



LIGHT & LIFE

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OF DUNG, BROKEN SPRIGS & GLORY

FR. JOSEPH SERGOTT, OP

Human suffering may be the greatest obstacle between ourselves and God because we do not understand it. Lacking knowledge, wisdom or faith, we often make uneducated guesses, or to put it more bluntly, ignorant judgments regarding the motives and ways of the Lord.

People often ask, "Why does the loving God allow us to suffer—or worse—seemingly inflict suffering upon us?" The base of our theological foundation is the fact that God is love (1 John 4:16); therefore, all of his objectives, his plans, and his interaction in our lives are always rooted in the principle of divine love. Moreover, if Jesus Christ *died* for us on the cross—knowing all of our sins—the grace from his death and resurrection continues to flow even now toward our salvation and not toward our condemnation (Cf. John 3:17).

Much hidden wisdom can be found in the scripture passage of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). Packed within it are the reasons why the Lord allows our suffering and what he wants us to gain from it. If your life bears no fruit or only some good fruit, God will intervene and break off the dead branches or the *good* little sprigs that will not bear enough fruit—and it will cause pain. You can even be bearing much fruit; however, when the Lord sees the potential to bear more, he will intervene so that you can bear abundant fruit—and it will cause pain. The Master Vinegrower is about saving our souls and us bearing fruit for the kingdom. Thus, he disciplines those he loves for their own good—and it hurts! So, just what kind of fruit is worth all of this pruning? The fruits of joy, peace, unity, patience, kindness, goodness, faith and love (among others) are what God intends for us.

However, sometimes our pain and suffering are self-inflicted; yet, we don't see it. It's easier to blame the Lord or other people. If we are bearing rotten fruit, due to sin or addiction, we will not be at peace or find happiness; we will suffer immensely. So, those caught up in deep sin or addiction will bear rotten fruit that affects their lives *and everyone around*

them. Sin and addiction beget the "fruits" of misery, discord, isolation and despair. So, the Master Vinegrower takes all that, using a four-letter word—DUNG—and he uses it. He takes the bad fruit, which is worthless, dead spiritual dung and is only good for fertilizer, and he lays it at our feet, that through his grace-filled love we may rise from spiritual death.

Sometimes though the greatest fruit is born from deep suffering that is not about our sinfulness. In this case the Lord wants us to share more intimately in his Son's passion and death. In great frustration, many of us cry out, "Why?!" St. Paul says, "The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18) Thus, when we undergo this kind of suffering, the Lord is not afflicting us with suffering for its own sake; rather, through it he wills that we enter deeper into his divine love. Thus, we experience salvation by being purified and sanctified through the fire and power of God's *love*. Thus, even the Blessed Virgin Mary, who never



Pieta - William A. Bouguereau

sinned, heard the words, "and you yourself a sword will pierce," (Luke 2:35) signifying that she herself would participate in her Son's sufferings (and glory) on the cross. In fact, it seems to me that the Blessed Virgin would have desired to be united with her Son in all things, even in his sufferings.

At other times our suffering reflects that of Jesus because he wants us to suffer for those who are in a very difficult situation (even though his suffering alone has redeemed the world), perhaps loved ones, perhaps those whose souls are in peril. So, the Lord gives us suffering to bear that impacts their lives. In this case, we become Christ-like figures.

Regarding suffering, St. Louis de Montfort says, "The glory of one who knows how to suffer is so great that heaven, angels and men, and even God himself, gaze on him with joy as a most glorious sight." (St. Louis de Montfort, *Letter to the Friends of the Cross*, #38)

In addition, we wonder why some people have to die, especially when it is too soon from our perspective. We question, "What sort of punishment is this?" But, if our loving

Continued on page 4

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TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Sadness of Lust & Christ's Call

By Fr. Peter Hannah, O.P.

Before I entered the Dominican Order, I recall a number of conversations with friends and acquaintances who felt comfortable enough with me to ask a burning question. It went something along the lines of, "So, as a priest, you won't be able to...have sex, right?" My "no" response was usually met by a few moments of puzzled silence, then a kind of half-bewildered response like "wow," which often concealed a further question some had the courage to express, like, "but how is that...possible?" I recall one conversation with a young man at the valet service where I worked the summer prior to entering the order, who stared thoughtfully into the distance and, without any sense of irony, confessed, "Man, I could never do that. I feel like sex is my spirituality."

A sense of perplexity at the vocation of celibacy is in a sense natural, but the kinds of responses I experienced are also indicative of the particular "cultural moment" in which you and I are living. Our current culture is a perfect storm of conflicting opinions and standards over what constitutes "ok" sexual behavior. The idea of chastity as an ideal, much less celibate chastity, is unintelligible to many. This atmosphere—indeed crisis in public morality—directly affects the everyday lives of Catholics trying to live the Gospel. All are affected, from young people who, having encountered the ready availability of pornography on the internet, struggle to develop chaste habits; to parents who struggle to raise children emotionally mature enough to handle digital temptations; to adults—parents, single people, priests, religious—who also encounter challenges in this brave new world of sexual mores that is emerging. Here I offer a few reflections for seeing the problem clearly and addressing it, with special awareness of the problem of pornography which has arisen in recent years.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHASTITY TODAY

G.K. Chesterton once quipped that "when it comes to sex, men are born mad." Previous generations had developed cultural norms to help check the "madness," or let us say, "volatility" of sexual desire: reserve in conversation, modesty in dress, expectations of public decency. It is very easy to attack these "old ways," and on many points critique is valid—elements of prejudice against women and puritanical tendencies, for example. The problem today is that the old system has been discarded and no new one has replaced it. The result is a cacaphony of conflicting voices and contradictory standards: pornography is fine but objectification of women is not; adultery is bad, unless the couple decides on an "open" relationship; women should be recognized for their unique contributions, but being a "woman" is a socially constructed fiction, since any biological male can decide to be one. In the midst of this confusion, you have us Catholics doing the best we can to live the Gospel and offer God the best we can in our families, schools, and neighborhoods, and lives.

Obviously the faith involves more than sexual morality, which is only one component of who we are. But it is foolish to think it unimportant. Catholic spirituality through the centuries has always seen chastity as a kind of basis for the spiritual life, which harmonizes and integrates the interior life. Lust blinds the intellect and weakens the will, enervating the two vital springs of our inner life, the mind with which we think, and the heart with which we love. Chastity heals and vitalizes this inner-life, invigorating our soul and causing the image of God to shine within us.

While the challenge of chastity takes many forms, pornography has arisen in recent years to pose a particularly sharp problem. Every older priest I've asked has confirmed that after the rise of high-speed internet, which is to say not too long ago, there has been an enormous spike in men—and increasingly women—battling compulsions fed by this dark underbelly of cyberspace. When I grew up in the '80s and '90s, the rare porn encounters I had were with an occasional "dirty magazine" one of the boys had smuggled into school and would surreptitiously pass around. The percentage of young people today—from high schoolers to as young as elementary school—who have been exposed to, or become regular viewers of, hard core video material online is frightening. My heart has broken for parents who have come to me asking how to address situations where one of their young children has encountered extremely brutal acts of hard core material simply by flipping around on an iPhone. Bruce and Jeannie Hannemann, who run "Reclaim Sexual Health," an online program for overcoming sexual addiction, report that children as young as five and six have contacted them for help. Pediatrician Dr. Michael Wasserman comments, "It's beyond the Wild West out there. You've really taken away the age of innocence."

Scientific study of the effects of pornography is still in its infant stages, but many studies point to how frequent pornography use can (1) rewire the brain similarly to addictive drugs, (2) damage relationships, (3) feed loneliness and depression, (4) effect—like a drug—increased need for more shocking and unseemly material. A litany of resources has emerged to confront this problem, from the non-religiously affiliated "NoFap" and "Fight the New Drug," to the individual work of Christians like Matt Fradd and Peter Kleponis. The US Bishops recently responded to the growing problem in their document "Create in Me a Clean Heart" (available online).

A DEEPER DIAGNOSIS

In his teaching on the virtues, Aquinas explains that growth in one virtue entails growth in others; and likewise that a vice in one area breeds vices in others. I have often reflected that the rampant sexual immorality of our day—and specifically the problem of pornography—

actually conceals a deeper problem. Theologian Reinhard Hütter penned an article several years ago (available online) which hit the nail on the head. In "Pornography and *Acedia*," Hütter details how the vice of *acedia*, long known to Christian spirituality, is an often overlooked proving ground for lust. "*Acedia*," Latin for "sloth," is much more than a vice of laziness. It is rather a *spiritual apathy*, which can manifest itself in laziness, but—counterintuitively—is also present in a frenetic lifestyle which is always "too busy": too busy to pray, to frequent the sacraments, to go to Mass, to develop healthy and life-giving relationships and habits. For Aquinas, *acedia* is ultimately a "sorrow over divine goods," to wit, a feeling of apathy towards the very center and source of our life; by extension, it is a refusal to develop habits that, if difficult at first, would contribute to our physical, intellectual, and spiritual flourishing.

I would suggest that in our prosperous 21st century society, underneath our frenetic activity and sexual confusion, legions of people are very busy, very bored, and very sad. While there is much truth to the adage, "idle hands are the devil's playmaker," the devil can work with busy hands too. He can encourage relentless activity in a way that dissipates vital spiritual energies, and causes one to forget one's identity as a child of God, and the life-giving habits that follow from it. It is more difficult to become entrenched in sexual vice—or any number of other vices—if one's life is truly balanced and centered on the most important things: God; a sense of one's dignity and vocation; daily commitment to things good, true, and beautiful; giving and receiving support from friends and family. Overcoming a compulsion or addiction requires more than a white-knuckle effort not to engage in the behavior. Rather the individual must find something more attractive, more worthwhile, more engaging, to become devoted to. *Acedia* destroys the initiative to seek out such things, feeding a lonely and sorrowful heart that easily seeks escape in illicit pleasure. While developing good habits is not an easy road in today's world, especially for men and women entangled in the vice of lust, it is a start. And Aquinas comes to our aid here.

AQUINAS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DEFEATING LUST

Aquinas is a master of synthesizing theological wisdom and practical application. In his commentary on the ten commandments, he displays this skill in an incisive passage, "Ways to Overcome Concupiscence." His arresting opening image will be familiar to anyone who has wrestled with the demons of lust: it is a struggle, he says, "that demands much labor, for it is based on something within us. It is as hard as trying to capture an enemy in one's own household." Then in a beautiful synthesis of common sense, theological wisdom, and psychological insight, he provides four strategies.

The first tack is to "flee external occasions." This is common sense, but I would add that in today's world the bar is much higher than in the past. One could, not too long ago, decide to purge one's house of, say, pornographic material by the physical act of consigning it to a dumpster;

or alternatively, be relatively sure that explicit material would not appear on ordinary television broadcasting. With a kind of generalized "pornification" of media, and the availability of internet pornography, today this requires heightened levels of self-discipline. As a priest, I would add that God is not unaware of these increased challenges. He is not slow to provide forgiveness and renewed strength to all who diligently seek him. The very difficulty today can also be seen as a greater opportunity for Catholics to develop the healthy habits we need in prayer, through the sacraments, through supportive friendships, which will set our hearts *Continued on page 4*

What would the Blessed Virgin say about Chastity?

by Fr. Peter Hannah, O.P.

Consider for a moment the broad array of characters in the early church: Peter; Paul; James; Stephen; Silas; Priscilla; Aquila; John Mark; Lydia; Cornelius; Timothy... Men and women of all ages and ranks. Now consider that the human being closest to Our Lord in his earthly life, she who was the human vessel chosen by God to bring him into the world, appears only once in the entire tale of the early church. Where is she? She appears in the "first chapter" of the Church at its foundation: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1.14). This seems to me important. Presumably Mary went on living for some time. But she is not visible as others are. What was she doing? Can there be any doubt that she continued to do what she is pictured doing at the beginning? Our Lady witnesses to the power of prayer in silence; a power which, one intuitively grasps, became a kind of anchor of support for the early church. One is reminded today of the legions of contemplatives who, following the example of Our Lady, sustain the Church by their lives of prayer also.

In considering what Our Lady would say about chastity, she perhaps would say many things. But I wonder if the first thing would be that chastity is a virtue which takes root and grows and blossoms in the power and presence of God. Our Lady is honored as "most chaste" in many prayers, and to be sure of all human beings she was. But I believe she would be the first to say that her chastity, her purity of heart and mind, came from Another. In today's noisy world, filled with so many clamorous and disturbing voices, Our Lady might simply counsel those who seek chastity to, above all things, dwell with God. Through a life of prayer—lived in whatever state of life—the good seeds planted by God in us by baptism, are given room to grow and flourish. The Lord can prune them too—this is what confession is for. But above all to make a person chaste, the Lord needs a humble and docile heart, as Our Lady's, offered to Him in faith and prayer.

Sadness of Lust, continued from page 3

on things that are true, good, and beautiful, rather than soul-destroying.

Aquinas's second tactic is to "not give an opening to thoughts which of themselves are the occasion of lustful desire," linking this discipline especially with the practice of *mortification*. Sometimes I wonder if the softening or deemphasis on mortification in contemporary spirituality has had the unintended effect of making our souls more "flabby," as it were. Historically, mortification—through, for example, fasting and self-denial—was seen as intrinsic to the spiritual life, laying a kind of groundwork of self-discipline that solidified one's interior life and opened one to the freedom and joy of contemplation.

The third strategy is the most vital: perseverance in prayer. I know of no better soul-strengthening practice than meditation on the mysteries of faith. For me and many others, this practice becomes especially effective before the Blessed Sacrament, where God seems to mysteriously infuse the soul waiting on him with divine strength. Aquinas, for his part, appeals to battle imagery again, and the two "weapons" of prayer and mortification: "This is not unlike a fight between two people, one of whom you desire to win, the other to lose. You must sustain the one and withdraw all support from the other... if you wish the spirit to win, you must assist it by prayer, and likewise you must resist the flesh by such means as fasting, by which the flesh is weakened."

Finally, Aquinas advises to "keep busy with wholesome occupations." Perhaps unsurprisingly, he deems "the study of Scripture is the best of all occupations." We can extend this, however, to pursuits of any kind that are, as he says, "wholesome," and so draw us in and consume us with the truly good things of life as we seek the holiness to which our baptism calls us.

In every age Christians have struggled with how to live "in the world" but not be "of it." The leviathan-like ways sexual immorality is infiltrating popular culture and our daily lives can seem overwhelming to good-faith Catholics trying to live the gospel. Finally, though, I am not so much shocked as saddened by this state of affairs, exemplified by the young man who declared to me that sex was his "spirituality." For underneath this indulgence of the flesh is a more profound sadness about life and its possibilities. Would that people knew the heights of happiness and joy to which Christ calls us! The sources of this deeper, authentic happiness, are the same as always: the sacraments; prayer; faith community; authentic friendship. We must be all the more confident today of St. Paul's assertion that "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." We are called to a special kind of non-conformity within our current culture, a non-conformity that remembers and lives the dignity of human sexuality as God designed it; rejoices in the goodness of Christ which is strong enough to forgive, heal, and strengthen; and develops life-giving habits which preserve us in chastity, that our hearts may be free and our minds alive to the beautiful heights to which we are called. ■

Of Dung, Broken Sprigs & Glory, continued from page 1

Lord wants to take someone home to live in heaven in peace and joy, and enjoy the fruits of his glory for all of eternity, what sort of suffering is that? From this world's viewpoint, it's painful to say good-bye; but those in heaven understand it perfectly and are waiting for that soul's arrival.

Finally, St. Paul says that we are afflicted in every way . . . continually carrying about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (Cf. 2 Cor 4:8-10). In dying on the cross, Jesus was *glorified* while also giving glory to his Father. It is the great paradox of salvation history: with his suffering and death, Jesus *sanctified* human suffering and death and opened the door to eternal life. Thus, now we can unite our own personal sufferings, our own cross, to that of Christ, and when we do so we glorify God and share in Christ's glory. Moreover, when we unite our own suffering with Jesus, it can be a sign of our own future resurrection and glorification in heaven. (Cf. 1 Peter 4:13; Romans 8:17) Yes, that's right, our suffering and death, accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ, will lead to our resurrection and glorification in heaven. Remember, *you cannot experience resurrection until you have died*—that means in all the little ways throughout life, but also when your life reaches its zenith.

So, you who are afflicted with physical suffering, you who suffer spiritual torment, you who are aggrieved by mental illness, you who have been confined to bed for years, you who are imprisoned, you who suffer from the weight of your own sins or addiction—you who are dying—unite yourself with the Lord Jesus through faith, and I promise you, he will give you a share in his glory. ■

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Thank-you, Fr. Joseph OP, Rosary Center Director



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