

The Cross in Our Life, Part Three
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The Cross of Pleasure

Most believers associate the cross with pain, trials, and hardships of every kind. Yet few realize that the cross produced by seeking pleasure apart from God is heavier and harsher than other crosses.

When received in the name of Christ, the cross of trials produces steadfastness, strength, patience, tenderness of heart, and a refined human sensitivity. It also brings abundant grace. It is truly and genuinely a cross that leads to resurrection—a cross whose consolation makes it sweet.

Pleasure sought apart from God, however, creates a deadly emptiness. A person tries to fill this emptiness by returning to the same pleasure and immersing himself in it more intensely. He imagines that, by returning to it with greater force and abandoning himself to it more completely, he will escape his boredom and weariness. He believes that he is satisfying a longing for fullness, without realizing that he is seeking it in the wrong place. In reality, he gradually discovers that he has become enslaved to pleasure. He grows weak before it, surrenders to it, and despairs of ever being delivered from it. This cross leads to death and not to resurrection.

Why does a person experience pleasure as a cross? Is pleasure not a sensation of delight and exhilaration, both of which are joyful? Because reality shows us that every indulgence in pleasure is followed by pain and sorrow. Pleasure is temporary; its glow fades as soon as it ends. A person then discovers that he was deceived and has returned to the same condition in which he began.

Before the act, the evil one portrays pleasure as promising every delight for which the person longs, satisfying everything he seeks, and bringing him the peace of which he dreams. Yet in practice, he discovers that he has not merely returned to his former state: he now feels an even greater emptiness, a harsher weariness, and a darker despair.

Nevertheless, in order to avoid confronting this new reality, he rushes into yet another attempt to immerse himself in a still greater pleasure. Thus, the words of Saint John Climacus are fulfilled in him: “The dog has returned to its vomit.”

Let us calmly examine the power that one or more pleasures exercise over us. If we find it difficult to scrutinize ourselves, let us consider those who are addicted to sex, drugs, and the like. Did not the sexual revolution begin by demanding the right to engage in sexual activity and declaring it permissible whenever a person desired it? What was the result? Human beings were not satisfied with what they had attained. They went beyond it, devising new forms of sexual activity, then turning to same-sex relations, until we began hearing, from time to time, even of ceremonies supposedly uniting a human being in marriage to a pet!

Saint Maximus the Confessor speaks of “blind pleasure” — pleasure from which spiritual vision is absent. Such pleasure does not consider our responsibility before God and our neighbor. It is concerned only with satisfying the desires and inclinations of the individual solely on the individual level. It is selfish pleasure in the fullest sense. It uses the body to satisfy what the soul demands. As bodily passions spread unchecked within a person, they enslave him and draw him into excess, until he reaches the point of deadly addiction.

All pleasures that a person seeks apart from God tend to become blind pleasures. They do not look beyond themselves but are content with the immediate moment. They are bodily in the fullest sense. Through them, a person falls into sensuality without any limit. He falls into the darkness of the ego, which descends to a level of sensuality that can find expression only in the material world. The material world thereby becomes increasingly heavy and can no longer serve as a path leading the human person toward the greater Truth.

With your strong body, for example, you can serve others and accomplish great things. Or you can subject it to your selfish pleasures without caring in the least about anyone else. If you put your mind to work, you may use it to spread joy around you and develop better ways of living for yourself and others. Or you may

exploit it merely to secure what is best for yourself, even at the expense of others.

The problem lies neither in the body nor in matter. The problem lies within you—in your being and in your soul. What does your soul seek, and how does it attempt to satisfy its needs? Where is God in your life? How is the Gospel of Christ embodied in you? And how far are you prepared to continue walking with Christ?

Although a person can freely reject pleasure, he can never escape the pain and sorrow that come from it. He is left with two choices, both bitter. Either he flees from them by throwing himself into the pursuit of still more pleasures and devising new ways of seeking and experiencing them, until his body withers and can no longer respond to the demands of his soul. At that point, he discovers that his soul has become immeasurably more lustful than his body. He then loses the consolation he has spent his entire life seeking and begins to look for it from others, only to experience ever greater anguish.

Or he surrenders to despair and depression, which cause him to lose the meaning of life. They deprive him of the ability to recognize the love others have for him and prevent him from loving them in return. He thus spends his life in suffocating psychological isolation and deadly loneliness.

A person can overcome his sorrow only when he is touched by the grace of God and experiences the joy of living with Him. He then begins to seek true and lasting pleasure—the pleasure that springs from within him, specifically from the presence of God dwelling in him. When he replaces his love for earthly things with love for divine things, he discovers that he has gained both. But this occurs only after he has entered into the experience of repentance, which means a “change of mind.”

As long as we remain attached to earthly things, our cross remains too heavy for us to carry—unless we encounter God, who awaits us at every crossroads, seeking to set us free and opening His arms to embrace us.

Our longing for divine things—for the presence of God within us—transforms our inner vision of everything, and everything acquires a different meaning. This cannot happen without struggle or without a cross. Until a person is freed from enslavement to earthly things, he cannot experience temptations and hardships as crosses that liberate and enliven. In this way, he rises from one spiritual state to a higher one, until he reaches the state described by the Apostle Paul in these beautiful words:

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9).

The Cross prevents the fundamental inclinations of the world and the flesh from swelling beyond measure. Yet it also grants them the possibility of being transfigured—to pass through the Cross into true vision and complete freedom. Then the Apostle’s description is fulfilled in us:

“As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Cor. 6:9–10).

The Fathers of the Church teach us that whoever is nourished by the Cross is nourished by the Tree of Life.