

Septuagesima 2009

When I was a teen, my parents bought me a recording of Stravinsky's *Agon*, a work I came to know and love through repeated listenings (although I'm sure its dissonant music would not be to the general taste). The name of this music, *agon*, fascinated me. The composer explained the title as having come from Greek, indicating a struggle, a contest. We got this word into English too in the words 'agony' and in the verb 'to agonize.' I spotted this word in our Latin text for the Epistle today and while it brought back the memory of the music, it also led my mind to the subject for this sermon for Septuagesima Sunday, the first day of the pre-Lenten season.

The sentence from Saint Paul that contains the word says this: "Everyone who *strives for mastery* refrains himself from all things." The reference here is to sporting events that were well known to the people in Corinth (and which would serve us well too in a time when sports play such a prominent role in our world). No one attains the needed physical condition to be an athlete without this struggle, this striving for mastery of his body. Getting into shape, as we say, is hard work. Physical strength and coordination are things acquired through repeated and arduous practice. There's a purpose, of course, in undergoing all this rigorous training. That purpose is *not* to feed our incredibly vain preoccupation about 'looking good.' Physical conditioning serves the purpose of training oneself to enter the contest for winning a victory. In sports, this is the winning of the game, the race, the fight, the contest. Saint Paul employs this metaphor for the discipline (or, to use our word) the '*agon-izing*' needed for the spiritual victory over the flesh. He clearly says that he chastises his body and brings it into subjection, subjection to his will. That is a work, a project, a struggle, an 'agony.' It's not something that happens all by itself. It is the experience of every man that he has an inborn tendency towards waywardness, laziness, sensuality and lust. This is evident either in the *excessive* urges of the flesh or else in lethargy and indolence, the lack of self-motivation. These are in fact merely two sides of the same coin and the remedy for both is the same: diligent work, self-mastery through repeated acts of self-denial and the willing engagement in the inevitable conflict, that *agon*, without which there can be no victory in the spiritual life.

This theme is well represented in the Church's tradition. We have, for example, Tertullian writing this to potential martyrs: "Your master, Jesus Christ, has brought you to this training ground. He determined long before the day of the contest to take you from a softer way of life to a harsher regimen, so that your strength might increase." Saint Clement of Alexandria gives us the terse formula, "No effort, no crown!" Saint Jerome: "Let our soul be in command and our body in subjection. Then Christ will come and immediately make his dwelling with us." And there are many other spiritual writers who say similar things.

What's important to keep in mind here is that nobody—nobody—gets through life without having experienced the 'agony.' Even those who lead the most shameful lives of abandonment to self-indulgence suffer greatly on that account. The reason why no one can escape the contest of this war against himself is that besides having the driving impulses and the cravings of the flesh there is another component of our make up often overlooked. We are *rational* beings; we have human reason. 'Reason' means that there is a logic about human existence; that there is a logic about right conduct implicit in our very constitution as human beings. Reason, and not only our fleshly impulses, is inevitably part of what we are. If one should think that fighting this internal struggle of reason versus cravings is not worth the hardship involved, he should realize the immense sufferings that follow upon the retreat into self indulgence. People 'agonize' (there's our word again) whose lives are out of control through their lack of self mastery. Being out of control can make a mess of one's life. Bringing life into order, means subjecting one's cravings to the rule of reason. The spiritual life, the Catholic life is, in the moral sense, nothing other than the authentically reasonable human life. The Catholic faith, however, lends all the necessary means to assist the tucking-in of the unruly impulses, desires and leanings of fallen nature. We have, above all, the Sacraments of Confession and (when sufficiently worthy) Holy Communion as aids for bringing the flesh into the subjection to the mind. And this domination of the mind over the flesh brings about a state of peace, contentment. It's a great feeling (pardon that word) to be in charge of one's own life, to be one's own master. It makes one free to do so many other useful and necessary things in life that would be impossible or very difficult without it. (And at this point allow me to say

what a great shame it is for permissive parents to allow their children to do whatever they please. What terrible training that is for the contest, for the agony of life! Such parents are disabling, crippling their children in that most needed conditioning that would enable them to lead happy and fulfilling lives in their adulthood and then forever hereafter.)

I suppose that the reason we have this pre-Lenten season in the traditional calendar of the Church is to get us mentally prepared for a fruitful exercise of the discipline of Lent. I can't think of a more urgent call to the people of our day in this society than the call to self mastery. I like to think of our Gospel in this sense as well. "Why do you stand here idle?" We are laborers sent out to work. We should set ourselves to the task of self-mastery with diligence. We need the training of the athlete. We need (in Saint Paul's words) to chastise, that is, to punish, our bodies and bring them into subjection. And we will be glad, we will be fit, we will be in shape, and we will be able to win in the contest and receive the imperishable crown. Agon. Strive. Fight. You can do it. You must do it. Without question, you have the capability of winning, and the Church is your training coach, your physician, and your cheering section in this great contest of striving for eternal life.