

Detachment

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

While out in Ohio a little while ago, Fr. Von and I had the opportunity to spend some time with Franciscan TOR Sisters. For those of you who do not know, one of the vows that they take is a vow of poverty. So for instance, they do not have Wi-Fi, or own person cellphones, or cars, etc. What they are essentially trying to do is something which we are all called to do in some way, namely practice detachment from the world. This sounds quite difficult to most people, but one other thing that is very striking about these sisters is their *joy*. Not happiness, but joy: that Christian joy which no amount of suffering, or poverty, or the lack of personal freedom can take away. They have a firm joy, deep down in their souls, because of their faith that Jesus came, died, arose from the dead, and is in heaven prepared to bring us to our own resurrection.

In Sunday's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans (8:9, 11-13), he says that "for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." What are the deeds of the body? In his letter to the Galatians he says, "The works of the flesh are plain: immortality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissention," and he goes on (5:19-20). Certainly, many of us probably do not practice idolatry. We probably do not have a statue of a pagan God in our homes, in front of which we burn incense and sing praise. Then again, maybe we do. Consider how we fill our lives with so many things that take the place of God. Maybe we fill up our time with praise to the idol of the human body by prizing as first and foremost our daily exercise. Maybe it is a god of television, or a god of money, where we prize the acquisition of wealth as the top priority in our lives. This is exactly what St. Paul is talking about.

Allow me to be quite clear. Making money is important and exercise is a good thing; and both are something that we need in order to live healthy lives and to take care of our families. Television is also not something that is bad in and of itself. What is wrong (and this is when they become sinful) is when we prize them above our relationship with God. Even the Franciscan Sisters need and use phones and cars in their ministry, but they themselves do not own them; the community does. Consider what it would be like having your spouse continually say to you that they were going to go watch TV before spending time with you, and then always "running out of time" to see you. This is comparable to what happens when we place things like Sunday Mass or our prayer life as the "optional" thing and not the central thing in our lives.

This is in a similar vein as the idea of Catholic Trench Warfare that I wrote about a few weeks ago. Consider that it is in the difficult moments that it is most important for us to be detached from these worldly things. After work, do we just plant ourselves in front of the television or computer and say we are done for the night? Or do we take the opportunity to pray for our loved ones? I believe it was Ven. Fulton Sheen who suggested that we should practice small penances, like occasionally not adding honey to our tea. These are the best moments for practicing detachment from the things of this world. It is in the moments when we say, "well, I have worked hard and I deserve this candy bar, or these extra five minutes of sleep," that our sacrifice is most important.

In truth, we "deserve" nothing, and owe everything to God. It is okay to take some time to relax and to celebrate. Indeed it is a good and healthy thing, and that should be a part of our regular routine. It is problematic, however, once we start believing that the "needs" of the body are of more importance than the needs of our souls. We should enjoy the occasional candy bar, and it is okay to watch TV, but it should always be regulated to second place in favor of our relationship with God, which is nurtured through prayer and the Sacraments.

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