



Spirituality and the 'Noonday Devil'

I have long been an ardent fan of the poet and author, Kathleen Norris. I gobbled up and read and re-read her earlier spiritual writings, The Cloister Walk (1997), Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (1999) and Dakota: A Spiritual Geography (2001) The non-Catholic Norris recounts, in these books, her amazing discovery of Benedictan monasteries in her native South Dakota and nearby Minnesota where she went, regularly, for prayerful retreat and spiritual counsel. She came to love and pray regularly the Divine Office which the monks chant daily, dwelling on the psalms as food for thought, meditation and daily vitality and succor. She found in the monastic chanting of the psalms a routine that was not tedium or, if sometimes that, a tedium with a purpose.

Her most recent book, Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks and A Writer's Life (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) surprised many by fast becoming a New York Times' Bestseller. It is more dense, in some ways, than her earlier books but, also, much

more intimately personal. I think it her best book yet. Part of its density derives from the opaqueness of its key concept of acedia (or as sometimes written in earlier English, accidie). The early fathers and mothers of the desert spoke of acedia as the most grievous and dangerous of the capital sins—more devious than anger or lust. They often referred to it as ‘ the noonday devil’.

What is acedia and how might it be of interest to moderns (the very word fell out of usage and was listed as obsolete in the Oxford Dictionary for many years)? Modern lists of the seven deadly sins tend to translate acedia, rather sluggishly and misleadingly, as sloth. But acedia can, sometimes, show itself in a kind of kind of frantic busyness, exhausting activity which precludes deep interiority. As Norris writes: “ Acedia has come so far with us that it easily attaches to our hectic and overburdened schedules. We appear to be anything but slothful, yet it is exactly what we are, as we do more and care less, and feel pressured to do still more.”

The ancient monks spoke more of ‘bad thoughts’ rather than ‘deadly sins’.

Acedia, as John Climacus puts it, “ is a voice claiming that God has no mercy and no love for us”. It is a kind of spiritual torpor. If anger involves caring too much about the wrong things, acedia involves caring too little about the right things. It is a kind of withering. Monks afflicted with the noonday devil felt unable to find grace and vitality in that very place where they were (so they wanted to move elsewhere), with those people with whom they were related and in the work which was theirs to do. The punk songster, Pink Floyd captures the root-meaning of acedia in his lyrics: “ I have become comfortably numb... You know the pain is there but can’t rouse yourself to care.” Acedia shows itself in a kind of restless boredom, frantic escapism and commitment phobias. Again, Norris

reflects on the contemporary American pace of life: “ We appear to be anything but slothful yet that is exactly what we are, as we do more and care less and feel pressured to do still more.”

Thomas Aquinas contrasted acedia with despair. Despair perceives our participation in divine nature, through grace, as something truly appealing but impossible to achieve. Acedia, in contrast, sees the possibility but finds it un-appealing. Acedia makes us unable to see the grace available to us now, in this place, in this time. Acedia may seem, at first glance, a close cousin to depression, a psychological state. But—argues Norris—depression can be treated by therapy or psychological drugs. Acedia is better seen, as the desert fathers and mothers did, as a kind of ‘bad thought’ or inclination which we can identify when it falls upon us and resist before it turns into harmful actions. Citing Evagrius, the wise monk, Norris appeals to his injunction: “ It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by bad thoughts but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us.”

Dante portrayed the souls in hell afflicted by acedia as “ tormented souls who kept themselves apart in life, regarding the world with a studied disinterest. Their passions were so lukewarm that it is as if they never lived at all and now neither heaven nor hell will accept them”. The noon day devil did not so much strike monks in their first fervor but only after years of their striving to pray, be close to God, rid themselves of their root vices and achieve virtue—only to see very little fruit. The ancient hermit-seers of the desert enjoined monks suffering from the noon day devil to not get thrown off by their constant repetitive failures. As one monk advised: “ It is all a matter of falling down and standing up again, no matter how many times”. Good monks needed to be willing always

to be beginners. They needed to be concerned with today—not some distant morrows. They had to learn that the human task—even for a monk—was to live with oneself as one is. Bad thoughts, the monks enjoined, come to everyone. Our job is not to deny them or run away from them, but to keep them from lingering, smoldering until they lead to bad or destructive actions.

Part of Norris' book relates her long marriage to the poet, David Dwyer. David suffered from alcoholic substance abuse, suicidal tendencies and true depression. She found a way to cleave to him, love him and nurture him throughout a marriage and through a lingering and painful death. Dwyer serves Norris as a crucial case-study of clinical depression for which psychological therapy and drugs are indicated. But acedia is something different from psychological depression (although. in some of its symptoms, of boredom, torpor, lack of care—for oneself, for others, for our environment—acedia apes some aspects of depression).

Norris turns to the asceticism of the monks to stay her course, through grief, pain, writer's block. She suggests, as the monks advised, that we try truly to live each day as if we know we are dying—not in sorrow but recognizing days are all we ever have. The ancient monastic cure for acedia was encapsulated in stability, community and prayer. So, Norris thinks the monks' habit of praying at the hinges of time (morning on arising, noon, late afternoon, evening) works as an antidote to acedia's lack of care, a listless not feeling loved by God as you are. She calls for acts of daily self-respect (taking care of our house, our body, our appearance), daily love for the real people who surround us and a daily giving of ourselves to our enjoined work. As Evagrius advised his monks:

“Decide upon a set amount for yourself in every work and do not turn aside from it before you complete it”. Also, do not worry about a thing once it is done. Offer it up to God’s mercy and goodness and grace. In the end, as Norris notes, living day by day in hopeful trust (even despite appearances) leads us to know that “For grace to be grace, it must give us things we didn’t know we needed[perhaps, avoided or dreaded] and takes us to places where we didn’t want to go[only to find in them, surprisingly a place of vitality or growth].

If acedia is really one of the seven deadly sins, it accosts us all, sometimes more fleetingly, sometimes in a more enduring fashion. I know I have felt, at times acutely, something quite akin to it. When it comes upon us, argues Norris, then it is time to go for a walk; to sing psalms (even if short ones and for a short time); to seek community; do regular chores such as washing dishes, the laundry or cooking or cleaning house; to study, read, write; trying to find ways to be kind to one another. Acedia and Me is definitely not some slick self-help manual. It is, rather, an invitation to go more deeply into demons which lead us not to care.

The monks sought what they called apathia—what Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises denominated ‘indifference’—which involves turning our place, our relationships and our work trustfully over to God for his graceful use. We care –but as T.S. Eliot put it in his famous poem, Ash Wednesday—we pray to God:” Teach us to care and not to care”. We seek to redeem the time given to us. When acedia falls upon us, profound discouragement that God does not really care for us, we also can hear Eliot and Norris’ rejoinder:“ Where shall the word be found, where will the word resound? Not here, There is not enough silence”.