St. Leo/Demopolis and St. Francis/Livingston – 8am/10am and 1pm Masses – 1,050 words

Our Lord’s warning in today’s gospel about how we know neither the day nor the hour of his return is a rather chilling one. I often wonder how so many who claim to be believers can live effectively not ready for his return, in spite of his clear admonition. Our capacity for self-delusion is very great. And the devil adds his own temptations besides, telling us that God will come through for us despite our spiritual procrastination; even lying to us by suggesting that there might be a second chance after death, or that no one really goes to hell. But the story of the foolish virgins is a corrective, cautionary tale against such delusions.

Yes, the foolish virgins were not ready, having procrastinated and not kept their lamps filled. They must have put that off for another time – after all, the Master appeared to be delayed in coming: “We’ll get to it eventually; surely it will all work out OK!” But then they were caught by surprise. There is a name for their type of procrastination and it is “sloth”; that is what they were guilty of. Sloth, which is also known as acedia, is the vice by which we neglect spiritual things – even important spiritual matters – that we know we must fulfill. It is a repugnance of the divine goodness, a dullness to spiritual things.¹

A great contemporary spiritual author, Cardinal Robert Sarah, teaches us further on this important concept. He says that “the spiritual and monastic tradition defines [sloth or] acedia...as a sadness that holds the soul in the presence of what ought to be its greatest happiness: its friendship with God”.² And this sadness can lead to flight: fleeing from God and from the sacred. Worldly things often present more immediate gratification and even excitement, whereas spiritual values frequently require great effort and even sacrifice. With sloth, then, we become dull to them – saddened by them, as it were – and we take refuge instead in the worldly.

Let’s consider some examples of how we could be affected by sloth or acedia. Have you ever signed up for a retreat or parish activity, then felt tempted to cancel as it drew near? Have you ever thought about sitting down to read your Bible, then seemingly found a million other things to do? Have you ever felt like delaying going to confession, reasoning that you were not yet ready for it? All these temptations may be manifestations of sloth or acedia – that spiritual sadness that wants to keep us away from God. It charms us with instant gratification and offers us an easier path – for taking up the cross and seeking the Lord is hard.

One of the most challenging aspects of sloth is that it can seem so difficult to overcome. Let’s consider a resolution to pray the Rosary daily: we think about it one day and decide to do it, then get distracted and never get to it. So we get frustrated, even discouraged. We resolve to do it again, but again give in to distraction and busy-ness; and so on. In the end, we might just abandon the resolution: and if we were really foolish, we might even conclude that it was not God’s will for us to pray the Rosary, since we found it so difficult to do. But now the enemy has won; he has succeeded in keeping us from deeper union with God.

Well then, how can we overcome this spiritual dullness, this sadness in the presence of spiritual goods, that we call sloth or acedia? We have to name it for what it is and accept the reality of it: we need to recognize that we face a spiritual temptation and trial. This changes our perspective on it and places us in a more active position against it. Before we named it clearly, we may have felt more its victim; but now that we know what it is and call it out, we start to get an upper hand. And as with all spiritual trials, we must persevere in fighting the fight; eventually, with God’s help, we will prevail.

¹ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 2094, 2733, and 2755.
Practically speaking, this may involve changing our approach to the spiritual things that we had been avoiding. Let’s again consider the Rosary: maybe, instead of trying to sit down for a full 20 minutes to pray all five decades, I should pepper the day with it; I can pray a decade in the morning upon waking, another during my lunch break, another on the way home from work. Now I have three decades, and that’s three more than I had when I kept avoiding it. From there, I can keep working my way up, and eventually pray in longer stretches, doing more than one decade at a time – till I start praying an entire five-decade Rosary each day.

With regard to avoiding going to confession by making excuses, maybe, instead of agonizing over my examination of conscience and continually finding reasons to delay, I should call the priest, make an appointment, and then go and ask him to help me. After all, perhaps the idea of standing in line with everyone else also contribute to the fear and hesitation. The priest will gladly walk you through an examen and help you do the work, as it were. He just wants you to experience the mercy of God! And if you can get that long-delayed confession off your back with his help, it will be much easier to start going regularly in the future.

In this Mass, then, we seek that wisdom of God spoken of in the first reading, which enables us to see our lives more clearly in God’s light and work at better cooperating with his grace. Perhaps we have been struggling with sloth or acedia in this or that area of our spiritual lives, and until now did not really know what it was or how to fix it. But our good Lord will help. He wants us to be ready so that when he does surprise us with his return – whether at the end of our lives or if we should live to see his Second Coming – we will not be found foolishly unprepared, but rather, will be waiting to enter into his great wedding feast.