creed on which its security rests, even though this is always under threat in view of the weakness of the sham god of history.” Also see John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* 46: “And the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit consists precisely in the radical refusal to accept this forgiveness.”



when he said that acedia could hasten man into the gaping abyss of self-destruction.<sup>49</sup>

*c. The refusal of one's own greatness*

One of the daughters of acedia, according to St. Thomas, is *pusillanimity*. It is the vice contrary to magnanimity, that is, generosity of soul. It is the inability to believe in the magnitude of the vocation to which God calls us: to become participants in the divine nature.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, we come back to the abhorrence of being of which we spoke earlier, the hatred that impels man to embrace his own destruction.<sup>51</sup> It is astonishing to see how, in the beginning, man was tempted by pride: he wanted “to be like God” (Gn 3:5), in other words, he wanted to become God without God, or against God; he was guilty of presumption. Today, we witness the opposite: we judge

---

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, 70–71: “We had to shake off the Big Brother God who is spying on us in order to be free, take back into ourselves the God projected into the heavens and ourselves rule over creation as God. Thus there arose in fact a kind of spirit and will that was and is opposed to life and is a dominion of death. The more perceptible this becomes the more the original intention turns into its opposite while remaining trapped in the same point of departure: man who only wanted to be his own creator and to reassemble creation himself with a better form of evolution he had thought out himself—this man ends in self-negation and self-destruction. He finds it would be better if he were not there.”

<sup>50</sup>“Man does not trust himself to his own true dimension but wants to be “more realistic.” Metaphysical inertia would on this account be identical with that false humility that has become so common today: man does not want to believe that God is concerned about him, knows him, loves him, watches over him, is close to him” (ibid., 70).

<sup>51</sup>Cf. P. Ide, *Soyez toujours prêts à rendre compte de la désespérance qui est en vous!*, in *Sources Vives* 80 (1998): 5–15: “The primary source of acedia is a lack of magnanimity, a long forgotten virtue, grounded in the right vision of the dignity of our human vocation: the man who claims to be a ‘realist’ refuses to believe himself destined to live in God and with God. Desperation as such is born from a basic hatred of man; this hatred often takes the form of an allegedly scientific reduction of his humanity to the status of an animal: man is an erect ape. In deep ecology (cf. Eugen Drewermann), the hatred is still more radical, and transforms into an attitude of self-punishment by which man, guilty of tyranny over nature, suffers for the crime committed against it by accepting his own destruction.”

that it would be better not to exist at all;<sup>52</sup> we are guilty of pusillanimity. It is precisely these two vices that St. Thomas says are opposed to magnanimity, one by excess, the other, by default.<sup>53</sup>

The soul gives itself to God, and confronts an insurmountable test in being faithful to this gift. Meeting this refusal, it is necessary once again to inform man of his own greatness, as St. Leo preached vigorously in the fifth century<sup>54</sup> and Joseph Pieper prophesied in 1935.<sup>55</sup> We need to recover the Thomistic understanding of the role of the Incarnation of Christ we saw above:<sup>56</sup> Christ came to give back to us the hope of accomplishing our vocation to be sons in the Son; he came to remind us of our own greatness, and to open for us the path

---

<sup>52</sup>“Today there is a remarkable hatred among people for their own greatness. Man sees himself as the enemy of life, of the balance of creation, as the great disturber of the peace of nature (which would be better off if he did not exist), as the creature that went wrong. His salvation and the salvation of the world would on this view consist of his disappearing, of his life and soul being taken back from him, of what is specifically human vanishing so that nature could return to its unconscious perfection in its own rhythm and with its own wisdom of dying and coming into being” (Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, 70).

<sup>53</sup>Cf. ST II-II 133, 1, c: “*Sicut per praesumptionem aliquis excedit proportionem suae potentiae, dum nititur ad maiora quam possit; ita etiam pusillanimus deficit a proportione suae potentiae, dum recusat in id tendere quod est suae potentiae commensuratum*” [now just as presumption makes a man exceed what is proportionate to his power, by striving to do more than he can, so pusillanimity makes a man fall short of what is proportionate to his power, by refusing to tend to that which is commensurate thereto].

<sup>54</sup>Leo the Great, *Sermon I pour la Nativité* (SC 22, 73): “Become aware, O Christian, of thy dignity.”

<sup>55</sup>Joseph Pieper, *Lieben—hoffen—glauben* (Munich, 1986), 232: “It is not through ‘working’ that one annihilates despair (at least consciousness of it) but only through the clear-sighted greatness of spirit that the greatness of one’s own existence expects and demands and through the blessed encouragement of hope in eternal life” (quoted in Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, 72).

<sup>56</sup>SCG IV, ch. 54.

to heaven.<sup>57</sup> By his resurrection, he takes us upon his shoulders to carry us all the way to the Father.<sup>58</sup>

Let us add that the greatness of the human vocation is not limited to the individual aspect of human existence; it must extend to all of society, in order for it to be truly free and human.<sup>59</sup> It has been said that our time is stamped by a certain “cultural acedia.”<sup>60</sup> Confronted by it, Christians have the responsibility of knowing how to give an account of their faith: in this way, they will contribute to the fight against the fragmentation of knowledge acedia causes.<sup>61</sup>

#### *d. False humility or sadness about the good*

---

<sup>57</sup>This is sung in the Easter Sunday sequence attributed to Adam de Saint-Victor, *Salve dies dierum gloria*, that proclaims in stanza 6: “*Desperante mundo remedium, dum tenerent cuncta silentium, Deus Pater emisit Filium desperatis*” [As the world despaired of help, while all things kept silence, God the Father sent out the Son to those who had despaired].

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, stanza 9: “*Resurrexit liber ab inferis, Restaurator humani generis, ovem suam reportans humeris ad suprema*” [“He rose free from the dead, the Restorer of the human race, carrying his sheep on his shoulders to heaven”].

<sup>59</sup>“A society that turns what is specifically human into something purely private . . . will of its nature be sorrowful, a place of despair: it rests on a diminution of human dignity. A society whose public order is consistently determined by agnosticism is not a society that has become free but a society that has despaired, marked by the sorrow of man who is fleeing from God and in contradiction with himself” (Ratzinger, *To Look on Christ*, 72).

<sup>60</sup>Cf. A. Scola, *Ospitare il reale. Per una “idea” di Università* (PUL-Mursia, 1999), 111: “Today’s society is characterized by a certain cultural acedia (if we look closely, this observation is not belied in the proliferation of ‘cultural’ pages in the newspapers, which really mostly just offer the same products of mass consumption). Being disinclined to be curious about what we are, what happens to us, and what we do, we are too lazy to undertake that ‘cultural work’ . . . that human life itself naturally asks of us.”

<sup>61</sup>“Even the Christian community has not always realized the profound malaise the Catholic conscience suffers on account of a faith that does not ask for reasons and so lacks cultural bite. The truth is that culture rightfully belongs to Christian experience, which is the fullness of the *humanum*. Culture characterizes Christian experience from its emergence in Baptism and accompanies it to its highest possible fulfillment: martyrdom, the supreme paradigm of existence in Christ (*en Christo*)” (*ibid.*).

The refusal of the greatness of man and the vocation to which he is called can cleverly hide behind the semblance of humility: man claims not to be worthy of God's love. Yet such a reaction reveals, once again, an overly anthropocentric perspective; in reality, it is God who loved us first (1 Jn 4:10), without any merit earned by us (Rm 5:8). The love of God is not a result of our personal sanctity; rather, it is our sanctity that depends on the love of God for us, and must be a free and loving response to it. This is why mock modesty is really the worst pride, which refuses to be open to the infinite in order to be satisfied by what lies within reach.<sup>62</sup> This is the temptation to be "reasonable."<sup>63</sup>

St. Thomas carefully analyzes the error that would claim to identify acedia with humility.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, humility is not the depreciation of oneself; on the contrary, it is good to aim always higher, as long as one does not rely solely on one's own strength but places one's trust

---

<sup>62</sup>This is also noted by M.-D. Molinié, *Du désespoir à l'adoration*, in *Famille Chrétienne* 1161 (13 April 2000): 7–10: "Deep down inside of us there lies a sly resistance. I believe the most incurable and deep-seated pride—that of the angels, perhaps—consists in refusing to welcome the infinite in order to 'be happy' with what is at hand. Such a pride takes on the guise of humility: 'I do not ask for so much, I do not aim so high! This infinite happiness is quite beautiful, but too much for me.' And secretly we are thinking; 'That is beyond me, because it does not come from within me'" (9).

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 9–10: "Satan often arouses in us a mock modesty that is the worst form of self-importance and the refusal to look up. We hope not to be devoured, either by Good or by Evil. Satan drives us to be reasonable, not carried away by anything—neither by the madness of darkness or by that of Love. The virtuous man must not be mad for anything, not even for joy . . . not even for God. The curse of the Apocalypse applies to this sin: 'If you were cold or hot . . .' It is better to be wrong about the infinite than to reject it!"

<sup>64</sup>*ST II-II 35, 1, ad 3*: "*Ad humilitatem pertinet ut homo, defectus proprios considerans seipsum non extollat. Sed hoc non pertinet ad humilitatem, sed potius ad ingratitude, quod bona quae quis a Deo possidet contemnat. Et ex tali contemptu sequitur acedia; de his enim tristatur quae quasi mala vel vilia reputamus. Sic igitur necesse est ut aliquis aliorum bona extollat quod tamen bona sibi divinitus provisa non contemnat: quia sic ei tristia redderentur*" [It is a sign of humility if a man does not think too much of himself, through observing his own faults; but if a man contemns the good things he has received from God, this, far from being a proof of humility, shows him to be ungrateful: and from such like contempt results sloth, because we sorrow for things that we reckon evil and worthless. Accordingly we ought to think much of the goods of others, in such a way as not to disparage those we have received ourselves, because if we did they would give us sorrow].

in God's help.<sup>65</sup> In the *Summa contra gentiles*, Thomas also denounces the subtle temptation to reduce the object of one's desire to a "bestial happiness."<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Joyful perseverance

In the end, the strategy we must use against the demon of acedia may be summed up as follows: joyful perseverance. "Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Ps 50:12). This is the prayer that must dwell in our heart when acedia strikes. It summarizes perfectly our spiritual attitude in the face of temptation. We are radically saved, resurrected with Christ: our sadness has been forever transformed into joy (Jn 16:20).<sup>67</sup> We must exhibit and witness to this *gaudium* born of the Resurrection of Christ. We are called to a marvelous work: to contribute, in our own feeble manner—that is, by our excellent action—to the movement towards fulfillment in Christ. This requires magnanimity, a greatness of spirit.

Joy is the criterion that cannot lie, the spiritual barometer that informs us of our spiritual life.<sup>68</sup> A Carthusian understood this

---

<sup>65</sup>ST II-II 161, 2, ad 2: *Quod aliquis ex confidentia divini auxilii in majora tendat, hoc non est contra humilitatem; praesertim cum ex hoc aliquis magis apud Deum exaltetur quod ei se magis per humilitatem subjicit* [to aim at greater things through confidence in God's help, is not contrary to humility; especially since the more one subjects oneself to God, the more is one exalted in God's sight].

<sup>66</sup>SCG IV, ch. 54: "Ignorance of the dignity of their own nature can lead men to cling to realities (such as their end) that are inferior to God. Hence the reason why many, seeing in themselves only their corporal, sensory nature shared with the rest of the animals, seek a type of bestial happiness in the world of bodies and in the pleasures of the flesh."

<sup>67</sup>The joy of the Resurrection is a spiritual joy, the true *gaudium*, as Christ proclaims in Jn 16:20: "*Tristitia vestra convertetur in gaudium*" [your sorrow will be turned into joy].

<sup>68</sup>John Paul II states in *Tertio millennio adveniente*, 16: "*The term 'Jubilee' speaks of joy; not just an inner joy but a jubilation which is manifested outwardly, for the coming of God is also an outward, visible, audible and tangible event, as Saint John makes clear (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). It is thus appropriate that every sign of joy at this coming should have its own outward expression. This will demonstrate that the Church rejoices in salvation. She invites everyone to rejoice, and she tries to create conditions to ensure that the power of salvation may be shared by all.*"

perfectly: “Pain is the gaze upon oneself; joy is our eyes upon God.”<sup>69</sup> This joy is *gaudium*, the fruit of communion with personal being.<sup>70</sup> It is an anticipation, in faith, of the complete and ultimate union with the God of Love. While acedia is the sin contrary to this *gaudium*, it does have one advantage: unlike all other thoughts, it is not followed by any other. On the contrary, Evagrius tells us, an extraordinary sense of peace and ineffable joy emerge following the battle with it.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, it is this joy that St. Anthony experienced when he conquered acedia.<sup>72</sup> Although a sin against *gaudium*, acedia leads us to joy—if only we learn how to resist it and remain faithful. Thus, the one who endures will hear the Lord say to him: “Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master!” (Mt 25:21).<sup>73</sup>

*Conclusion: “You are not of the world” (Jn 15:19)*

The test of acedia to which the desert monk was subjected is the same for every Christian in the world. It is not peculiar to a monastic setting, but is rather an integral part of the very condition of

---

<sup>69</sup>Dom A. Guillerand, *Écrits spirituels* (Rome: Benedettine di Priscilla, 1966), t. 2, 226.

<sup>70</sup>J. Mouroux, *Sens chrétien de l’homme*, (coll. Théologie 6) (Paris: Aubier, 1945), 11: “In communion with truth, with greatness, with beauty, with spiritual persons: here is where the depth of man is found. Without knowing it, it is to this fullness, which is at once both entirely filled with peace but also thrilling, that man eternally aspires. More than simply a response to success in some endeavor or attempt, true joy is the fruit of a communion realized in its fulfillment. And because it achieves the deepest, most profound communion, that of living persons, this love is strength without equal and the source of joy that does not fade.”

<sup>71</sup>Evagrius, *Praktikos* 12 (SC 171, 526).

<sup>72</sup>*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* 1 (SC 387, 336): “It was an angel of the Lord sent to Anthony to correct and to strengthen him. And he heard the angel say to him: ‘Do as much and you will be saved.’ Hearing these words, he felt much joy and courage, and doing this, he was saved.”

<sup>73</sup>Mt 25:21: *Serve bone et fidelis . . . intra in gaudium Domini tui* [good and faithful servant, enter into the ‘joy of your Lord’]. It is noteworthy that the term *gaudium* here undoubtedly refers to a dwelling; the servant enters into joy just as he enters the eternal abode of the Father. We see therefore how acedia, being the sin contrary to joy, makes us leave our true home.

the Christian in the world. This is why we can say that acedia is, from a certain perspective, the sin par excellence. “In the world, you will have tribulation (*thlipsin*)” (Jn 16:33). It is precisely this expression that Anthony uses when acedia torments him.<sup>74</sup> We may deduce from this that acedia drives man to turn his back on the condition of tribulation that characterizes the Christian living *in* the world without being *of* the world.<sup>75</sup> In this way, acedia invites the Christian to live as if he were *of* the world.

On the contrary, Christ tells us: “You are not of the world” (Jn 15:19) and St. Paul goes further to say: “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2). Spiritual warfare is an inherent part of life as a Christian: it consists in attaining the freedom to live peacefully in one’s heart in order to dwell there in God. The dwelling not to be abandoned at any price, is thus the locus of Christian action, which unfolds in space and time, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves the Christian from within and allows him to anticipate through his action the final meeting in the everlasting dwelling place: the Father’s house. Indeed, here below action itself possesses a home, and this dwelling place is the Church.<sup>76</sup> It is therefore in the Church that we will attain true freedom as God’s children, according to the words left to us by St. Augustine in the days of acedia: “Do not seek to be liberated by distancing yourself from the house of your liberator!”<sup>77</sup>—*Translated by Christina Strafaci.\**

---

<sup>74</sup>*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* 1 (SC 387, 336): “What can I do in my state of affliction (*én tè thlipsei mou*)?”

<sup>75</sup>As interpreted by R. Brague, *L’image et acedia*, 217: “We can grasp what is at stake in acedia. It speaks to the cardinal difference in Christianity between being *in* the world and being *of* the world. To be present *in* the world is only possible for those who are not *of* the world. Acedia makes simply untenable a presence *in* the world distinct from being *of* the world.”

<sup>76</sup>For further discussion, see Jean-Charles Nault, “L’accidia: tentazione di uscire dalla dimora dell’agire?” in *Quale dimora per l’agire? Dimensioni ecclesologiche della morale*, ed. L. Melina and P. Zanor (Lezioni & dispense) (Rome: PUL/Mursia, 2000), 243–256.

<sup>77</sup>St. Augustine, *Enarratio in Psalmum XCIX*, 7 (CCL 39, 1397): *Non te sic quaeras manumitti, ut recedas de domo manumissoris tui!* Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 87.

\*This translation is a slightly shortened form of the original text.

**JEAN-CHARLES NAULT, O.S.B.**, is a Benedictine priest at the Abbaye de Fontenelle in Saint-Wandrille, France.