

When Killing is Not a Crime

We all have a tiny “Apetito” within us; it’s that little voice that tells us to sleep in on Saturday mornings or that invisible string that pulls our hand toward the cheeseburger instead of the celery. Perhaps we all have a “Mortificación” in our lives who scolds us for those things or urges us to cook with less oil and exercise in the mornings. It would be nice if we all had a little more “Desnudez” in our personalities; it would mean less lying and beguiling and more charitable service.

In this allegorical play, “La muerte del apetito,” each character represents a virtue or vice that often befalls humankind. Sor Marcela, as though “speaking out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27), shows us through allegory how to “[put] off the natural man, and become a saint” (Mosiah 3:19). However, this play was written centuries ago for the catholic nuns in Sor Marcela’s convent. Can we benefit from it now, even though we are of a different religion and era? Yes, but in order to really understand what is being taught, we have to look at the exegetical, or intended, meaning. Once we find the original meaning, we can begin to apply the lessons to our current situation.

The play is a fight between desire and restraint which comes to life through the protagonist, Alma, who represents every soul. She battles between her own appetite and the “better,” but more difficult and less satisfying, life of self-denial. We can all empathize and associate with Alma’s struggle to decide between fulfilling her caprices and finding temporary pleasure (for example, staying up late to watch a movie, even though you have to get up early for work), or achieving a higher spiritual state through self-control and self-denial (being energized and energetic for work the next day by skipping the movie). She says:

Si al Apetito me entrego,
enojaré a las virtudes

que me conducen quietudes,
 Si a la Mortificación
 doy en casa posesion,
 pasaré una vida triste (361-366).

She is conflicted because the idea of denying herself small pleasures seems like a very unhappy life, full of sadness; but she also knows that giving in to her fancies will lead to punishment or even loss of the virtues and good habits that she has acquired thus far. Like if we stop waking up early, we will surely fall out of the habit making it harder and harder to wake up before ten...eleven...noon.

Mortificación, a friend of Alma's, tries to persuade and convince Alma of the joy in abnegation. She promises that the fight becomes easier with each step closer to

God:

Cuanto el Alma se remonta
 a las cosas celestiales,
 tanto olvida las carnales
 que antes solía estimar (464-467).

Mortification, in the literal sense, means training the soul to a higher plane of living. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, that means restraining the desires of the flesh, even if they are not unlawful. In the New Testament, Paul says "you shall die, but if through the spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live" (Romans 8:13). Sor Morcela teaches that, quite literally, we must *kill* our carnal desires in order to *live* in Christ. "What [mortification] slays is the disease of the soul, and by slaying this it restores and invigorates the soul's true life" (Catholic Encyclopedia, *Mortification*).

We could liken Mortificación to that little voice inside our head that steers us away from the dessert table at an all-you-can-eat buffet...even though it looks *so* good.

She is the internal alarm clock that wakes us up from peaceful slumber and tells us to get out of bed and start the day...even if we do not want to.

Conversely, Apetito tries to convince Alma that she *should* indulge. Apetito represents all of our whimsies and lavish desires. Appetite does not refer only to physical hunger but also our permissive disposition. Little things, small indulgences that seem harmless, may lead to greater sins. Our appetite, according to Sor Marcela, is our tendency to gratify our every desire. He is the personification of our carnal nature (or our “fallen” state). He constantly pleads with Alma, the protagonist, to bring him food for he is always hungry. If he feels tired or sleepy, he takes a nap anytime, anywhere. As he enters the stage for the first time, we learn that he has been out all night, so he slept all morning (89-91).

The worst part about Apetito, though, is his desire to serve us and cater to our every whim, and we are persuaded to believe he is “not so bad.” He says:

te asisto,
porque te sirvo y regalo
y miro por tu salud (146-148).

The most important thing to remember is that Apetito is not a manifestation of the Devil, rather he is a reflection of our own self-serving desires that lead us to sin. Perhaps our desires are not sins themselves, but if we indulge in them, we might be caught in the devil’s grasp later on.

Mortificación, in an attempt to finally convince Alma of Apetito’s sinful nature, explains why humans even have unrighteous desires as she recounts the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, all of the passions, appetites, and carnal senses came upon mankind without hesitation:

al instante, las pasiones,
apetitos y sentidos
guerra publican a voces,
y todos, desordenados,
sólo en la maldad conformes,

sin verguenza y sin piedad
acometieron al hombre (269-275).

It is a war of body versus spirit, and this war will last for the rest of our lives.

Catholic doctrine states, “Man is by nature and vocation a religious being. Coming from God, going toward God, man lives a fully human life only if he freely lives by his bond with God” (Catholic Catechism 44). We, as humans, are connected with God; we are his sons and daughters. Only by keeping that connection alive and striving to reach our highest potential can we lead happy and productive lives. Yielding to temptation weakens our defenses against the devil, “our sins result from our consenting to temptation” (2846).

However, *Apetito* counters, pointing out that living with *Mortificación* makes *Alma* unhappy, “*Mortificación te hace llorar muchas veces*” (330). Through *Sor Marcela*’s characterization of *Mortificación*, we realize that she did not believe that it was the only way, or the best way, to achieve a more celestial life. *Apetito* makes fun of *Mortificación* and shows little fear of her wrath, but when *Desnudez*, sister to *Mortificación*, appears on the scene, *Apetito* begs for protection from her (720-725).

Desnudez represents being completely without guile. In the same way that Adam and Eve were naked in the Garden of Eden and knew no shame, we should strive to be able to stand without disgrace before others and in the presence of God. Like most allegorical characters, *Desnudez* gives us a self-proclaimed definition of who she is:

Mi condicion es afable
para los que me conocen
y aborrecen este mundo
con todas sus pretensiones,
pareceres y opiniones,
y a Dios buscan solamente,
sin apego o interés (781-786).

We can achieve her state of being (and cause fear in *Apetito*) if we seek only for God without attachment to the world or self-interest.

Obviously we are not Catholic nuns living in the 18th century, but we, even now, centuries later and worlds away from the convent of San Ildefonso, we can learn from her allegorical play. Each of us still struggles with self-indulgent desires, and we can all benefit by learning restraint. The battle between *Apetito* and *Mortificación* rages on in our daily lives. The next time we reach for a bag of potato chips instead of eating our dinner, or whenever we are tempted to waste our time on the internet instead of helping our neighbor shovel the snow off his driveway, perhaps we will remember the joy Alma feels as she teams up with *Mortificación* and *Desnudez* to kill *Apetito*.

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