

The Soul Dances: Tiredness and rest (II)

"It is helpful to discover how to rest amid the small occurrences of everyday life." The second part of an article on the need to rest in the midst of a life of hard work.

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"Quando il corpo sta bene, l'anima balla – When the body is well, the soul dances." The first time Saint Josemaría heard this Italian proverb

he didn't like it. He had known so many people who, in the midst of great physical suffering, were filled with joy and peace. As he once said: "The body is well – even though it be ill – and the soul dances, when one has supernatural outlook."^[1] But over time he came to appreciate the wisdom contained in this refrain. The human being is an inseparable unity of body and spirit. Just as the soul, according to its state, can uplift or drag down the body, so too the body can express what is in the soul, or muffle it in the case of ill-health.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," as the old saying goes. And rest is one of the best means of prevention. As with everything else in life, here too God counts on our doing ordinary activities well. We need to make fulfilling our duties compatible with the responsible concern to preserve the strength needed to continue

carrying them out. Rest is not a luxury or a form of selfishness. Rather it is a necessity and a duty. When we say goodbye to friends and family members we often say “take care.” This can be seen as a reminder that our health is a gift from God. It is a gift that enables us to be of service to others, and that we need to safeguard, without needless fears. The Pope reminds us of this, in citing the wise fatherly advice from the book of Sirach:[2] *My child, treat yourself well, according to your means . . . Do not deprive yourself of the day’s enjoyment (Sir 14:11,14).*

With common sense and good humour

“Grant me, O Lord, good digestion, and also something to digest. Grant me a healthy body, and the necessary good sense to maintain it. Grant me a simple soul that knows how to treasure all that is good and that

doesn't frighten easily at the sight of evil, but rather finds the means to put things back in their place. Give me a soul that knows not boredom, grumbling, sighs and laments, nor excess of stress, because of that obstructing thing called 'I'. Grant me, O Lord, a sense of good humour. Allow me the grace to be able to take a joke and to discover in life a bit of joy, and to be able to share it with others.”[3]

This prayer for good humour, cited by Pope Francis in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia, depicts simply and clearly what the tenor of the rest of a son or daughter of God should be. We need to confront tiredness with both common sense and good humour; it is just as necessary to give importance to our rest as it is to not over-exaggerate our tiredness. Saint Paul advised *those who mourn to live as though they were not mourning, and those*

who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing (1 Cor 7: 30). It is true that we need to rest and that it would be irresponsible to wait until we become so totally exhausted that our health suffers. But neither should we allow unreal expectations regarding our rest that only make us anxious in trying to achieve them.

It is helpful to discover how to rest amid the small occurrences of everyday life. The best rest is that which comes in continual small doses; constant irrigation is of greater benefit than many days of drought interspersed with a deluge. Saint Josemaría said that to rest is “not to do nothing: it is to relax with activities that require less effort.”[4] Normally, as long as we haven’t become totally exhausted, we can rest in this way. With a bit of creativity and order, we can find, even in our work, ways to rest: “while working on one thing, we rest

from doing something else. This is the spirit of Opus Dei.”^[5] It is much easier to enjoy a task when we put our heart into it, even though humanly speaking it is not very appealing. This leads to the best results and makes it easier to rest while working.

The hygiene of rest

Deriving from the Greek word *hygieinos* meaning healthy, hygiene is a series of measures taken to conserve one’s health. The “hygiene” of sleep is essential for rest, since the human body needs sleep. When we ask our body to go without sleep so as to squeeze out “extra time,” it gets the energy however it can. But abusing this flexibility can lead to harm that is not easily reversed, like an elastic band stretched beyond its limit. It is not just because a sleepless night can result in a loss of lucidity and energy the next day. The lack of

sleep accumulated over time can undermine one's health and lead to exhaustion. Here, as with many others things, the saying holds true: "bread today, hunger tomorrow."

Sometimes, despite the effort to get adequate sleep, we can experience difficulties in falling sleep. Then the night can become very long and one does not wake refreshed. Insomnia is not a sickness in itself, but rather a symptom. When a person suffers from it, the cause needs to be found, and sometimes the help of a specialist may be required. The factors may be external or environmental, such as heat or cold, noise or excessive light. They may also be internal, such as a worry that makes us suffer, a project we are working on, a respiratory or physiological problem etc. As with other health concerns, perhaps the problem cannot be easily resolved. And besides trying to find a solution,

it is a good opportunity to abandon ourselves serenely in God's hands.

Continuous tension can bring on fatigue. The word “stress” is often used for a “bad” tension, where people find themselves “burnt-out” by too much work or an overly taxing situation. But there is also a “good” tension or stress found in tenacious and constant work that is not in itself bad for one’s health.

What is harmful is a lack of relaxation or a misguided motivation. *Better is a handful of quietness, says Ecclesiastes, than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind (Eccles 4:6).* We can tire ourselves unnecessarily by not taking time to stop and rest, by wanting to resolve things all at once, or by being overwhelmed by the thought of pending tasks. Then our work can be a great deal of *striving after wind*. Work can also become dull and wearying when it is seen as

an end in itself and we lose sight of what we owe to others.

Muscular tension built up throughout the day can sometimes be the result of too much haste. Instant electronic communication and the speed of the means of transport tend to invade all areas of life. This can lead to always being in a hurry to get things done. Therefore we need to learn how to combine tenacity with serenity. Leaving with sufficient time so as to be punctual for meetings with others; listening to others without thinking about what we are going to do next; exercising patience with delays... These are some of the many ways we can instil more tranquillity in our daily life. If even the way we breathe affects the body's serenity and freedom from tension, so too a proper "breathing" of the soul conserves our serenity and energy to resolve problems, to accept peacefully daily concerns and

worries, as well as our own imperfections and those of others. These habits can gradually help us to rest in a simply and healthy way, and to be an “oasis” for others: a shoulder to lean on, someone in whom they can confide.

Physical exercise can help both body and soul to relax. We all benefit from the habit of going for a walk each day, taking advantage of going to or from work, collecting the children from school, doing an errand.... Sport is also quite helpful, age permitting. It allows us to relax and expend energy in a cheerful way. It can be an opportunity to relax with others, and to challenge our body to meet prudent goals. These as well as other simple measures that we can incorporate in our daily life contribute to a correct “hygiene” of resting *in* our work, which makes us more cheerful and productive.

A change of atmosphere

Rest in its various forms is a change of atmosphere. Just as the atmosphere in a room becomes stuffy without ventilation, so too daily life can tire us out, even when there are no great frictions. Without “fresh air” we can easily slip into boredom or routine.

A change of atmosphere does not necessarily mean going away for a few days, as often our responsibilities will not permit this. Playing sports, taking a walk, going on an outing to the countryside or the mountains, visiting a different place... These are ways we can “clear our head” and return refreshed to our normal life.

At times small conflicts can arise with those with whom we live or work. Sometimes these can be resolved simply by spending a few hours with them outside our usual

environment. At other times we may face challenges that we find it hard to give a clear focus to, and that require distancing ourselves from them a bit and refocusing and clarifying them through our rest. Fiction, both books and films, as well as poetry and art can also separate us a bit from our everyday problems and refresh us. These provide a change of perspective that helps us to refocus our vision of the world and rediscover the beauty of little things.

Authentic rest comes from distancing ourselves somewhat from daily reality so as to return renewed. But it does not mean a headlong flight from the real world. Seeing the way some people disconnect totally on weekends, and the lamentable state this leaves them in, we can be sure that rest is fictitious if we return in a worse state than beforehand. At times this way of acting stems from disappointment with daily life and

seeking to flee from oneself. It is good therefore to look sincerely at our life and identify entertainment that is an escape rather than real rest, and perhaps even harmful.

Temperance is thus a good touchstone for the quality of our rest. Having a good time and being festive is undoubtedly part of rest. But it is important not to confuse festivity with excess, even though this has become commonplace. Here too the advice holds true that it is good to give the body “a little less than it needs.”^[6] Having a good time without over-indulging leads to greater enjoyment.

Temperance frees us from the anxious search for constant diversion, with the resultant disappointment when it isn’t available. Thus it does us good sometimes to go without music, even though we have the technology to always be listening to it; to

disconnect for a while from the internet so as to “reconnect” with those around us and be more aware of their needs. In the end, we need to ask ourselves whether we have created artificial “needs” with the constant possibilities of entertainment, which can deprive us of the freedom of a simple and joyful rest.

Rest that is open to others

Family life is enriched by fostering cultural interests and hobbies. These also provide an alternative to sports, which can become problematic if one is short on time, sick or getting older. We are not eternally young. If our rest is centred on vigorous sports, as we get older we may find this less and less attractive. That is why it is good not to wait until this moment arrives to begin to develop other ways of resting. Even though some of these may not require the presence

of others, a child of God should always view rest as part of their life with and for others, and not as something merely private. Seen in this light, books and films can enrich our conversations and give us topics to talk about. Painting, gardening or DIY (do it yourself) projects give warmth to the home; each one's musical talent (even though it may not be great), creativity in cooking, originality in putting on a celebration, all make life more pleasant for everyone.

Authentic rest should be open to family and friends. It makes no sense, come the weekend, to retreat into a shell. Rest that is individualistic ends up not giving true relief but rather produces a strange anxiety to escape. This can be symptomatic of an inner tension with one's self-identity as a father, mother, brother, husband, daughter... It is one thing to want to

rest and another to become anxious about rest. Rest that is open to others is serene and flexible: it reveals our identity and helps us to be who we are.

In Saint Paul's exhortation, "*alter alterius onera portate* - bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (*Gal 6:2*), we can see an invitation to care for the rest of others. We rest best when we help others to rest. Taking into account the likes and interests of those around us is part of daily family life: the father with the children, the wife with the husband, the grandchildren with the grandparents... And trying to be understanding: life becomes much easier when we truly love others and know we are loved, surrounded by people who listen to us, understand us, and make our concerns their own. "If you do things with affection, each of our houses will be the home that I want for my

children. Your brothers will have a holy hunger to return home after a day filled with work. And they will find their eagerness renewed to set forth again – rested and serene – for the war of love and peace that our Lord asks of us.”[7]

Rest has its deepest source and ultimate horizon in our Lord. “My God: I rest in you,” Saint Josemaría wrote in the margin of the *Decenary to the Holy Spirit*. “O Lord God,” prayed Saint Augustine, “grant us your peace – for you have given us all things. Grant us the peace of quietness, the peace of the Sabbath, the peace without an evening.”[8] If at times we find ourselves carried away by the beauty of the countryside seen from a high point, by the steady breaking of the waves on the beach, by a crackling fire in a fireplace, by the sight of joyful children at play, how can we fail to find repose in prayer, in intimacy

with our God who always listens to us and fills all that we do with meaning? *The Lord God is a sun and shield* (Ps 84:11). He illuminates our tiredness and our rest. If our soul becomes silent on losing sight of Him, it breaks into song and dances when He is found again. “Rest in your divine filiation. God is a Father – your Father! – full of warmth and infinite love. Call him Father frequently and tell him, when you are alone, that you love him – that you love him very much! And that you feel proud and strong because you are his child.”[9]

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[1] Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 29 April 1969 (cited in *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition* p. 325).

[2] Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 4.

[3] This is the Vatican website English version of the prayer cited by Pope Francis in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2014. Although often attributed to Saint Thomas More, it was actually written by Thomas Basil Webb (1898-1917), who was killed at the Battle of the Somme. Here is the poem he wrote not long before dying at the age of 19:

Give me a good digestion, Lord,

And also something to digest.

Give me a healthy body, Lord,

With sense to keep it at its best.

Give me a healthy mind, Lord,

To keep the good and pure in sight,

Which, seeing sin, is not appalled,
But finds a way to set it right.

Give me a mind that is not bored,
That does not whimper, whine or
sigh;
Don't let me worry overmuch
About the fussy thing called I.

Give me a sense of humor, Lord,
Give me the grace to see a joke,
To get some happiness from life
And pass it on to other folk.

[4] *The Way*, 357.

[5] Saint Josemaria, Notes from a
family get-together, 7 July 1974.

[6] Cf. *The Way*, 196.

[7] Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 29 March 1956 (cited in A. Sastre, *Tiempo de Caminar*, Rialp, Madrid 1989, 182-183).

[8] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII. 35.50.

[9] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 331.

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