Sloth is becoming a social disease. It affects people’s character, spirit and will-power. This vice, despite being pervasive in our society, is not taken seriously. It is usually considered an old, outdated word and not necessarily a negative human trait. Why would one regard discouragement, sadness and boredom as sins?

The Greek and medieval philosophers, the founders of Western ethos, agreed that sloth was a vice and one of the capital sins. It is the root (ancestor) of other distortions in life such as laziness, inconstancy, negligence (the Italian word incuria is etymologically connected to sloth), meaningless life, resignation and depression (including clinical). In the past, sloth was seen as a risk to individual and social well-being. Classic humanism believed that the common good, which is built by active and hard working people, was threatened by such a vice. To keep the social body alive, the virus of sloth should be diagnosed and eradicated. A healthy life is based on work, liveliness, and civil, political, and economic commitment. Virtues allow human dignity and happiness to flourish, while vices inhibit them and make life difficult. They are more than a collection of single acts as they represent a moral, existential condition. People usually fall into vice unintentionally as they are unaware of the path that they are taking (that's why vices are different from sins). Vices are a source of small pleasures that keep people and communities from pursuing true satisfaction; this can only be achieved when bodies and souls are used well (virtuously). Such vice causes a person to satisfy with "the husks for pigs" rather than the food that is served at home.

Like gluttony, greed and lust, sloth is characterized by the fruitless pursuit of small comforts. It is usually a consequence of people suffering traumas, crises, delusions, grief, disappointments and injuries who, instead of fighting these problems, wallow in self-pity, licking their own wounds. This attitude can console and even evoke pleasure, like the survivor of a shipwreck laying down and enjoying the sweet feeling of mere existence. It is in this way that slothful people will survive - but not live - after the crisis. A consumeristic society offers us numerous goods that make being idle enjoyable, increasing the trap of sloth (take television for example). Such goods grant people a perverse sort of pleasure that is shortsighted and fleeting. Wise, ancient advice tells us not to respond to failures with passivity and sloth, like Narcissus, but with an active life. We are called on to leave our comfy homes and extend our help to others. Narcissism is similar to sloth, and, as such, it is also an endemic social blight.

Sloth is an awful vice since it causes people to suffer and live miserable lives. It should be healed before people give up on life and prevent others from living - we see this happening all the time in companies. People are unable to start again after a serious crisis; they are spiritually dead.

Melancholy, another word for sloth and sadness, is represented in the mysterious engraving of Dürer by a small monster. This beast does not allow an artist to reach his many tools that lay on the floor. In the background there is a starry sky; neither stars nor labor exist when sloth takes over. This picture, engraved when Machiavelli wrote The Prince, was done in the times of the Italian civil war, European religious conflicts and when civil humanism was rejected; it was an age, similar to ours, when melancholy dominated society.

To overcome a vice, one should identify its first symptoms and immediately block further development, which would otherwise be rapid and cumulative. The symptoms of sloth are: the inability of people to reach the end of a process, the
inability to get work done, abandoning the revision of articles before publishing them, being bored at work and constantly saying: ‘Why am I doing this?’, ‘It’s not worth the hassle’.

Ancient teachings on virtue tell us to react immediately to the first symptoms of an addiction - the symptoms are not yet the vice, but the lack of reaction is. If one doesn’t feel the need for more than “husks”, they should react virtuously like the “lost son” and say: “I will get up and go to my father”.

In Dürer’s engraving the melancholy man doesn’t look to the abandoned tools on the floor nor to the stars. Crises have devastating consequences when they put out the fires of aspiration. On the other hand, hard times can produce desire; people want to recover what was lost, craving the missing stars (in fact the word desire, or de-sidera, means lack of stars). Those who fall into sloth don’t miss the stars as they are content with a dark sky. However, if they step out of their solitude and start to enjoy the company of others, someone can show them how to once again see the stars.

This deep crisis can not be entrusted to be fixed by economic and financial decisions alone. The complacency, low spirits and sloth of the people and nations must be overcome by new political and social projects that reintroduce civil enthusiasm into society. Lonely people should gather together and work for common social goals, fruitless and addicting pleasures should give way to joyful and fruitful passions, and civil virtues should replace vices. Can we do this?

Translated by Cristian Sebok