

Counsels on Melancholy (depression)

(Ch.7)

The Book of her Foundations

by Teresa of Avila

How one must deal with the nuns who have melancholy (depression). This chapter is necessary for the prioress.

My Sisters have repeatedly asked me to say something of how to deal with melancholy (depression). We strive not to accept those who have it, but sometimes it is hard to recognize until it's too late.

The problem is that those with it can seek to do their **own will**, so it is important to identify these nuns, to **govern** them, to avoid **harm to other nuns**.

2. Not all who have this issue are problematic though. And there are greater and lesser degrees of the illness, but it can interfere with one's **reason**.

What won't our passions do once our reason is darkened? It seems that if reason is lacking, **madness** results. But, in those of whom we are speaking, melancholy hasn't reach madness, which would be less harmful. To have to consider someone rational when she isn't is an unbearable burden. Those afflicted with this illness are to be pitied, but they do no harm. To bring them under control, the solution is **to put fear into them**.

3. The prioress needs to make use of **penance** to attempt to bring these persons into **submission**. They have to understand that they will **not** get their way. If they believe that their rants will get them what they want, they will be lost. One such person is enough to disrupt a monastery. As the person cannot defend herself against the devil, the prioress must proceed with great care governing her exteriorly and in interior matters. As the reason is obscured in the sick person, the prioress must understand the situation to avoid the devil taking control of the person.

The illness only afflicts the reason at times and the person is then not at fault. However, those in whom the reason is weak has fault. It is dangerous if when ill, they begin to take **liberties**. They are not to do so or they won't be masters of themselves when well.

The most important thing to a melancholic person is getting their own

way, saying whatever they want, criticizing others, and finding rest in what pleases them. In sum, they are like a person who **cannot bear anyone who resists him**. If each passion goes unmortified, each seeking to get what it wants, what would happen if no one resisted them?

4. The **only remedy** is to make these persons **submit** in every way. If **words** do not suffice, use **punishment**; if light punishment is not enough try heavy; if a month in a **prison cell** is not enough, try four; no greater good can be done for their souls.

Even if at times they may be unable to help themselves, it is important that they understand this, as the soul remains in much danger as the affliction is not complete madness which excuses one from any fault. At times though, the reason is so overpowered, that the person is no longer in control of his actions. It is a mercy from God, that they submit to someone to get through the crisis. It is here that lies all their good and perhaps even their own salvation.

5. I so know people who are on the border of losing their minds completely. But, they are humble and fearful of offending God, so they do as ordered. They suffer their illness as do others, although this is a greater martyrdom. Thus, they suffer purgatory here on earth and will have greater glory in heaven.

Let me repeat that those who don't submit be urged to do so by the prioress and not be deceived with indiscreet pieties lest they disturb all with their confusion.

6. There is another very **great harm**. Since the afflicted nun may **appear good**, others may think they too have melancholy (depression) and so need to tolerate her. This leads to difficulty providing a **remedy**. This matter is so important, though, that **no negligence** should be allowed. If the afflicted nun **resists the superior**, she needs to pay for it as a healthy nun would with no exceptions.

7. It may seem unjust to **punish a sick person** who can't help it. Therefore, it would also be unjust to bind and whip the insane, and the just thing would be to allow them to kill everyone.

I have attempted many remedies and I find no other. It must **absolutely not allow** these nuns to take **liberties** because one has **pity** on them, as it will end up harming others.

If the insane are bound and chastised, so as not to kill others, this is right and compassionate thing since they cannot control themselves. So how much more must one be careful not to allow these melancholic persons liberties by which they could harm souls.

I believe this affliction is often found in **unrestrained souls** that **lack humility** and **discipline**. Melancholy doesn't have the same strength as in the insane because when there is someone to fear, they do control themselves and they can. Why, then can't they do so for God? I think the devil through melancholy wants to gain many souls.

8. Today all **self-will** and **freedom** go by the name **melancholy**. It is my feeling then, that this term should not be uttered in monasteries as it brings with it **freedom from control**.

It is preferable to call it a serious illness and cared for as one. Sometime medicine is necessary and the nun needs to be cared for in the infirmary. But, when she comes out she must understand that she is to be humble and obedient as are the others. When she is not, her illness cannot be used as a defense. This procedure is fitting. The prioress must lead the nuns with much compassion as would a mother, seeking whatever remedy possible.

9. Perhaps it seems I am contradicting myself as I said that these nuns must be dealt with **strictly**. I repeat, they cannot think that they can come out of the infirmary and do as they wish, nor can they disobey. The harm comes from them thinking they can do as they please.

But the prioress can refrain from ordering impossible tasks that would set the nun up to fail. She should lead with skill and love, so they submit out of love which usually happens. She should show her love for them in word and deed.

The greatest remedy is to occupy them with duties to prevent their imaginations from wandering; the root of the trouble. And though they don't necessarily perform the duties well, the prioress should suffer some defects to avoid suffering greater ones if melancholy overpowers them. This is the most suitable remedy one can provide. Strive to avoid long periods of prayer which because of their weak imaginations will do

them much harm. Let care be taken that they rarely eat fish and fast less than the others.

10. It may seem excessive to give so much advice for this affliction and not for any other, there being so many serious ones in our miserable life... I do so : **First**, it seems these nuns are well; they hide their affliction. They don't need to be in bed, don't have a fever nor is there a need to call a doctor to come. The prioress needs to be their doctor for it is a sickness that impedes perfection more than that of those who are in bed and in danger of dying.

Secondly, with other illnesses either one is cured or one dies. With this illness, the victims are rarely cured, nor do they die but they eventually lose their minds, a death capable of killing all the nuns.

They suffer more than death in themselves through afflictions and fantasies, all of which they call temptations, and so they will have much merit. If they could only understand that the illness is the cause of these, they would find much relief provided they paid no attention to them.

I do have great compassion for them, as should those living with them. The Lord can give this compassion, and they should strive to accept them...

Please the Lord that I may have succeeded in pointing out the proper thing to do in regard to so serious an illness. AMEN