

Minister's Letter



Sister Helen Julian CSF, Minister Provincial of the First Order Sisters, European Province, writes:

Dear Friends,

'Happiness is finding your inner child' proclaimed the magazine in the dentist's waiting room. The article went on to praise the virtues of re-learning how to play, and spending time doing things just for fun. I'm sure that stamping in puddles and kicking through leaves are a very good thing, but I found myself remembering times as a child of doing nothing much in particular, and wondering whether that's something else to re-find. Rather than 'finding my inner child' perhaps I need to find my inner sloth?

Now sloth has a bad name. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'physical or mental inactivity; disinclination to action, exertion, or labour; sluggishness, idleness, indolence, laziness'. It's a Middle English word, and first appears in 1175. It's also, of course, one of the seven deadly sins, and although the actual word hardly appears in the bible at all, (only in Ecclesiastes 10:18, 'Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks') the related idea of laziness makes many appearances, especially in Proverbs.

Francis too had no time for it. Thomas of Celano tells us that early in his conversion, 'Burning with holy fervour, he began to accuse himself of idleness and sloth'. And yet he regularly took time from his busy life of preaching and healing to go away to places of retreat. He didn't wait until all his work had been done, before finding time to 'do nothing with God'.

Sloths do very little, and do it very slowly. They spend 16 to 18 hours a day asleep, often remain motionless even when awake, and are so sedentary that algae grows on their fur. An early explorer described the sloth as 'An Animal of so slow a motion, that he will be three or four days, at least, in climbing up and coming down a tree.' They live largely in those trees, hanging upside down from branches, secured by their long claws. They spend so much of their time upside down that they have many of their internal organs in different positions from other mammals. And yet their life continues, they do find enough food and water, and one by one they produce the next generation of sloths.

I suspect that our next generation now have far less time to do nothing much in particular; school work with its many exams and assessments is demanding, and many children are kept indoors for fear of dangerous strangers except when they are ferried to a music lesson, or a judo or dance class.

And sadly this is good training for adult life. Many jobs now demand permanent availability via the mobile phone or laptop; and flexible working, while good in many ways, also means it's hard to ever really be off duty. The social lives of many people depend on constant communication with a wide circle of friends, many of them 'virtual'. Being out of mobile phone range can induce real panic.

The sloth's claws are entirely unsuitable for using a Blackberry or a keyboard. Perhaps we could all benefit from the occasional 'sloth' day when we fast from the instant communication which is so seductive?

The old adage has it that the devil finds work for idle hands to do. I suspect he is pretty good at using our over busy hands and minds to do his work as well. When everything is moving so fast, it's very difficult to take time to reflect on the values behind our activity, the effect of our decisions on others and on ourselves. We've seen something of this in the meltdown of financial markets and companies, but I suspect it happens in a less dramatic way in many other contexts, including the church and our religious communities.

So, embrace your inner child by all means; but find time to embrace your inner sloth too.

Pax et bonum - Peace and all good.