

## Conference 22: The Illusions of the Night

1. After about seven days, the solemnity of Pentecost was finished. At the first shadows of evening, just after the evening synaxis (vespers), we two entered the cell of holy Theonas, eager for the teaching he had promised us. The old man was very lively and his face was smiling and pleasant as he addressed us first.

I am amazed, he said, that you have been able to wait so long for a reply to the question you so urgently proposed to me seven days ago. Is it possible that you can grant your debtor such a delay, even though I did not request it?

Since you so kindly and spontaneously granted me such favors, it is very fitting that I too make no more delay in paying the debt. This "investment" is very pleasant in that it accumulates while it is being liquidated, and not only enriches the recipient but does not diminish the giver. Dispensers of spiritual doctrine have a double gain, for they profit themselves as much as their hearers. In instructing others, they themselves are no less inspired toward perfection. Your zeal helps me to progress and your solicitude is cause for my own compunction. My own spirit would have remained plunged in torpor, nor would I have given a thought to the things you asked about, had not your zeal and interest recalled me from sleep, as it were, to the recollection of spiritual things. So then it is time to plunge into the question we preferred to put off due to lack of time.

2. If I am not mistaken, this is the tenor of your question: Why is it that sometimes a period of joyous abandonment and relaxation seems to lessen the pangs of the flesh? Yet when we abstain more seriously, our afflicted and exhausted body is rudely assaulted, even to the point that we suffer nocturnal pollution as you admit?

3. Our fathers tell us that there are three causes for such

an attack, which come through untimely excesses according to a delayed time-sequence. Either it is caused by an excess of food, or there is a lack of vigilance, or else the enemy has produced this by means of illusions. So it is first of all the vice of covetousness of the mouth, that is, of voracity and gluttony, that causes the abundance of these humors. When you have pollution during a period of fasting, it is not your present fasting that causes it, as you think, but your past excesses.

For that which gluttony has been stored in the bone-marrow must surely come forth through chafing or at least carelessness, even during a serious and emaciating fast. What is more, not only do we need to fast from choicer foods, but our use of simple foods also must be moderate. Even bread and wine ought not to be taken to satiety if our bodily purity, once acquired, is to perdure and somehow imitate the inviolate chastity of the spirit.

We must confess that there are sometimes found those who without any particular care for the matter, but simply through a balanced temperament or old age, experience pollution but rarely or even not at all. Yet the merit due one who attains peace by such easy means is far different from that gained by someone who attains it through glorious virtue. For the fierce power of the latter over all vices is worthy of admiration. But the former, who is simply good by necessity, is in my estimation more worthy of pity than praise.

The second cause of impure flux occurs when the mind is void of spiritual studies and exercises: It does not strive according to the interior disciplines, and through habitual torpor it acquires a kind of slothful form about itself. Or it pays little attention to the "small matter" of bad thoughts, and it lazily desires the highest purity of heart, which it thinks consists in the castigation of the outward person alone. By reason of the error of this harmful nonchalance, it turns out that not only a wandering hoard of thoughts invades the mind with impudent audacity, but the seeds of all past vices also continue within it.

As long as these lurk in the depths, even though the body be chastised by strict fasting, they still trouble the sleeper with alluring phantasms. By means of these, filthy humors are called forth before a legitimate amount of time has passed, that is, not by natural necessity but through wicked fault. These

humors, if they cannot be completely reduced to nothing, at least by God's grace can be limited to a simple emission, and this more through mental alertness and virtue than by bodily fasting. Therefore, first of all, the wanderings of the senses are to be checked lest the mind grow accustomed to such excesses and be drawn to worse provocations of lust during sleep.

The third cause is this: Although we struggle to acquire a perpetually pure chastity by means of an orderly and careful discipline of continence and through contrition of heart and body, nevertheless, the wily demon devises a crafty attack against our commendable efforts of body and soul. The demon tries to shake the constancy of our conscience and to humiliate us as if for some crime, especially on those days when we are especially desirous of pleasing the divine gaze by greater purity. By causing a pollution due to no itching of the body nor mental consent nor the illusion of some phantasm, but by simple flux, the demon keeps us from Holy Communion.

Besides that, the devil uses the following maneuver in the case of beginners and those whose bodies are not yet subdued by the long discipline of fasting. When he sees them struggling hardest at fasting, the devil tries all kinds of arts to throw them down so as to convince them that not only have they not gained purity through abstinence, but that in fact their fasting has caused the attacks. This then can lead them to fear the mistress of incorruption and the stern nurse of purity and abstinence as an enemy.

Therefore, we ought to realize that there is more than one reason for rooting out all vices without exception. Not only will a single vice continue to plague our senses with its perturbations, it will introduce a band of vices crueler than itself and waylay the mind subject to itself by multiple enslavement. So the sole reason for conquering gluttony is not because it overbards us with food, nor simply because it fuels the fires of concupiscence within us, but also lest it prove to be the companion of wrath, fury, sadness or other passions.

For when food or drink is ministered to us in insufficient quantity or tardily or negligently, if we are dominated by gluttony, the result is that we are incited to anger. Then again, one can hardly be susceptible to voluptuous taste without being a lover of silver, for whose superfluities luxury expends her greatest efforts. The love of money, of course, is bound

together in an indissoluble society with vain-glory and pride and a multitude of other vices. And so each single vice, even if it alone begins to grow within us, will arrange an increase of the others.

4. **Germaine:** It is providential that we have been able to deal so candidly with this question. Previously, modesty has prevented us from being instructed in it, since we dared not ask. But now the situation and the subject of discussion provoke us to raise the point without trepidation. If the time comes when one must approach the Holy Mysteries, and yet he feels he has been polluted by the illusions of the night, is reception of the saving bread permissible or forbidden?

5. **Theonas:** Certainly we ought to expend every effort, in as far as it is in us, toward maintaining the immaculate purity of our chastity and especially at those times when we wish to assist at the holy altar. And we must exercise the most vigilant circumspection lest the bodily purity we have preserved intact up to then be stolen on the very night we are preparing for the communion of the saving banquet. But if the wicked enemy deceive the guard of the sleeping mind so as to deprive us of the remedy of the heavenly medicine, but in a way that involves no blameworthy prurience on our part nor consent to evil pleasures; and if the cause be simply an emission due to nature or called forth by an attack of the devil and not a voluptuous movement on our part, then this constitutes no impediment to our sanctification. We can and ought to come forth confidently for the grace of this health-giving food.

But if the efflux is due to our own fault, then we should haul our conscience before the bar of Paul's fearsome words: "Whoever eats the bread of the Lord and drinks his cup unworthily, is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself and then eat the bread and drink the cup. Whoever eats and drinks the bread and cup unworthily, eats and drinks judgment on himself since he does not discern the body" (1 Cor 11:27-29).

That is, he does not distinguish that heavenly food from common and cheap foods. And he does not realize that only the pure of mind and body may take this food. Then he adds: "Therefore many among you are ill and weak and many are

dying," meaning that spiritual sickness and death are mainly caused by this evil sort of eating. For many who go to Communion unworthily are weakened in faith and spiritually debilitated, that is, prone to the listlessness of vice. They sleep the sinners' sleep and are never roused from the deathly slumber by healthy concern.

The text continues: "If we judge ourselves, we will not be judged" (1 Cor 11:31). That is, if we judge ourselves unworthy of receiving the sacraments every time we come forward in the state of sin, and if we expend every effort to improve ourselves by means of penance so that we might approach worthily, then the Lord will not have to chastise us as unworthy with the stern penalties of illness.

Let us resort to these methods of compunction as a remedy for our wounds lest for want of having done a short penance in the present age we be condemned in the future with the sinners of this world. Leviticus also teaches this quite plainly: "Every clean person may eat of the sacrificial meat, but if any unclean one eats of the salutary sacrifice of the Lord, he shall perish before the Lord" (Lev 7:19-20 LXX). In Deuteronomy as well the unclean are mystically excluded from the spiritual camps: "If anyone of you suffers nocturnal pollution in sleep, let him leave the camp and not return before the evening bath. And after sunset he will return to camp" (Deut 23:10-11).

6. But we will show even more clearly that this impurity is sometimes caused by the machinations of the enemy. We know a brother who, although he always possessed chastity of mind and body, which he merited by great care and humility, and although he was never tempted by nocturnal phantasms, nonetheless, as often as he prepared to receive Sunday communion, was befouled in sleep by an unclean discharge. For a long time the frightened man abstained from the Holy Mysteries, but finally he brought the question to the seniors, confident he would find in their advice a remedy for the attacks and his sorrow.

The spiritual physicians learnedly proposed the first cause of the illness, namely, that it comes from an excess of food. But they found that this did not apply to the brother. They saw that the phantasm did not come from the vice of satiety, since the brother's abstemiousness was well known and because of the

special circumstance that the pollution only occurred on solemnities. Thus they passed on from there to the investigation of the second cause of the ailment, that is, whether the flesh by fault of the soul might be perplexed by impure phantasms through exhaustion brought on by fasting.

This can happen to the most austere people who are gradually puffed up by the purity of their body and are thus polluted by the vice of pride. For they come to believe that they have won bodily chastity by dint of their human virtues when in fact it is a special gift of God. When asked expressly whether he believed himself capable of such virtue that he would not need divine help, he rejected such an idea as utterly impious and added humbly that he could not have retained purity of body for even a few days unless he had been aided by the divine help in all things.

So they moved on to the third cause, which they perceived to be the secret machinations of the devil. Since they had proven that there was no fault of soul or body involved, they advised him to take part in the sacrament lest his continued abstention actually bind him in the wily trap of the enemy by preventing him from partaking in the sanctifying body of Christ. By this fraud he might be permanently cheated of the medicine of the divine remedy.

And so it happened that the whole plan of the devil was uncovered and the protecting strength of the Lord's body soon put an end to the habitual delusion. The trick of the enemy was laid bare and the opinion of the elders was clarified and proven which taught that for the most part impure emissions are produced not by fault of body or soul but by the powerful wiles of the adversary. Therefore, to avoid illusory fantasy in dreams, that cause of impure emissions, permanently or—I would say for the humbler or common condition—certainly for some months, we must continue to hope in the gift of purity from the grace of God and we must avoid an excess of food and drink.

For the excess of these things naturally and necessarily causes humors to form, which must be expelled by the laws of the body. These come forth on the occasion of some itching or fantasy. The result of avoiding satiety in food is that the unclean emissions are produced more slowly. And so it comes about that just as the flux is reduced, so also the fantasy

troubles the sleeper only rarely or lightly. For the flux doesn't depend on the imagination as much as the imagination depends on the excess of flux.

Therefore, if we wish to be freed from the seductions of these phantasms, we must struggle with all our might first of all to conquer the passion of fornication, as the Apostle says: "Let sin not reign in your mortal body so that it follows its lust." Secondly, let us completely quiet and sedate the alluring movements of the flesh: "Let us in no way present our bodies as instruments for the sin of iniquity." Thirdly, let us in all our ways mortify the titillation of the libido within us: "Let us offer ourselves to God as the living from the dead." By this program we will arrive at a permanently peaceful bodily state in which we can even present "our members as instruments" no longer of lust, but "to God for the service of justice" (Rom 6:12-14). When we have been thus built on the foundation of chaste purity, "sin will not dominate" us.

For we are "under the Law," which, while it commends the licit right of marriage, also nourishes and stores in our bones that heat, which works itself out in illicit fornication. But we are also "under grace," which in promoting the incorruption of virginity also destroys even that simple and innocent movement of the body and also the desire for licit intercourse. And so when all the impure collections of humors have dried up, we will be worthy to receive that blessedness which Isaiah promised to outstanding and praiseworthy eunuchs: "Thus says the Lord to eunuchs: To those who keep my Sabbath and choose what I wish and hold to my covenant I will give a name better than sons and daughters in my house and on my walls. I will give them an eternal name that will not perish" (Is 56:4-5).

Who are these sons and daughters to whom the eunuchs are so much preferred that they are said to receive a better name and place, except those saints of the old dispensation who remained in conjugal union? They arrived not undeservedly at adoption as sons of God. But what is the name promised them as the highest reward if not the name of Christ that we must one day bear? Of this name the Prophet speaks elsewhere: "And he will call his servants by another name. He who is blessed by this name on earth will be blessed by God, Amen. He who swears by it on earth will thereby swear in God" (Is 65:15-16). Again: "You will be called by a new name

pronounced by the mouth of God" (Is 62:2).

On account of this purity of heart and body, some will enjoy that special and distinctive happiness in which they sing forever that song that none of the saints may sing except those who follow the Lamb wherever it goes. "For they are virgins and have not defiled themselves with women" (Rev 14:4). Just so, if we wish to attain to this sublime virginal glory, let us cultivate with all our might an incorruptible mind and spirit lest we fall into the category of those silly virgins to whom the name virgin was not really granted. Because they only preserved themselves from carnal corruption, they were called virgins but silly ones. Due to the lack of oil of internal purity in their vases, the clarity and splendor of their bodily virginity was extinguished.

For it is necessary also that the external chastity of a person be served by the warmth and nourishment of interior purity and that it be continually encouraged toward perseverance in permanent incorruption. Although the foolish were called virgins, they are not on the day of Our Lord Jesus Christ permitted to enter the glorious bridal chamber of the spouse with the prudent ones who uncomplainingly preserve their spirit, soul and body integral.

For they are the true and incorruptible virgins of Christ. And they are considered eunuchs who not only fear fornication and have no desire for it, and not only repress impurity, but also conquer the least titillation of mind and the slightest suggestion of lust. And they do this to such a degree that they reduce the fleshly feeling so that they are touched by no movements of delectation and not even by the slightest whisper of allurements.

7. But we must guard our hearts with such a rampart of humility that we hold to this truth with an unchanging constancy of spirit: We are no way capable of arriving on our own at such a level of purity. If we have done all these things which I ascribed above to the grace of God, let us believe that we are still unworthy of communion with the sacred body. First of all, because the majesty of this heavenly manna is so great that no one sculpted of this muddy flesh may receive it as food by his own merits and not from the largesse of the Lord. None can be so careful in the conflict of this world that the blows of

sin don't strike them at least once in a while and to some degree. For it is impossible not to sin either through ignorance or negligence or by surprise or by design or by impulse or through forgetfulness or in sleep.

Even if we have ascended such a height of virtue that we can with no boasting exclaim with the Apostle: "To me it matters very little whether I am judged by you or any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am conscious of no fault" (1 Cor 4:3-4), still, we should know that we cannot be without sin. For it is not in vain that the same doctor adds: "But I am not justified by this," that is, just because I believe myself just, I will not thereby immediately possess the true glory of the just. Or just because my conscience throws up no accusation of sin against me, I am not therefore clean of all blemish. For many things lay hidden to my conscience which, although they are unknown and obscure to me, are known and manifest to God. Therefore, he adds: "The one who judges me is the Lord," that is, by him alone to whom the secrets of the heart are not hidden is a true examiner of my justice possible.

8. **Germaine:** You said before that only the holy ought to participate in the heavenly sacraments. And now you add that it is impossible for us to be entirely immune to sin. Now, if no one is free from sin, no one is holy. If no one is holy, it follows that without sanctity no one participates in the Mysteries of Christ. Nor can they hope for the kingdom of heaven, either, which the Lord promised to his holy ones.

9. **Theonas:** We cannot deny that many are holy and just, but there is a big difference between holy and immaculate. It is one thing to be holy, that is, consecrated to divine worship. Scripture attests that this title is applicable not only to persons but to places, and to the vessels and basins of the altar. But it is another thing to be without sin. That can only be said of the majesty of Christ alone of whom the Apostle said, as if the honor were his alone: "Who committed no sin" (1 Pet 2:22). If we too were able to live a life free from all sin, then it would be a rather cheap praise and unworthy of publication that we give under the guise of being something incomparable and divine.

Again the Apostle says to the Hebrews: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our trials, but he