

Letter to an Agnostic

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Answers the assertion of a young agnostic that religion is morbid. Recalls the struggle of St. Theresa of Avila as well as her own efforts to find joy in God. Suggests that the arrogance and rebelliousness of youth can deprive the soul of life. (DDLW #53).

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Reading the eighth chapter of St. Teresa's autobiography recalled to me your objection to religion as being morbid.

This is quite a natural feeling on your part and it is a very common attitude toward religion. If those who spend several hours a day in prayer, and hours more in spiritual reading, as she did, in a *willful* search for God, had these feelings, these struggles – how much more those who are scarcely touched by faith or hope?

You know the reaction of my friends to religion, that it is a deliberate turning away from life. We Catholics know, with a supernatural knowledge, not with a worldly knowledge, that this is not so, just as we know the existence of God and love Him with our will, which is a power of our souls.

St. Teresa struggled for twenty years, she said, to avoid the occasions of sin. To know what she was talking about, what she meant by sin, it is necessary to understand the situation she was in.

She had entered the convent at the age of eighteen. The Carmelite convent was a large one, containing so many nuns that it was difficult to feed them all. It was the custom of the day to send unmarried daughters, widows, ladies who wished to retire from the world to the convent and yet they did not retire from the world. There were a great many visitors. St. Teresa herself said that one of the reasons so many visitors came was to bring food to the nuns, and they received their callers because there was so little food in the convent that they needed to eke out their resources in that way. Later when St. Teresa was making her foundations of the reformed Carmelites, she saw to it that her nuns had enough to eat.

St. Teresa knew that she was far from leading the life she wished to lead when she entered the convent. She wished to give herself up wholly to God. She wished everything she did, every word she said, to tend to that end. But she was a gay creature. The story is that she went to be received in the convent in a bright red dress. She was full of vitality, life. She wished to live abundantly.

The very qualities in her which urged her to give herself to God, drew her to her fellows. She had an abundant love for them, an interest in them, and there was much time spent in conversations.

The more her life was involved with her fellows, the more she was drawn to them, the more she felt she was drawing away from God.

She was making little account of venial sins, she said; she was not avoiding the occasions of them. She felt that she was a sinful creature and said so many times in her autobiography. This does not mean anything scandalous – that the convent ladies sat around and received unseemly visits, ate or drank to excess (as the monks were accused of doing), or indulged in vicious talk or gossip.

But St. Teresa had so great a desire for perfection that any time engaged in idle talk (the most innocent idle talk) seemed to her to be deliberately stolen from God. She knew what she wanted, she knew that there was a better life for her, but she had a struggle to attain it.

She tells in this eighth chapter how she was kept from prayer.

The sadness I felt on entering the oratory was so great that it required all the courage I had to force myself in. They say of me that my courage is not slight, and it is known that God has given me a courage beyond that of a woman; but I have made a bad use of it.

She told, too, of watching the hour glass, of how she was filled with distractions, of what a constant hard struggle it was to force herself prayer and spiritual reading.

And these struggles went on for twenty years!

"I wished to live," she wrote, " but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it."

This is the *morbidness* that you mean, I know.

If St. Teresa, with her knowledge and insight and the graces God gave her to go on struggling, felt that she was wrestling with the shadow of death, how one who knows nothing of religion must shy off from it every time the matter enters his consciousness!

The shadow of death she was talking of was the life she was leading, purposeless, disordered, a constant succumbing to second-best, to the less-than-perfect which she desired. But human nature will try to persuade us that the life of prayer is death, is a turning away from life.

As a convert I can say these things, knowing how many times I turned away, almost in disgust, from the idea of God and giving myself up to Him.

I know the feeling of uneasiness, of weariness, the feeling of strain put upon the soul from driving it, instead of abandoning it to God.

And how any one can persist in the search for God without the assistance of the Church and the advice of her confessors, with the experience of generations behind them, I do not know.

The thing you do not understand is the elemental fact that our beginning and our last end is God. Once that fact is accepted, half the struggle is won. If we wish to go on struggling, not to be content with the minimum of virtue, of duty done, of "just getting by," then we should account it a great honor that God has given us these desires, to serve Him and to use ourselves completely in His service.

You do not see this, you do not believe it. Every now and then, when you think of religion in your busy life, you end by turning from it with aversion.

You are very young, scarcely twenty-one, and you have not yet really felt the need, the yearning toward God.

You have not been in such agony and misery that you turned to One whom you knew not and said: "God help me!" Or if you did, you were ashamed of doing it afterward, feeling it to be cowardice to turn in misery to a God in whom you did not believe.

I felt this despair when I lay in jail for fifteen days (after demonstrating for the rights of political prisoners), contemplating the fundamental misery of human existence, a misery which would remain even if social justice were achieved and a state of Utopia prevailed. For you cannot pace the floor of a barred cell, or lie on your back on a hard cot watching a gleam of sunlight travel slowly, oh, so slowly, across the room, without coming to the realization that until the heart and soul of man is changed, there is no hope of happiness for him.

On the other hand, you have not felt the ecstasy, the thankfulness, the joy, which caused the Psalmist to cry out, "My heart and my flesh rejoice for the living God." "My soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord."

St. John of the Cross, who lived at the same time as St. Teresa and was her good friend, tells about the different stages of prayer and how the first state is the purgative state. He explains how though we feel this joy and this longing of God, a joy which is so sweet that even the remembrance of it is a constant spur to us, still our own imperfections give us constant suffering and unease, and the struggle for the spiritual life is a wearisome one, and that we must not expect to find ease in prayer.

He makes us understand this distaste, this recoil from religion. This lethargy comes from a consciousness of that immanence of the struggle, the fact that it is unceasing and will go on to death, and we often think that sheer thoughtless paganism would be a relief.

You do not know how long I struggled. How I turned *to* God, and turned *from* Him, again and again; I, too, felt that distaste, I, too, felt that religion had a morbid quality.

It is the struggle of the flesh against the spirit. It is the struggle of the natural man against that in him that is Divine. (I am going to write you later about the flesh and the spirit, the sensual and the spiritual, for you have an entirely wrong idea as to what Karl Adam calls “the antitheses with which Christianity is concerned.”)

I can understand what you mean by morbid, and can understand how no matter how often you are drawn you are also repelled. If you only knew, and could in intellectual humility submit yourself to the rule which makes all so plain and clear!

We have “a rule of life” which is easy to follow, provided we listen to the wise counsels of such people as St. Teresa, St. Francis de Sales, de Caussade, Father Considine. I mention these names because they are the first ones that come to mind who have been of help this past year.

St. Teresa understood that weariness of the soul; St. Francis tells us to be gentle with ourselves; de Caussade tells us to abandon ourselves to Divine Providence, and Father Considine tells us to have more faith in God as a kind Father who is so far above our earthly fathers that He will forgive us all our sins, even the greatest, who will not give us a stone when we ask for bread.

We are taught that our souls need exercise just as our body does, otherwise it will never be healthy and well, and if it is not in a healthy state, of course we will feel morbid. And prayer is that exercise for the soul, just as bending and stretching is the exercise of the body. It is intellectual pride, the arrogance of youth which makes the physical act of prayer difficult.

You submit yourself to the dogma of Communism, you accept the authority of Karl Marx and Lenin, you accept the philosophy of Communism and know while you are accepting a “hard saying,” that in all likelihood you will be persecuted for this acceptance.

Perhaps the main trouble is that to you Christianity is too simple. To you Christianity is the accepted thing, so you rebel, and knowing that your rebellion deprives your soul of life, you turn on religion and call it morbid.