

Last Wednesday's Gospel prompted this topic. Our Lord was teaching a large crowd during the day. The crowd was so large, in fact, that our Lord had to get into a boat and go out a little ways from the crowd or they would have been pressing upon Him so much that He would not have been able to address them. Now step back from that for a moment and consider the situation. Notice that they are not in or at a synagogue, much less the Temple. That means it's not the Sabbath. In our terms, then, that means it's a work day and yet here is a crowd of what must have been 1000's of people gathered to listen to Him, *on a work day*. They are taking time away from work or whatever else they had going on to stop and listen to our Lord, *and* (this is important) our Lord – who is God, the supreme authority, the supreme good, *the* judge – does not chastise them for it. He does not tell them to go away and get back to producing things. Think about how often it happens in the Gospels where our Lord is preaching and teaching on *weekdays* – work days – and He never once tells them to get back to work.

This simple yet accurate observation brings up the topic of leisure. Fr James Schall (now deceased) was a very faithful and insightful Jesuit priest who taught philosophy at Georgetown University. He gave a lecture once that he entitled: "On Leisure and Culture," with a subtitle of "Why Human Things Exist and Why They're Unimportant!" It's available on youtube with the title of: "The Unseriousness of Human Affairs;" it's well worth a listen. His topic, then, was that of "leisure." Now as a philosopher, he takes the meaning of leisure from the ancient Greek philosophers – like Plato and Aristotle. What is meant by leisure by the ancient philosophers and by Fr Schall will be the meaning used here. What they meant by leisure is time we have that is not used for obtaining the necessities of this life. To help explain this general meaning of leisure Fr Schall contrasts it with the word 'practical.' By 'practical' he means the things (work) we have to do to supply our needs – food, shelter, and so on, or at least the work done to improve or sustain this life. The time that is not for that is called leisure. So leisure here doesn't just mean laying back in the Lazy-Boy and flipping through channels. It means non-work time, where work is what I have to do to supply needs – notice needs, not necessarily desires. Leisure is time away from the work necessary to supply one's physical needs.

So leisure is time that I have that is not committed to earning the living needed to supply basic needs. What to do with it? What is it for? Is it, in fact, a waste of time? Fr Schall starts out his lecture by bringing out this question with a quote from St Gregory Nazianzen: "What benefactor has enabled you to look out upon the beauty of the sky, the sun in its course, the circle of the moon, the countless number of stars, with the harmony and order that are theirs..." In effect, as pointed out by Fr Schall, St Gregory is saying that these are things that we can and should do. But why, Fr Schall asks? Stare up at the moon and the stars and wonder at their beauty. Isn't it just a waste of time? Is there anything "practical" about it? This is the question then: what is leisure for, is it good for anything, isn't it just a waste of time? Shouldn't all things be related to "practicality," that is to say to producing stuff that can be used here and now, necessary stuff as well as stuff that I just like? That is to say, isn't this practicality the supreme, if not only, good? Does leisure have a good purpose?

The ancient Greek philosophers gave a strikingly simple answer to this question of the purpose of leisure. Leisure was a time to seek higher things, the highest things, to seek truth, wisdom, and understanding; it was for trying to understand the world around them, understand man, the purpose of things, the purpose of life and how to carry it out. In fact, they "lived" for this. Work or practicality was something to get done so that they could pursue these highest things. Real living was this leisure time and it was enjoyable, it enlivened the person.

But, these were pagans! Great thinkers, serious thinkers, real seekers of truth, yes, but pagans nonetheless. What about the will of God? In fact, God *commands* leisure. Here is the full text of the 3rd commandment from Exodus chapter 20:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates."

God Himself is commanding one day per week of leisure. If you had (or have) a chance to read the document on the Jubilee year, you know that God went even further than that with the Israelites, commanding them to have a “leisure year” every 50th year – there was not to be even any planting or harvesting in that jubilee year. The purpose of the jubilee (and leisure) year was to commemorate God delivering them from the Egyptian’s cruel enslavement. In other words, the jubilee year was to be a whole *year* dedicated to God alone, a whole year to be even more mindful and committed to God, set aside for the Lord. The 1st & 3rd commandments, then, are tightly connected: love God above all else (1st), in part by setting aside at least one whole day a week (the 3rd commandment), dedicated to God alone, putting all of the things of this life and this world aside.

Emphasizing that God has commanded leisure – time when you’re not producing or obtaining stuff needed for physical life – is not an invitation to “good,” old fashioned laziness. Remember that our Lord also commanded work: by the sweat of your brow you shall earn your bread, and: he who does not work should not eat. Those who seek to follow the Lord should be the most diligent in their work. It is rather that these 2 things – work and leisure – need to be kept together. How often people fall into the sin of: worshipping the work of their hands, as the Old Testament says. How often people pin a gold medal on themselves by idolizing work, thus killing their own eternal life and endangering those close to them as well. Both work and leisure are meant to be done and used as a service to the Lord. They are two sides of the same coin, neither should be lacking. This is the wisdom of the ages, the wisdom of God, and the command of God.

Remember what is meant by leisure here – it’s not just doing fun stuff, it’s not *just* resting (although it’s of course fine, even good, to do some of those things as well) and it’s certainly not running and running to umpteen different things until you drop from complete exhaustion. The general definition of leisure, the one from the ancients and that is being used here, is simply that time which is not used for producing or obtaining the necessities of physical life. The main thing being discussed here is the ***purpose of leisure***, what leisure is for, how it is to be used. One purpose is certainly rest. But the ancient philosophers were surprisingly correct (given that they did not have Revelation) in their assessment of the purpose of leisure: leisure is a time, first and foremost, to seek the highest things – wisdom, knowledge, understanding, causation, the purpose of life and how to fulfill that purpose; in short, the purpose of leisure time is to seek God, our true and final end.

Ladies and Gentlemen, do we have genuine leisure time?

Why do it? The first answer to this question is very simply because God clearly, even obviously, commands it; it is not optional, it is a sin not to do it. Remember that God has no needs whatsoever. So when He tells us these things, it’s not because *He* needs it, it’s because this is what is good for us, this is how our ultimate good comes about, He tells us out of love. We have to stop, then, and say: Do I trust the Lord or not? He is telling me this is good, even necessary, for me – am I going to believe Him or not? Is He God, or am I God, or is the world – who tells me the opposite – God?

Maybe this use of leisure sounds dull, almost like drudgery! If so, that’s probably largely because we’ve gotten too addicted to running, to entertainment, to striving for more. The ancients actually found this use of leisure enjoyable. Man has not changed; now he just has more distractions. People will still find true enlightenment, true understanding, something enlivening and even somewhat thrilling. Think about how a small child wants to point things out to you (mom look!) or tell you about things they’ve discovered – it’s the enjoyment of new knowledge, insight, or understanding. The same will still be true for you. If you think about your everyday life – take even listening to news – you will see that it is true. This call for the true purpose of leisure, then, is simply saying to elevate that thrill of discovery to the highest things.

Take some time and imagine doing this. Imagine taking *some* time each day for leisure and one whole day of true leisure. Notice that leisure entails putting all of the stresses and demands of this life out of our mind and pursuing, thinking about, our true destiny and how to use this life to reach it. What would it be like? It would be so peaceful, so...refreshing. And then imagine that this is a practice you transmit to your kids?

There is perhaps a little more to say about why do it but the bigger question that is left is how to do it or even how to get started. We will have to take that up next week.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.