

Cardinal Manning's Understanding of Courage

Epigraphs

“And finally comes fortitude, which denies itself, and willingly sacrifices its own and itself for truth, justice, generosity, and the public weal [*i.e.*, for the “*bonum commune*” — to include both the natural **and the supernatural Common Good, Salvation**]. These four [Cardinal Virtues] **rise into** what the old world called *virtue* which was equivalent to **courage or fortitude in a heroic degree, crowning** temperance, justice, and prudence **with a sovereign strength of mastery**. In the **supernatural** order, this would be charity, the bond of perfection, **and the fullness of fortitude in self-oblation and in martyrdom.**” (Henry Edward Cardinal Manning, *Pastime Papers* (1892), Chapter 1 (“Honour”), p. 12—my emphasis added)

“**If they were unwarlike through luxury, softness, and effeminacy, they certainly were not merry, for mirth is the joyousness of high and manly natures; and such natures are only courageous....The highest conception of fortitude is weakness conquering by suffering**, and power conquered by inflexible endurance of pain and wrong [injustice]. And this can never be achieved by the strength of the arm, or by the insensibility of the brain, **but by the greatness of heart**. Courage is not a muscular but a moral virtue. The great Exemplar is divine: **this has changed the ideas and the language of mankind.**” (Cardinal Manning, *Pastime Papers* (1892), Chapter 10 (“Courage”), pp. 76 and 80—my emphasis added)

“G.K. Chesterton remarked that Christianity is **unique among religions in ascribing courage to God**. The Creator became a creature....To Muslims, the Christian concept of a triune, incarnate God, insulted, tortured, and murdered by his own creatures seems blasphemous.” (Joseph Sobran, *Subtracting Christianity: Essays on American Culture and Society* (2015), p. 382—my emphasis added)

In 1892, near the end of Cardinal Henry Edward Manning's life, he published an essay entitled "Courage," which is the last-but-one chapter of his own longer collection of eleven essays modestly entitled *Pastime Papers*.¹ His Chapter 10 on "Courage" is also a fitting complement to his profound Chapter 1, entitled "Honour."

Because of the learning and depth and unmistakable variety of Cardinal Manning's fresh insights concerning the concept and reality of courage, I propose now to present some of this wisdom and eloquence, that we too may thereby be inspired today and more fully fortified. It is my hope, moreover, that we shall also come to admire even more this Catholic Convert from Anglicanism who later became a Roman Catholic Cardinal of the Church. For he will take us on a journey from the Father of Greek History, Herodotus, to the Legend of Merry England, to the 1852 maritime disaster off South Africa of the *Birkenhead*, to the political insight of Horace the Latin poet, and to a somewhat surprising consideration of the foundation and expansion of the British Empire itself (its good sides and some of its vices and abuses, and thus the need for a course-correction and future caution). As we might expect, the underlying factors of religion and the sacred supernatural also deftly permeate Cardinal Manning's thought and verbal expressions.

Cardinal Manning first approaches his consideration of Courage with a refreshing surprise, which might also make us think of G.K. Chesterton himself and his reality-revealing paradoxes. Manning's opening words are, as follows:

If we were to say that the men of Merry England are courageous, would not all nations say the same of themselves? **But if** the men of Merry England were **not** courageous, England **would have** ceased to be merry long ago. Herodotus tells us that the Mysians [in northwest Anatolia-Asia Minor] were **not** courageous; **and that to be conquered by the Mysians was the lot only of cowards.** The "prey of the Mysians" was a proverb **and a reproach.** It may be doubted whether the Mysians were a merry people. **If they were unwarlike through luxury, softness, and effeminacy, they certainly were not merry, for mirth is the joyousness of high and manly natures; and such natures are only courageous.** (76—my emphasis added)

These words also make us think of Hilaire Belloc's resilient "font of joy" and his abidingly merry robustness; that "*hilaritas mentis*" ("cheerfulness of heart") which was for Saint Thomas

¹ Henry Edward Cardinal Manning (1809-1892), *Pastime Papers* (London: Burns & Oates, Limited, 1892), pages 1-140 and eleven chapters in all. Chapter 10 on "Courage" will be found on pages 76-93; and Chapter 1 on "Honour" will be found on pages 1-12 of this original 1892 edition. All further references to this book will henceforth be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay. My own emphases will often be added, and designated as such.

Aquinas so important as it signified humble generosity and “the seal of selflessness.” G.K. Chesterton even spoke reverently of Christ's own “shyness” and “restraint” and something Our Lord, with His courage, still kept in reserve: “There was something that He hid from all men when He went up the mountain to pray....There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.”²

We return now to Manning's own nuanced Themes of Mirth and Courage in War and Peace: After some vivid depictions of the art history and geographical regions of England in war and peace, Cardinal Manning proceeds to say:

It is not easy to say **when England became merry, or why it got its name**. There were certainly periods of its history [e.g., under King Alfred the Great circa 900 A.D. against the marauding Danes, as it is so memorably presented, with his own Christian joy and mirth, in Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*], and long tracts of time, when there could have been but little mirth in England. There was little mirth when, as [Thomas] Carlyle says, our Saxon forefathers of the Heptarchy were cutting each other into meat for cows and kites [carrion birds], nor when the Danes ravaged the Thames and the Humber [to the north], nor in the reign of the Red King [d. 1100, the Norman William Rufus, William II], nor of King John [d. 1216], nor in the Wars of the Roses, nor when Henry VIII was King; **when, then, did its merriness begin?** It is not easy to say. **But it is not hard to say what would damp our mirth and quench our merriment** [as happened in the Aftermath of the Thirty Years' War on the Continent, 1618-1648]....No foreign foot [as of 1897] has trodden down England **for ages. Nor can it, if we be true to God and true to ourselves. If we fail in either of these fidelities, nothing, however unimaginable to our boastfulness and self-confidence, may not come upon us in an hour** [or, perhaps, even more gradually, drop by drop, as in an Islamic “conquest by immigration” or slowly by way of a crescent “Dar al-Sulh”?]. (77-78—my emphasis added)

If a growing apostasy from Christianity also weakens England's cultural immune system, the cumulative titration by an alien creed and culture may well transpire and spread and then seep in. Thus Cardinal Manning had somewhat foreseen what our two abiding “fidelities” are essentially to require:

Our fidelity to God consists in acknowledging Him as our Lawgiver and our Supreme Judge: our fidelity to ourselves in the courage of our people. (78)

2 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York and London: John Lane Company, 1909 and 1908, respectively), pp. 298-299. The above-quoted sentences constitute two of the last three sentences of the book. “Mirth” is the last word in the book, in Chesterton's final Chapter IX, which is entitled “Authority and the Adventurer.” On page 298, Chesterton more fully had also said the following about Christ: “Yet He **restrained** something. **I say it with reverence**; there was in that shattering personality **a thread that must be called shyness.**” (298—my emphasis added). “*Gaudium de Veritate!*”

He then asks a question, a fundamental one: “What, then, is courage?” (78)

For the rest of his essay he will attempt to answer his own question:

The Greeks had two names for it [courage]: the one signifying the completeness of all virtues, and yet signifying also the one virtue of courage; the other signifying exclusively the specific quality of courage [*e.g.*, *andreia*, *tolma*]. Both these words were derived from roots which signify the masculine character. The Romans called it virtue [*virtus*, *fortitudo*], which also has two senses: the one describes **the completeness of personal excellence**: the other expresses **the special excellence of boldness and fortitude**. Here again the root is **the conception of man and manhood. They signify chiefly bravery and boldness in encountering danger in war, or fortitude in bearing pain and suffering.** (78-79—my emphasis added)

He notes that courage is first “rather a **physical** quality of fearlessness and endurance, such as the ages of rude conflict and constant warfare elicited and trained in chiefs and warriors”; yet “**the** [linguistic] **root** of courage **gives** to it [also] **a deeper and higher sense**” (79—emphasis added):

It [“Courage”] is a word of **later** origin and seems to belong [as does the conceptual word “*Res*”] to the Latin race. The Italians still call it *Coraggio*, or greatness of heart; the Spaniards, *Corage*; the French, *Courage*, from whom we have borrowed it. And we understand it to mean manliness, bravery, boldness, fearlessness, springing **not from** a sense of physical power, or from insensibility to danger and pain, **but from the moral habit of self-command, with deliberation, fully weighing present dangers, and clearly foreseeing future consequences, and yet in the path of duty advancing unmoved to its execution.** (79—bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

With his characteristic deftness and modesty of learning, Cardinal Manning shows us how the idea of courage gradually underwent a transformation of meaning, and it is a resonant meaning still:

In the Greek and Latin worlds the idea of power and force predominated; in the modern, **the moral greatness of passive immobility prevails** over the lower conceptions of force and fortitude. **The highest conception of fortitude is weakness conquering by suffering, and power conquered by inflexible endurance of pain and suffering.** And this can never be achieved by the strength of the arm, or by the insensibility of the brain, **but by the greatness of heart. Courage is not a muscular but a moral virtue. The great Exemplar is divine: this has changed the ideas and the language of mankind.** (80—my emphasis added)

With his clear and serene and unassumingly varied language, Manning attempts to present to us some more of the inspiring essentials and facets of courage:

Courage, then, is a quality of the heart. We say, Be of good heart, to those who are down-hearted or faint-hearted. **It is a matter of self-command. It may be acquired by discipline and sustained by the will.** This is not so with physical courage....But a weak body united to a strong mind may carry all before it...The word “apprehensive” is often used as equivalent to fearful, because the mind is quick to apprehend or perceive all the dangers of the present, and to foresee all the dangers of the future. **Courage does not consist in ignorance of danger, nor in undervaluing the risks before us, and the power of our antagonists.** It carefully measures all dangers and calculates all risks, and is inclined even to suppose them greater than they seem to be, **and yet, after all, it calmly gathers itself up to await the shock, or even go onward to meet it.** (80-81—my emphasis added)

After this preparation, the time has come for Cardinal Manning now to exemplify or specify more explicitly the historic and heroic witnesses of the Faith:

The noblest examples of this [courage great-hearted and wholehearted] which the world has ever seen, were those who in every age have laid down their lives for their faith. They were not only men hardened in warfare [like the companion Crusaders of King Saint Louis] or in public life, but the gentlest and meekest and most yielding **in other things**. They were also women of every condition, simple and refined; or they were **boys manly in faith, or girls with a martyr's constancy. In all these it was the fortitude of the heart, calm, collected, inflexible.** The martyrdom of St. Peter, St. Lawrence, St. Sebastian, have been **reproduced** in St. Thomas of Canterbury, Cardinal [John] Fisher, and the martyred Bishops of Japan. The martyrdom of women and of children, as St. Catherine, St. Agnes, St. Pancratius, have been **renewed** in the poor missionary sisters and their catechumens, who died for the Christian faith in Corea and in China. **This is the courage not only of heroes but of saints, and we look at it afar off.** Yet its elements are **the same** in every age—that is to say, **a clear conscience, or a conscience that has no blot to hide,** is the first condition of courage. “*Nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa.*” [the Roman Latin Poet, Horace]....For **courage is full of hope and conscious rectitude** [—and “desperation is not courage”]. (81-82—my emphasis added)

Showing another contrast to clarify our mind and lead us to the higher things, Cardinal Manning then says:

Even physical courage fails **when moral courage is palsied**; for physical courage is only a weapon which moral courage wields. **There must be a sense of duty, the mission of an apostle, the fidelity of a Christian, the loyalty of a subject, the chivalry of a soldier—all these and the duty of each in the manifold lot and conditions of life, create an end for which to live and die. Add to these the habit of self-command.** (82-83—my emphasis added)

As to this matter and habit of self-command, Cardinal Manning continues with a further

description of those characteristics:

Courage consists **not** in the absence of fear, but in the subjugation of fear. **Some of the bravest** men have had **the most intense perception** of danger, and **the most sensible apprehension** of its **fatal** consequences. But fear has not swayed them to the right or to the left. They have not swerved from the direct path **into the dangers which they both foresaw and feared**. The agitation of the nerves and the beating of the heart, and the trembling of the frame are no signs of cowardice. The brave man and the coward are alike in this, that both feel this passive physical emotion. But the brave and coward differ in the result. The brave man conquers his fears, and the coward is conquered by them. A Spanish king was reproached for trembling before a battle. He said, “My body trembles at the dangers **into which my spirit will carry it.**” **The highest courage in a soldier is said to be the standing still under fire without returning it. It is the self-command of duty in obedience to authority.** (83-84—my emphasis added)

Cardinal Manning now gradually gives a concrete 1852 historic example of discipline and courage that is especially well known to the English, one that is similar to the later loss of the *Titanic* (on 15 April 1912):

In a **forlorn hope**, there is **the excitement of action and the forgetfulness of self** [“women and children first!”] which comes from it. **But to stand under fire, still and motionless, is a supreme act of the will. Such also was the men who**, on the deck of the ill-fated *Birkenhead* [a steam frigate sunk at night off Capetown, South Africa, on 26 February 1852], **stood shoulder to shoulder in line while the ship was sinking** [after the women and children had been safely placed into the lifeboats and launched]. All was over, effort was useless, **disorder would only hasten the end. To submit** in the perfection of order and obedience was **the highest moral act, implying submission and the supremacy of duty**. Such is the courage of soldiers and seamen. It is a military courage in war with armies **or with storms**. (84—my emphasis added)

Then we are memorably shown an instance of this sustained courage at sea (or with fire and flames) amidst the dangerous natural elements, too, something this writer is also slightly familiar with too, especially in sea-rescue — and Cardinal Manning appears to have had this experience, as well, in his own earlier and younger life:

Courage is also signally shown **in the exposure of life for the saving of life from danger** of fire or water. Every fire brigade [also aboard ship] has its roll of heroes and of **deeds well done in daring** the violence of the fire. **And no nobler record of human courage the world has ever known than is written down every year upon our shores in the life-boat service**. In **both** these kinds of courage **the physical and moral courage are united and sustained in the highest degree**. It seems invidious to compare when **such heroic**

bravery reaches its highest point; but the prolonged resolution of buffeting for hours to and fro on a tempestuous sea demands a self-command not for a single act of daring, but for a continuous energy of fearless self-sacrifice which can hardly be equalled by any transient actions howsoever heroic. In heroism both are equal: in continuance they must be unequal. (84-85—my emphasis)

It is fitting now to consider what Cardinal Manning says about political courage and moral cowardice, inasmuch as “the greatest moral cowards are demagogues” (85):

Another form of courage is political—that is, to withstand public opinion, and the *civium ardor prava jubentium* [“the rage of the citizens commanding wrongful measures and actions” (Horace)]. **There are men brave in war who shrink from popular animosity.** Some statesmen go down the stream; others are always breasting it, and going up against the tide.

The greatest moral cowards are demagogues. They flatter the people and float along upon the prejudice or ignorance of the majority. They are afraid of going against it, for fear of losing its favour or its [putative] good-will. Their whole career is a *simonia linguae* [a “simony of language”, “a buying and selling of privileges, or offices and pardons illicitly and venally”, especially in the Church or other spiritual institutions], a courting of popularity, and a purchasing applause by words of adulation and by the suppression of unpopular truths which they ought to declare and defend. (85-86—my emphasis added)

Now we come to a topic which is even closer to our lives and families today, especially with regard to the Roman Catholic Church and the Latin Rite, and it is thus fitting that a Catholic Cardinal from England writing almost 125 years ago will help to give us the proper knowledge and principles:

There is also a special courage needed for defense of moral and religious truth in the later days [of that Nineteenth Century, up to 1892]. The world does not [as of 1892] rack the body [as once it had done in the Tower of London]. **But it has moral racks and Little-ease** [once a windowless torture chamber four foot square on the grounds of that same Tower where a man could not stand nor sit nor lie down, but was cramped in agony] **in refined perfection. Some men in these [moral and religious] matters are always on the unpopular side, always in opposition to popular prejudice; not from crochets or perversities, but because they see beyond their day, or discern dangers not yet perceived, or have inherited truth of which others have been robbed. They cannot be silent for the truth's sake.** The love of their country compels them to bear their witness. (86—my emphasis added)

We are then led to consider the kind of treatments received by such distinctive men of farsightedness and integrity, some of them lightly derisive, some of them more acute and even perilous:

The blandest treatment they [such courageously truthful men] receive is to be treated as dreamers, enthusiasts, or soft-heads. They are told they have no logic, that their arguments are beneath contempt. This is the talk of wiseacres [such as a know-it-all with an affectation or pretentiousness] who are always many and always infallible. **But there is no great trial of courage there.** There are heavier and sharper [trials] in store for every man who opposes popular opinion **in defense of unpopular truth.** It is a light kind of courage that falls before ridicule, and **yet some men otherwise strong are weak enough to desert both truth and justice for fear of ridicule.** Every witness for truth must expect St. Stephen's lot [the deacon-protomartyr of the Church]. He will be **pelted with stones by offended pride, arrogant prejudice, disappointed ambition, defeated scheming.** **If a man can stand under this fire without returning it, he is a good soldier of Truth; and Truth is a good captain, who always wins at last.** (86-87—my emphasis added)

Over the remaining seven pages (87-93) of his book's penultimate essay — and on his way to discuss unexpectedly “the British Empire” — Cardinal Manning asks and then attempts to answer, in part (and refreshingly), such searching and preparatory questions: *e.g.*, “Are we then a courageous people?” (87); “What form of courage for the faith or for the battle-field is wanting [lacking] in Ireland?” (87); “What self-command and inflexible persistence in duty can surpass the courage of the people of Scotland?” (87); “What shall an Englishman say of the people of England [as of 1892]?”; “What has built up [and sustained] the British Empire?” (88)

He then opens up a consideration of the many criticisms presented by foreigners, and also by hostile enemies railing against England and against Englishmen:

But no one has even said that Englishmen are cowards. They tell us we are slow and never ready, over-confident, and wanting [lacking] in the sharp look-out which prepares for danger; that we continually pay dear for our dullness and want of foresight, but that after disasters, and in spite of an almost stupid improvidence, we pull ourselves together, and break through the greatest straits and losses. **This is not the bearing of the Mysians.** (87-88—my emphasis added; and recall Herodotus' “Mysians” discussed on page 76)

If we first allow Cardinal Manning a little portion more of an “incremental repetition” as to “What has built up the British Empire?” (88), we shall better appreciate his summary answer and some of his later characterizations. Answering his own direct question, he says:

In a word, **the courage** of Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotchmen, **the inheritance** of Britons and Celts, and Saxons, and Scandinavians, and Danes, and Normans.... We have been lately told that the British Navy is **the heirloom** of Scandinavian sea-kings, that [Admiral] Nelson was a **Viking with a Scandinavian patronymic** [cf. Niels-son]. The Saxons, a conquering race on

land, were not seafaring, and it needed three sea voyages to gain an earldom. Of Danish hardihood and Norman conquest we have had proof enough. **From such a confluence of courages**, as Shakespeare would say, we might look for an Imperial race. (88—my emphasis added)

After giving many examples of British explorations and strategic foundations and cultivated implantations, Cardinal Manning is even inclined to praise:

This structure [of the British Empire] is **not the work of weak hearts or feeble hands**. The [ancient] Egyptians boasted that no free-born Egyptian laboured to rear the Pyramids; we [British] might boast, **if** boasting were not a sign of folly, that none but free-born men have **reared** the British Empire. It is a great edifice, **built up by centuries of manhood and intelligence, and force of will and sustained energy**. It must be **acknowledged with shame** that fraud, and cruelty, and injustice have tarnished its beginnings. **But as it now subsists** [in 1892, but not for long, especially in South Africa] it is a reign of law and justice....But the Empire is a work not of the will of man, but of a Will that overrules all human wills, and binds them in the path of His Supreme Wisdom. (89-90—my emphasis added)

After giving further evidence of the scope of the British Empire and its convincing signs of “the self-reliance of a great and courageous people” (90), Cardinal Manning decides to give us another specific example and a clarifying contrast, as well:

Take once more the Indian Empire [of South Asia]. We [British] **came as deliverers** of the millions of Hindoos **from the Mahommedan yoke**. We have [now] 150 sovereign princes under our Imperial sway. **They were in old times in perpetual and internecine war**. We have imposed the Pax Britannica. They were **in constant civil wars of succession**, in which every one of Royal blood, **with true Oriental policy**, was in turn destroyed by the pretenders and usurpers of the sovereign name. We have reduced succession to a judicial award. We found the reign of arbitrary will; we have imposed the reign of law....**If** we have not done more, we have **at least established a sway and rule of the natural law of justice and mercy**. **If** this were **withdrawn for a moment** [as of 1892], **the old anarchy would rush in upon the old chaos, with all the multiplied powers of destruction with which we have armed it**. (90-91—my emphasis)

With honest forthrightness and integrity, the Cardinal of the Catholic Church now raises the question of Christianity in India and the difficult barriers and limits implicitly faced by the Christian missionaries:

We have not made India Christian; but [as of 1892] we have lifted it in the scale of human civilisation. **Empires do not convert men to Christianity**; but **under** the **material** structure of the Imperial **power** of Rome, **the Apostles**

and their successors created a Christian world, and under the world-wide Empire of Britain [as it then seemed] **a new Christian world** [Catholic? Or mostly Protestant? Or a hybrid?] **is rising up to repair the ruin of the old**. This is not the work of a race without **a courage which is masculine, grave, and fearless in its effort, but calm and bright, and merciful and merry, like the song of its legions and its sailors, its reapers and its little children in the green hamlets of the heart of of England** [as J.R.R. Tolkien would also later cherish and hope to help restore]. (91-92—my emphasis added)

In the last, somewhat extended paragraph of his essay of courage, Cardinal Manning is more hortatory and cautionary, as well as grateful and encomiastic:

This great [British] Empire is **one link in the chain** which **draws** the history of the world. It is **our responsibility** and **our day of visitation**. If we have not **the courage to keep it up**, we shall deserve **the shame of cowardice** if we give it up. And in the day in which we betray **our trust** to the millions under our sway, **the energy** which goes out of England, and Ireland, and Scotland, **will find no training-ground for high and just deeds of civilisation, and, if the stern necessity arise, in warfare. Our expansive powers, if checked [blocked and thwarted], will fall in upon themselves, and become turbulent, and insular, and selfish....England will cease to be merry, if it ever be shut up in its own four seas, as Holland is ditched by its dykes....A clear conscience and a sense of duty and self-command make a great and Imperial people, and in the homesteads of such a people there will be no fear, but peace and justice, confidence, courage, and mirth.** (92-93—my emphasis added)

We see here once again, and now on the last page of Cardinal Manning's discerning and inspiring book, those two thematic words of his placed purposively beside one another once again: **courage and mirth**. “Mirth” was also the last word, we recall, in G.K. Chesterton's own adventurous and courageous 1908 book, *Orthodoxy* — published some sixteen years later — which was especially grateful for, and so graciously attentive to, the Courage of the Sacred Humanity of the Incarnate Christ.

For Chesterton had effectively said in the first part of his later book, *The Everlasting Man* (1925): **if you consider Man merely as an animal, you cannot account for Man**. In the second and final part of that book, moreover — written after he had become a Catholic (in 1922) — he likewise quite effectively said: **if you consider Christ merely as a Man, you cannot account for Christ**. May we also now come to know something of that “Intimate Interior Joy that comes from the Truth” (Saint Augustine's “*Gaudium de Veritate*”) and even some of the Lord's own Tears of Joy, even some hints, not only of His gentle Irony, but of His **Mirth**. “For mirth is the joyousness of high and manly natures; and such natures are only courageous.” (76—Cardinal Manning)

But we must also now face how far Britain has slipped since the time of Cardinal Manning, even up to 1892! At least it seems so as we consider England and her once-courageous coherence and resilient “cultural immune system” from the vantage point of 2016. For, many sad facts now discordantly obtrude themselves.

And the United States of America, too, even with its arguably “Inadvertent Empire,”³ is now centrifugally fragmenting, both overseas and interiorly at home — or what used to be considered a national and spiritual home — before the inordinately spreading apostasy from Christianity and its still now more rapidly accumulating effects. What would Cardinal Manning say today, we wonder? He would certainly want us, under Grace, to cultivate Courage especially, and all the other Cardinal Virtues and infused Theological Virtues — and to pray for the Great Gift of Final Perseverance. For even the gift of the Virtue of Hope implies Risk, as well as Adventure. We are still defectible, as the “discipline of humility” (Cardinal Manning) will recurrently remind us!

CODA

Since the Sin of Spiritual Sloth — one of the lesser-known Seven Deadly Sins and Foundational Vices (*Vitia Capitalia*) — will always tend to sap and sabotage our Courage, it is fitting in this short supplement to consider what Evelyn Waugh wrote about Sloth near the end of his life.⁴

Waugh first introduces us to the matter of Sloth by appearing somewhat skeptical and then asking an earnest question:

The word “Sloth” is **seldom** on modern lips [at least as of early 1962]. When used, it is a mildly facetious variant of “indolence,” **and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin** [*i.e.*, thus also dangerously quenching our life of sanctifying grace], **is one of the most amiable weaknesses....How then has Sloth found a place with its six odious companions as one of the Mortal Sins?**

Theologians are the least rhetorical of writers. Their [traditional] vocabulary is elaborate and precise, and **when they condemn an act as a mortal sin** they are

- 3 William E. Odom and Robert Dujaric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). William Odom was also a retired Lieutenant General and a graduate in the West Point Class of 1954. He was a learned scholar and gifted teacher (also at Yale University). His book about America's Inadvertent Empire may very usefully be contrasted with the history and conduct of the British Empire. It is a delightful thing to imagine the good discussions that might have transpired between Cardinal Manning and the feisty General William Odom (who was sometimes affectionately called “Wild Bill Odom”!).
- 4 Evelyn Waugh, “Sloth” (January 1962), is to be conveniently found in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (Edited by Donat Gallagher) (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1983,1984), pp. 572-576. This essay was also published in *The Seven Deadly Sins* (ed. Raymond Mortimer) (London, 1962).

not merely expressing disapproval in a striking phrase. **They mean something specific and appalling; an outrage against the divine order committed with full knowledge and consent which, if unrepented before death, consigns the doer to eternal loss of salvation....**We only know that Hell is there for those who **deliberately** choose it...**What then is this Sloth which can merit the extremity of divine punishment?**

St. Thomas' answer is both comforting and surprising: *tristitia de bono spirituali*, **sadness in the face of spiritual good. Man is made for joy in the love of God, a love that he expresses in service. If he deliberately turns away from that joy, he is denying the purpose of his existence. The malice of Sloth** lies not merely in the neglect of duty (though that can be a symptom of it) but **in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair....**

Sloth is the condition in which a man is fully aware of the proper means of his salvation and refuses to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust....

In this generation **the man of Sloth**, in all his theological implications, has become one of the stock figures of stage and novel....**These new apostates** do not wrestle with historical and philosophical doubts; they **simply lapse into “sadness in the face of spiritual good.”**

The plainest representation of **this depth of Sloth**, and the one likely to be freshest in the reader's memory, is Query, the central character of Mr. Graham Greene's recent novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*. (572-573—my emphasis added)

Therefore, Waugh soon acknowledges that “Sloth is not such an innocent weakness as at first glance it appeared.” (576) And he added: “So much for the Sloth of the theologian, technically dubbed *accidia* (or *acedia*). (574)

Moreover:

There is no true classical term for this state [this condition of Sloth], not because it was unknown to the ancients, but because it was too commonplace to require identification. The last centuries of European paganism **before the revelation of Christian joy** were **sunk deeply** in *accidia*. Now that paganism is returning **we see the symptoms again** [of “this depth of Sloth” (573)]. (574—my emphasis added)

As Waugh was himself consciously approaching old age and would come to die only four years later (in April of 1966), he was especially attentive to the subtle spiritual dangers of Sloth — for persons as well as for societies and nations and empires:

But Sloth is not primarily the temptation of the young. Medical science has oppressed us with a huge new burden of longevity. **It is** that last undesired decade, **when passion is cold, appetites feeble, curiosity dulled and**

experience has begotten cynicism, that *accidia* lies in wait as the final temptation to destruction. That is the time which is given a man to “make his soul.” **For [only] a few of us** [there is] the hero's and martyr's privilege of a few **clear** days ending on the scaffold; instead [of] **an attenuated, bemused drifting** into eternity. Death has not lost its terror **in the new clinical arctic twilight.** In this state **we shall have to face the last deadly assault** of the devil. It is then, **perhaps,** that we shall be **able** to resist **only** by the spiritual strength we [with Grace] have husbanded in youth. (576—my emphasis added)

May our own virtuous combat against such insidious and sapping spiritual Sloth impart to us not only a desire for greater Courage, but also for its good fruits, *sub Gratia*, in time and in eternity.

(This essay is dedicated to Alan Potter on his birthday. Born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1955 on Michaelmas — the Feast of Saint Michael the Archangel — Alan Potter was an especially loyal and honorable Catholic friend to Joseph Sobran, also during those final years of Joe's unmistakably burdened life. We also now honor the cherished memory of Joe Sobran himself, who died six years ago, on 30 September 2010, one day after Alan's own birthday.)

--FINIS--

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