

POST #8 - AREAS OF CONCUPISCENCE

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Areas of Concupiscence

Nobody is attracted to *all* sins, and nobody is attracted to *no* sins. Seminary formators should ask the seminarians to identify which sins are most tempting for them and suggest they read up on the seven deadly sins or temptations in order to assist them in their review. St. Mark the Ascetic suggests that all of our temptations, because we are in Christ, are rooted in the three temptations of Christ in the desert: temptations to gluttony, avarice, and pride.¹ Christ was not concupiscent, but we, while in Him, are. Attention to our temptations helps us know where we need to work and about what we need to pray.

Distinctions

Seminarians need to distinguish these kinds of limitations that come because we are created with limitations (or become limited through environment) from our propensity to sin, from our areas of concupiscence. Early on in their formation, many seminarians lump all of their weaknesses together and fight against all of them. However, if they fail to distinguish between what is human limitation and what is a sinful inclination, they will be frustrated in their discernment and in their lives as seminarians.

There are two principle problems with seminarians failing to make the distinction between human limitation and sinful inclination: 1) a contempt for their humanity and 2) laziness about their concupiscence. Both of those problems severely hamper discernment.

Many young men make huge strides in overcoming their limitations. They learn the value of their willpower. These strides and this value are very important when we are young. With time, the men need to learn to work with their limitations and accept them. A churning frustration that helps motivate a man who is eighteen can easily become a churning frustration that only frustrates a man who is twenty-eight or thirty-eight. This acceptance does not mean self-indulgence; it means playing the hand one has been dealt. This acceptance, for the seminarian, usually accompanies a growing into the identities of beloved son, redeemed sinner, and temple of the Holy Spirit. If we are rooted in these identities, we are less attached to our limitations.

Conversely, the evil one will try to get the seminarian to have what *he* has: contempt for humanity. This contempt is poison in a seminarian. Often, a man with a little self-knowledge will say that he is harder on himself than on others. That was probably true when he was younger. Priests who begin that way and who do not change usually get tired of being soft on crime and become as harsh and punishing of others as they are of themselves. There is no condemnation now for those who are in Christ Jesus, and this contempt for humanity has to be rooted out of the seminarian in order for him to progress and discern clearly.

A second problem with not distinguishing between human weakness and concupiscence is that a man can become overwhelmed with his limitations and give into his concupiscence. He can feel so frustrated by

¹ Mark the Ascetic, *The Philokalia*, v I, p.

his inability to change and progress (as he sees it), that he throws in the towel and medicates himself. Seminary formators should encourage seminarians to be firm and accepting with their created weaknesses, but firm and hard on their concupiscence.

The Limitations of Will Power

Very often, after a man has been in the seminary for a couple of years, the Lord calls the man to move beyond a willed managing of this life to a life rooted in grace. This movement is so that the man's service and soul will be much more fruitful. As a man discerns his vocations, this movement can be troubling at first; but ultimately, it will help clarify his discernment. The movement brings us to the freedom of the children of God. In addition to resulting in men relying more on grace, the Lord often moves our men from a time of focusing on their wills to a time of focusing on their intellects. Understanding rather than willpower becomes the goal of their efforts. This growth in understanding also helps the men in times of peace to discern their calls to the priesthood.

Times of Spiritual Consolation

In times of spiritual consolation, we have energy and desire for God and the things of God. In these times, the good messengers (angels) are bringing good messages from God. Because St. Ignatius describes in his rule that consolation leads to an increase of faith, hope, and love, it can have much in common with the time of spiritual peace. In these times, direct your men to be checking to see if their experiences of God's love seem to elicit from them the desire to give themselves totally to God as priests. Included in this desire is the generous desire to give to God our capacity for marriage, for a wife and for children. In times of spiritual consolation, those called to celibacy are drawn to make such generous self-offering. Also, ask the men to be checking to see if their experience of God's love elicits from them the desire to serve as His priests.

At times, the desire-as-response will take the form of desire-for-the-good-of-self-gift, that is, in the expression of Divine love, we know our capacity for self-emptying, for self-oblation; and we desire to be self-giving. At other times, we are drawn to the pearl of great price, to the fulfillment of our desires that we perceive in Christ. The first desire involves an oblation; the second is experienced as a goal of all effort.

Journaling

These experiences of spiritual consolation are sometimes followed by experiences of spiritual desolation, which may be described as dryness. In each of these cases, it is helpful for the men to be keeping a journal. Since the experiences of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation are totalizing, if the men are not used to this phenomena of radically changing perspectives, it is helpful for them to write down what they experience in prayer.

In times of spiritual desolation, one can be convinced that the experiences in consolation were illusory. In spiritual consolation, one can be astonished at how unfeeling, unperceiving, blind and disturbed one has been—such experiences can be naively dismissed with a shrug and a “What was I thinking?” By encouraging the men to note their experiences of disjunction, of abrupt change in their ability to perceive grace or evil, formators can help the men to mature greatly and help others interpret what can be misinterpreted as mood swings.

For example, a man who experiences great desire for self-emptying love during the time of spiritual consolation may experience devastating fears during desolation. These fears may tell him that he will be left alone, emotionally and spiritually bereft. Such fears, because they gain strength from particular historical wounds, will tend to appear again and again. The earlier we perceive these apparent—but false—perceptions, the earlier we can get through them the next time they appear. Seminarians can use journals to focus their attention on the movements of truth and the movements of deceit.

Spiritual Desolation

In times of desolation, the evil spirits hold the floor and bring their distorting messages. As Heinrich Schlier writes, “Evil spirits are personal … malignant interpreters of the world.”² In spiritual desolation, their malignant interpretations are designed to take us away from the will of God, from knowing the blessings of the new creation. As your directees speak about their experiences of spiritual desolation, it can be helpful to note the patterns of deceit and the false subtleties that you hear. Often, the devil’s interpretations, which involve some truth, send the men on endless scrutinies of their motivations and desires. With attentive observation of these patterns, the men can learn which questions are real and which questions are parts of a trap from the evil one. Scrutiny has to be given, but giving too much attention makes the problem worse.

² See Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), pp. 19, 67.