

In *Spirit and History*, William F. Murphy argues that, for de Lubac, "the Christian moral life, which corresponds especially to the tropological sense of Scripture, is properly situated within the broader context of . . . Christian mysticism." On March 12, 2000, during the Mass of the first Sunday of Lent at Saint Peter's Basilica, Pope John Paul II offered a "request for pardon" for the past and present sins of the Church's members. In *Notes and Comments*, we present the text of the homily pronounced during the Mass, in which the pope speaks of the "purification of memory" that is one of the chief characteristics of the great jubilee, emphasizing both the "objective responsibility which Christians share as members of the mystical body" and the offer of reconciliation in Christ who "out of love took our guilt upon himself."

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Concupiscence and Desire from the Point of View of Theological Anthropology

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Yet the spirit's absolute desire, *appetitus innatus* (innate appetite) though it be, is simultaneously, in relation to man's last end, an inefficacious desire. Although an absolute desire for the vision of God is inscribed in man's nature, man cannot achieve this final fulfillment by his own power. This, then, is the ultimate core of the paradox of man: God has destined man for a fulfillment that transcends all of the creature's expectations. . . .

1. Man is Riven by Inner Conflict

The Second Vatican Council, in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, states that man is riven by inner conflict. The Council locates the deepest root of this inner contradiction in the original

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sin by which man, in an act of rebellion against God, misused his freedom, thus leaving a permanent fissure that has run through human existence ever since. When man looks into his heart, he realizes that he is inclined to evil and entangled in guilt. The breakdown of relationships, sickness and pain, and, above all, the awareness of the inevitability of death, bring home to him the fragility of his life. Yet, at the same time, he experiences an unquenchable desire for a fully realized life, salvation, meaning, security, and love that remains ultimately unfulfilled in this life. Paul describes this inner cleavage in man in the Letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rm 7:15). "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:19). The Council brings out the implications of this inner contradiction: "As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 13).

The ninth and tenth commandments of the Decalogue (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21) forbid misdirected desire. It is not necessary to enter here into the precise meaning of the Hebrew terms *chamad* and *'wah*; our purpose is rather to attempt a definition and interpretation of the categories of concupiscence (*epithymia*, *concupiscentia*) and desire (*appetitus*, *desiderium*), which are, after all, central to theological anthropology and ethics. According to Karl Rahner, the theological concept of concupiscence is "surely one of the hardest in dogmatics."¹ We could say something similar about man's natural desire.

2. The Theological Definition of Concupiscence and Desire

2.1 Concupiscence (concupiscentia)

Taken in a pre-ethical sense—as meaning spontaneous drives that precede free decision and tend towards subjectively appetible goods—the "spontaneous concupiscent act" is part of human nature.² Yet, whereas animal drives are fixed by instinct, man's specific task is to integrate the diverse, often divergent, desires of his (pre-personal) nature into the unity of his self-being

¹K. Rahner, "Der theologische Begriff der Konkupiszenz," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 1, 7th ed. (Einsiedeln, 1964), 377.

²*Ibid.*, 395.

as a person. This need for integration indicates the fact that man is a unity of intellect and sense, freedom and passion. Although a finite being, he has an infinite vocation, for which he has a natural desire. He is, moreover, subject to an unconditional claim: he must do good and avoid evil, even though his efforts to honor this claim will stretch over a lifetime and will have to overcome a good deal of resistance, both from within and from without. Free being that he is, man can also cling to desires whose tendency runs counter to his ultimate orientation to God as the absolute Good. In such cases, we can speak of "evil concupiscence" or "inclination to evil" (cf. Sir 15:14; 21:11).³

Before turning to what the Bible and the Church's teaching have to say about concupiscence, I would like to comment briefly on the term *epithymia* in Greek thought. We find this term in the context of Platonic and Stoic anthropology. Although the word originally has a neutral meaning among the Greeks, Platonic body-soul dualism treats the body as the seat of base desires and as a limitation of the soul, from which it is imperative to free oneself through ascesis. Stoic ethics, for its part, calls upon its practitioners to neutralize the affections (*pathe*) and to attain perfect freedom from passion (*apatheia* and *ataraxia*), since, in their view, pleasure and desire are pernicious diseases of the soul. This Greek inheritance exercised a long and persistent influence on the theological notion of concupiscence as a sensory desire of the body or flesh in conflict with the spirit.

While Holy Scripture understands concupiscence as a manifestation of the calamitous power of original sin that Adam has unleashed upon the world, it always does so in the perspective of the history of salvation. Of the relevant passages from the Old Testament, we cite only two. After the Flood, God says: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for all man's striving is evil from his youth" (Gn 8:21). The rabbinic doctrine of the "inclination to evil" has left its mark on the wisdom literature of Israel (cf. Sir 15:14; 21:11). Yet the Old Testament, unlike Greek thought, does not immediately identify this inclination with man's sensory dimension, but locates it in man as a unity of body and soul.

Paul describes the above-mentioned inner conflict in man as one between flesh and spirit: "But, I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against

³Cf. J. Schmid, "Böser Trieb," in *LthK*, vol. 2, 2d ed. (1958), 618ff.

the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would" (Gal 5:16f). Rm 7:7–25 is particularly important, inasmuch as it lays the foundation for the New Testament's reflection on concupiscence. Paul sees a connection between sin and concupiscence. The commandment of the Decalogue, "thou shalt not covet" (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21), makes it clear that covetousness does not conform to God's will and is thus an incitement to sin. The use of *epithymia* in the sense of contrariety to God also occurs in the First Letter of John, which admonishes "do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 Jn 2:15f). But, as Paul tells us, we can vanquish these cravings of the flesh through a spiritual "contest" (cf. 1 Cor 9:24–27).

The Messalians (in Greek, the "Euchites," the pray-ers), a multifarious and unorganized ascetical-mystical movement of the fourth century, taught, among other things, that every human soul is inhabited by a demon that cannot be driven out by baptism. In their view, the Holy Spirit or Christ could enter the soul and free it from its passions only by means of prayer and asceticism. Diadochus of Photicea (ca. 400–475), whom we could describe as a moderate reform Messalian refutes this opinion:

Some have opined that grace and sin, that is, the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood, lie concealed together in the spirit of the baptized. It is for this reason, they say, that one person drives his spirit to the good, whereas another immediately drives it to the opposite. I, on the other hand, have understood by the Holy Scriptures and my own perception that before holy baptism, grace moves the soul to the good from the outside, but that Satan, hidden in its depths, tries to block the spirit's every way to the right. However, from the moment when we are reborn, the demon is outside, while grace is inside. . . . To be sure, even then Satan continues to influence the soul, perhaps even more powerfully than before. Obviously, the reason cannot be that he is identical with grace. . . . but that, insinuating himself so to say through the fluidity of the body, he darkens the soul by means of the sweetness of irrational pleasure. God allows this to happen, so that man might be tried by tempest and fire and, if he wills, attain the enjoyment of the good.⁴

We find the same teaching on concupiscence, eleven centuries later, at the Council of Trent.

The Church's magisterium clarifies the theological concept of concupiscence over against two principal misunderstandings.

⁴Diadoque de Photice, *Œuvres spirituelles*, chap. 76 in *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 5, 2d ed.

Against Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, the Church states that concupiscence is not a positive *vigor naturae* (natural power), but a defect in man's original nature (cf. *DH* 378, 1512, 1521). This defect is a consequence of original sin and a stimulus to personal sin (cf. *DH* 1515). On the other hand, the Council of Trent rejects the Reformers' doctrine that concupiscence itself is sin.⁵ Luther shifts the seat of concupiscence from the sensory sphere to the spirit, thereby making it the spirit's fundamental resistance to the divine will. Concupiscence is not just *fomes peccati* (kindling for the fire of sin), as in many schools of medieval Scholasticism, but is identical with original sin itself.

Such, then, is the background against which the Council of Trent speaks of the permanence of concupiscence in the baptized, hence, the justified, in its decree on original sin. Original sin is completely removed in baptism. From then on, *in renatis enim nihil odit Deus* (God hates nothing in the reborn). Concupiscence remains, but is not a sin, unless one freely consents to it:

This Holy Council recognizes and is aware, however, that concupiscence, or the *fomes peccati*, remains in the baptized. Because it is left for man's struggle, it cannot harm those who do not consent to it, but manfully resist it. Rather, he who has "competed according to the rules" will even "be crowned" (2 Tm 2:5). The Catholic Church has never understood the fact that this concupiscence—which the Apostle occasionally calls "sin" (cf. Rm 6:12–15; 7:7; 14–20)—is called sin as if it were truly and properly sin in the reborn, but rather in the sense that it is of sin and inclines to sin." (*DH* 1515)

The burden of Trent's doctrinal definition on this matter is that concupiscence is not identical with original sin. In saying this, we must, however, keep in mind that the Council makes its pronouncements about concupiscence only in the interest of explaining its permanence in the baptized (*renatis*); it says nothing about concupiscence in those who are still in a state of original sin. Although concupiscence originates from sin, inclines to sin (*ex peccato est et ad peccatum inclinatur*), and is like kindling for the fire of sin, it is not itself sin in the proper sense of the word.

⁵Cf. *Confessio Augustana* 2: "Item docent, quod post lapsum Adae omnes homines, secundum naturam propagati, nascantur cum peccato, hoc est, sine metu Dei, sine fiducia erga Deum et cum concupiscentia, quodque hic morbus seu vitium vere sit peccatum" [Furthermore, they teach that, after the fall of Adam, all men, by natural propagation, are born with sin, that is, without fear of God or trust in him, and with concupiscence, and that this disease or vice is truly sin].

Under the primacy of grace, Christian life is a constant struggle against concupiscence (*ad agonem relicta*).⁶

In the Bull *Ex Omnibus Afflictionibus* (1 October 1567), Pope Pius V condemns 79 theses of the Louvain theologian, Michel de Bay (1513–1589), otherwise known as Baius. Although Baius is not liable to the anathema of the Council of Trent, since he does not say that the concupiscence remaining in the baptized is sin, Pius does reject some of his propositions regarding concupiscence. The inclination to sin is not by itself sufficient to make man a sinner, even though it comes from original sin (cf. *DH* 1948). The pope also condemns Baius's assertion that, in those who have fallen into mortal sin, concupiscence is sin (cf. *DH* 1974). The following thesis is rejected for skating too close to the Protestant doctrine of the non-imputation of sin for Jesus Christ's sake: "The perverse movements of concupiscence are—considering the state of fallen man—prohibited by the commandment 'Thou shalt not covet' [Ex 20:17]. Therefore, the man who feels them trespasses against the commandment 'Thou shalt not covet,' even if he does not consent to them, although this trespass is not imputed to him as sin" (*DH* 1975).

The magisterium also rejects Baius's proposition that "God could not have originally created man as he is now born" (*DH* 1955). This rejection implies the Church's teaching that God could have created man with concupiscence, which is not in itself sin:

Concretely, then, concupiscence has a neutral aspect that safeguards the *gratuity* of the freedom from concupiscence that man enjoyed in paradise. In principle, God could therefore have created a human being without original justice (hence, without freedom from concupiscence). . . . To be sure, this "neutrality" is essentially a theological abstraction, for concupiscence as it exists in the concrete historical order (which, in turn, cannot be cleanly detached from the content of the concept itself) is never "neutral."⁷

For the Louvain theologian, and later Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), usually known as Jansenius, the

⁶Cf. Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 2.4: "Concupiscentia igitur tamquam lex peccati manens in membris corporis mortis huius, cum parvulis nascitur, in parvulis baptizatis a reatu solvitur, ad agonem relinquatur" [Concupiscence then, like a law of sin remaining in the members of this body of death, is born with babies, is detached from sin in baptized babies, and is left for the struggle].

⁷J. B. Metz, "Konkupiszenz," in *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, ed. H. Fries (Munich, 1962), 490.

movements of concupiscence are culpable only when the will consents to them—only this consent does not spring from a true freedom, but is a necessary consequence of concupiscence. According to Jansenius, only compulsion imposed from the outside can suppress freedom and responsibility. Thus, as long as man has not yet received the gift of faith, he has no choice but to follow evil concupiscence and to sin in all his actions, but this is an inner necessity that does not remove the voluntary character of the deed. And what is voluntary, says Jansenius, is free. In this sense, Pope Innocent X, in the Constitution *Cum occasione* (31 May 1653), posthumously condemned the following Jansenist thesis as heretical: "In the state of fallen nature, man does not need freedom from necessity to merit and demerit, but only freedom from compulsion" (*DH* 2003).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives the following definition of concupiscence:

Etymologically, "concupiscence" can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason. The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the "flesh" against the "spirit." Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man's moral faculties and, without itself being an offense, inclines man to commit sins. (2515)

2.2 Desire (desiderium)

In classical moral theology, the treatise on sin and guilt contains a chapter on the *peccata interna*, the so-called sins of thought. These sins are distinguished into three kinds: voluntary delight in a forbidden deed that one imagines to oneself, though without intending to carry it out (*delectatio morosa*); the desire, or firm purpose, to carry out the deed (*desiderium*); and the consent to the joy that one feels in actually doing so.⁸ The same distinction could also be applied to ethically good acts that one imagines and intends to perform.

We limit ourselves here to a more detailed discussion only of desire (*desiderium*). In a general sense, we can define desire as an intention of the will directed towards some end that is worthy of being sought. Nevertheless, there is still an uncertainty about

⁸Cf. O. Lottin, *Morale fondamentale* (Tournai, 1954), 58f; A.M. Arregui, *Summarium theologiae moralis ad Codicem Iuris Canonici accommodatum*, 18th ed. (Bilbao, 1961), 65ff (nos. 109–11).

desire, inasmuch as the subject does not know whether or not he can actually attain the end. We all know how often man's desire or longing seeks after impossible things! For this reason, desire can firmly intend an end only if the intellect has already determined that this end is actually attainable.

At the same time, desire has another dimension that far exceeds the scope of the ethical significance that has been the focus of our discussion so far. This dimension is known to theological anthropology as the *desiderium naturale visionis Dei* [the natural desire to see God].⁹ Man is by nature ordered to an end that he cannot attain by his own power, but which is nonetheless the only good that is worth seeking in life: communion with God, ultimately in the blessed vision of him.

Because man is simultaneously spirit and nature, his natural desire to see God is embedded in the natural striving, common to every being, for its perfection.¹⁰ We thus name a fundamental category of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, the *appetitus naturalis* [natural appetite], which provides the ontological framework for the *desiderium naturale visionis Dei*. Although Thomism draws no fundamental difference between *appetitus naturalis* and *desiderium naturale*, it does make a terminological distinction between them: "The term *desiderium naturale* adds to the term *appetitus naturalis* the idea that the will's basic striving can be manifested to the conscious or reflecting subject."¹¹

It follows that the term *desiderium naturale* chiefly, if not exclusively, has the meaning of a striving for a good that the intellect has displayed to the will as worthy to be striven for. Inasmuch as man has a natural inclination to the good in general, he naturally seeks God, insofar as God is the principle and end of nature. Yet God is more than this: he is also the fulfillment of

⁹For a fundamental resource on this issue, see Henri de Lubac's pathbreaking works *Surnaturel* (Paris, 1946; newly reissued, 1991), and *Le Mystère du Surnaturel* (Paris, 1965; newly republished in Cardinal Henri de Lubac, *Œuvres complètes* 12 [Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1999]).

¹⁰Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.1.5: "Cum unumquodque appetat suam perfectionem, illud appetit aliquis ut ultimum finem quod appetit ut bonum perfectum et completivum sui ipsius" [Since each entity strives appetitively for its perfection, someone strives appetitively for that as its last end which it strives for as the good that perfects and completes it].

¹¹J.H. Walgrave, "Het natuurverlangen naar de godsaanschouwing," in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 36 (1974): 242f.

man's yearning for supernatural beatitude.¹² As a spiritual entity, man transcends the universe. For the same reason, no created good can satisfy the infinite scope of his natural desire. But if this is the case, then man's *desiderium naturale* signifies the striving for a perfect happiness that, concretely, can be attained only in the blessed vision of God.

Man's *desiderium naturale* is an absolute desire, because it belongs essentially to his nature:

The spirit . . . does not desire God as the animal desires its prey. It desires him as a gift. It is not in search of an infinite object: it wants the free and gratuitous communication of a personal being. Thus, if, *per impossibile*, it could take possession of its supreme good, it would at that very instant cease to be its good. Do we insist on speaking of an exigency? If so, then we must say that the spirit's sole exigency consists in demanding nothing. It demands that God's offer be free, just as—in a completely different sense—it must itself be free in its acceptance of this offer. It has equally little interest in a happiness of which it could take possession and in a happiness that it merely receives.¹³

Yet the spirit's absolute desire, *appetitus innatus* (innate appetite) though it be, is simultaneously, in relation to man's last end, an inefficacious desire. Although an absolute desire for the vision of God is inscribed in man's nature, man cannot achieve this final fulfillment by his own power. This, then, is the ultimate core of the paradox of man: God has destined man for a fulfillment that transcends all of the creature's expectations: "Nothing comes to him (God) that has not risen from the dead, because no will is good unless it has gone out of itself, in order to make room for God's all-encompassing penetration into itself."¹⁴ Only when man has passed through the final transformation and purification of death will he come to know what is the goal that God has prepared for him.

3. Concupiscence and Desire in Christian Life

The Church's teaching suggests that, in purely formal terms, concupiscence can be something natural. Karl Rahner has made a decisive contribution to rethinking the theological concept of concupiscence. Rahner understands concupiscence as "man's

¹²Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.62.1.3.

¹³H. de Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 483.

¹⁴M. Blondel, *L'Action* (1893), 2d ed. (Paris: PUF, 1950), 384.

spontaneous desire insofar as it precedes his free decision and remains in opposition to it."¹⁵ In his free decision, man deposes over himself as a whole. Yet this total self-disposal is never complete:

There always, and essentially, remains a tension between what man simply finds himself to be (as "nature") and what he wants to make of himself by his free decision (as "person"). . . . The "person" never exhaustively retrieves its nature.¹⁶

The spontaneous act of desire is part of nature, even as it is in need of integration into the free decision of the person. Concupiscence is, in fact, ethically ambiguous, "because it can act as a retardant both for good and for evil, and because it results from man's nature as a material being."¹⁷ But the full theological import of concupiscence does not emerge until we see it within the horizon of the effective order of salvation. God, who wonderfully created man in his dignity, has even more wonderfully restored man by his grace.¹⁸ Grace is thus meant to pervade and form the whole life of the justified. If, and insofar as, concupiscence remains in the life of the recipients of grace, it is concretely experienced as a tangible consequence of original sin: "[T]his concupiscence is possible only in the original sinner, and he experiences it, already as such, as contradicting what he 'really' ought to be, even though this 'really' is not his 'nature,' but his destiny, which, though supernatural, he cannot choose not to have."¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas considers this "concupiscent possession of grace"²⁰ in the effective order of salvation to be an essential manifestation, albeit materially, though not formally, of sin.²¹ At the end of his seminal article, Rahner offers some remarks on how the Christian can deal spiritually with concupiscence: "Concupiscence is . . . not simply the manifestation of sin. In the order of Christ, it is not simply what is left behind in the justified to be

¹⁵K. Rahner, "Der theologische Begriff der Konkupiszenz," 390.

¹⁶Ibid., 393.

¹⁷Ibid., 402.

¹⁸Cf. the *Collecta* of the 3d Mass of Christmas in the *Missale Romanum*.

¹⁹K. Rahner, "Der theologische Begriff der Konkupiszenz," 412.

²⁰J. B. Metz, "Konkupiszenz," 496.

²¹Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.82.3: "Peccatum originale materialiter quidem est concupiscentia, formaliter vero est defectus originalis iustitiae" [Materially speaking, original sin is indeed concupiscence, but formally it is a the defect of original righteousness].

overcome in the eschaton as a principle that contradicts man's nature as it concretely exists in this order. Rather, it is also the form in which the Christian experiences and bears Christ's sufferings."²²

In this context, we can conclude with the question of a spirituality of concupiscence and desire in Christian life. The Christian is tangibly affected by the wound that original sin has inflicted on his nature. Through his death on the Cross, Jesus Christ has finally overcome the power of evil and has opened to us the path to the freedom of God's children. Yet God also desires man's free and resolute cooperation in his own liberation from the enslaving power of sin. The Christian, then, must engage in spiritual struggle, because there are many concupiscent desires in himself that require taming, as Augustine, for example, knew from experience.²³ The Christian tradition has recommended asceticism, meaning a constantly renewed training in the good, as a remedy in the battle against concupiscence. Prayer and fasting have a privileged place here.

Concupiscence and desire thus belong to Christian life in different ways. Concupiscence, as nature's spontaneous desire, must be integrated into the free decision of the person and, in the effective order of salvation, be conquered again and again with the help of grace. Desire for God may increase more and more, although we must always be aware that God does not measure according to man's desire, but fulfills it superabundantly. —Translated by Adrian Walker. □

²²K. Rahner, "Der theologische Begriff der Konkupiszenz," 414.

²³Cf. *Confessiones* 10.41.