

It's not a sin to be depressed: What St Philip Neri and St Thomas Aquinas have to say

By S.D. Wright on

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Telling someone depression is a sin is like telling a paralysed man to get up and walk, but without any of Christ's power to make it happen. St Thomas Aquinas and St Philip Neri show us what to think.

In a [previous piece](#), I explained how St Thomas treats mirth, playfulness and affability as virtues – and that, despite some people acting as if being humourless, dour and rude is a virtue, these things are actually vices.

Towards the end of that piece, I noted that this does not mean that being sad or depressed are vices.

There are a minority of Catholics today who hold that depression is a fault, or the fruit of a fault – perhaps nothing more than vanity and pride. They speak as if depression is an invention of modern (and therefore, we are to assume, false) thought, and that perhaps doesn't even really exist. They speak as if one could free oneself from a state of depression by acts of the will.

What should we make of this? Let's dig into this topic and see.

Two-Part Series: St Thomas Aquinas and St Philip Neri

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Compassion

Some people in the world are sad for good reason – some have experienced or lived through sufferings which the rest of us could never even imagine. Some people's lives have been so filled such trauma and difficulty, that they have entered habitual states of sadness, sorrow or numbness. In some cases, these states have even had effects on their bodies – and they are unable to leave these states by a mere act of the will.

Based on the experience of such persons, we can loosely define depression as a persistent state of being unable to feel joy and motivation. Perhaps some feel numb to all emotion, or experience an abiding, involuntary sorrow which cannot easily be thrown off.

This is obviously not a scientific definition, but it will serve for our purposes.

It's common to "materialise" depression, as if it is all about chemical imbalances. I have nothing to say on this, except to note that man is a rational animal, which means that he is a thing which is subsistent, bodily, living, sentient and rational. The passions (or "emotions", which perhaps avoids negative connotations) pertain to the sentient, animal nature. Chemical imbalances might pertain to the points of our nature that are merely "bodily" or "living" (viz. what he has in common with mineral or vegetable things), but this does not exhaust what it means to be an animal. The emotions are truly good and proper features of an animal nature – and they cannot be reduced to merely chemical processes, nor to those of the intellect.

It is also an error to spiritualise depression, as if the emotions belonged solely to the immaterial soul, and not to the body. This is perhaps the root of the idea that depression and other psychological problems are self-indulgent faults, and can be cured by going to confession and "getting a grip."

What depressed people need to do, according to this "spiritualisation", is to decide to stop being depressed, try harder and be more humble.

Perhaps there are indeed self-indulgent persons who can and should just snap out of things. But let me be clear: as a generalisation, these are completely appalling ideas.

Let's see instead what St Thomas has to say.

Sorrow and its remedies

According to St Thomas's schema, sorrow is a passion, defined as a kind of pain arising from the apprehension of a present evil.¹ St Thomas actually uses the very word "depressing" in explaining the effects of sorrow:

"Sorrow has a depressing effect, it is like a weight whereof we strive to unburden ourselves."²

Far from the strange and inhuman idea of equating depression with pride, St Thomas says that it is a good

sign if a man is in sorrow when exposed to some evil thing – because if a thing really is evil, then a lack of sorrow would show either insensibility in the face of it, or poor judgment – “both of which are manifest evils.”³

If someone has been harmed or traumatised by great evils, then this abiding sorrow and depression is (in a sense) the normal reaction. This is not to say that it is good to be depressed: but this state can be a natural effect of an ongoing apprehension of an ongoing evil (namely the effects of the harm).

Equating depression with pride is either a) a denial of the evils which have led to a person’s habitual state of sorrow, or b) an assertion that the state of depression is disproportionate to the cause.

But it is generally not proper for us to make such claims about someone else’s state. In this circumstance, it is like someone with perfect vision denying the existence of blindness, or of blind people – or even the simple need for corrective spectacles.

Sorrow’s bodily effects

Actual physical blindness leads us to an important point.

St Thomas teaches that sorrow can have harmful effects on the soul and on the body – in fact, he teaches that sorrow is more harmful to the body than any of the other emotions or passions.⁴

His understanding of biological mechanics may or may not be accurate, but his overall point seems to be borne out by experience, as well as by modern research into the effects of traumatic experiences.⁵ St Thomas gives examples of the effects of psychological pain on the body in a fourfold division of sorrow, taken from St John Damascene and St Gregory of Nyssa:

- Pity, for another’s evil, considered as our own evil (i.e. suffering ourselves for someone else’s suffering)
- Envy, for another’s good, considered as our own evil (thus causing suffering to ourselves)
- Anxiety or perplexity, “which weighs on the mind, so as to make escape [from some evil] seem impossible”
- Torpor, “when the mind be weighed down so much, that even the limbs become motionless”. He even recognises that torpor can deprive a man of speech.⁶

Torpor, by St Thomas’s definition, is a sort of freezing effect, affecting the body in a profound way. The “freeze” effect is now recognised – along with “fight”, “flight” and “fawn” – as one of the responses of human beings to traumatic experiences, and it is closely linked to depression.

These bodily effects can even be lasting, especially if the cause is lasting – and even more so if it occurs during a formative period of life.

Remedies for sorrow

This focus on the body also appears in St Thomas’s discussion of remedies for sorrow. He considers pleasure in general to be the remedy for sorrow, and mentions five particular remedies. Here are four of them:

- Contemplation of truth

- Weeping
- Sleep
- Baths.⁷

These last three are specifically bodily actions, achieving bodily effects.

Profound psychological problems will no doubt require more profound remedies. But the weariness of the soul and the effects of this on the body can be soothed – to some degree – by bodily remedies. Many modern techniques for resolving trauma, stress and depression involve such a focus on the body.

Caution against ‘hot takes’ on depression

All of this should put paid to the idea that sorrow, melancholy and depression are merely spiritual affairs or matters of the will. No-one can simply decide to stop having a headache, or a broken arm, or cancer – nor can we presume that someone can simply decide to stop being depressed.

We would not dream of attributing serious bodily ailments to the moral guilt of the person suffering – “You have cancer because you are proud!” – nor should we so attribute emotional sufferings to such faults.

This “spiritualising” approach is comparable to telling a paralysed man to get up and walk, but without having any of Christ’s power to make it happen. In other words, it is denying the state of the afflicted, and saying that they can and should “just do better.”

Let’s reflect on the consequences of such a short-sighted approach: If a paralysed man was confronted with someone denying the reality of his state, would it be surprising if the man turned against what he perceives to be the source of this “reasoning”? Is it not the height of imprudence to present this as “the Catholic take” on his state?

And if he were to be cured of his affliction through other means – rather than through the impotent commands to stop being depressed by such Catholics – what will he think of the Church then?

There are many who are or were depressed, and have now turned against Christ because of such defective advice from well-meaning but ill-informed Christians. This is not to excuse such a reaction – but it is hardly surprising, given the details of some cases.

We do Christ’s holy religion a disservice by acting in this way.

Even those who are not driven out of the Church may find their lives, their prayer and their recovery stunted by such advice, which lays a heavy and insupportable burden on their shoulders without providing the proper help to move it. Some even despair and commit suicide: others are left to suffer, shamed into silence, mistaking these ideas for the teaching of the Church.

Our hearts should go out to them.

Concluding thoughts

I deliberately left out one of St Thomas’s remedies from the list above, and that is *the sympathy of friends*:

“Sorrow has a depressing effect, it is like a weight whereof we strive to unburden ourselves: so that when a man sees others saddened by his own sorrow, it seems as though others were bearing the

burden with him, striving, as it were, to lessen its weight; wherefore the load of sorrow becomes lighter for him: something like what occurs in the carrying of bodily burdens.”⁸

He continues:

“The second and better reason is because when a man’s friends condole with him, he sees that he is loved by them, and this affords him pleasure, as stated above. Consequently, since every pleasure assuages sorrow, as stated above, it follows that sorrow is mitigated by a sympathizing friend.”⁹

How useful, in light of all these things, do we think it is to tell a truly depressed person that they are sinful, vain and proud, and should snap out of it with some humility?

Let’s return to the subject with which we started – [St Philip Neri](#). How does he teach us to behave around sorrowing people?

Sympathy can take a variety of forms. One form, as St Thomas discusses, is sorrowing with one’s sorrowing friends. This, he says, “is proof of friendship” and the love that is expressed by this sorrow “becomes an object of pleasure by reason of its cause.”¹⁰

Another form, more related to St Philip, is being cheerful, humorous and affable. As we saw above, the virtues of mirth, eutrapelia and affability are ordered towards easing the weariness of life and bringing joy to ourselves and our neighbour.

Those of us to whom God has given a cheerful disposition might seem to go through life like happy little ducks, and we might struggle to enter into the sufferings of those unlike ourselves. But we should not dismiss these others or look down on them as if they were at fault.

Perhaps the very reason we have been given cheerful dispositions is to cheer up those who are suffering – or at least to listen to them, and to suffer with them.

Cracking jokes is not always appropriate. The appropriateness of each particular form of sympathy will be a question of prudence, depending on the person before us. But we see both forms of sympathy in St Philip’s life, and in the meditations of the Novena which gave rise to these reflections. We all know about St Philip’s jokes and good humour, but look again at how he treated the sad [Fr Bernardi](#): he did not crack jokes – nor did he hector him as vain – but rather, he invited him for a run.

The most important point in this piece, however, is this. To those who are weighed down by sorrows or the events of life, Christ Our Lord says:

“Come to me all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you.” Matthew 11.28

Notwithstanding ideas to the contrary voiced by some Catholics, I think we can safely say to such persons:

Our Lord, his Catholic Church, St Thomas Aquinas, and St Philip Neri understand your state.

No, more than this: they are the friends of those who are in sorrow. They do not deny the existence of your suffering, nor do they offer you false remedies and then condemn you when they don’t work.

Let’s end again, as we did in the previous reflection, with the same words of [Cardinal Newman](#) from the meditation on St Philip’s cheerfulness:

“When he was called upon to be merry, he was merry; when he was called upon to feel sympathy with the distressed, he was equally ready.”

Would that we do the same.

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See for example the influential work Dr Bessel van de Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*, Penguin, London, 2014

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