

**Praying to RECOGNIZE one's
inordinate attachments to creatures and
TO BE WILLING to give them up.**

Inordinate Attachments to Creatures

by Father John A. Hardon, S.J.

The subject in which we wish to address ourselves is *inordinate attachments to creatures*. As always we might ask ourselves, “Why talk about this?”

First of all, because it is a very common occurrence in real life, many people are so inordinately attached to so many creatures that, consequently, we ought to know something on how to resolve what is such a universal human problem. Spiritual writers say that, in the last analysis, this is the only real obstacle to sanctity. Saint Ignatius considers this the one thing on which those who wish to strive after perfection must constantly concentrate. It should be the normal object of our examinations of conscience.

We shall ask in sequence one question about each of the three words in our title and for good measure we will add a fourth.

1. What do we mean by creatures?
2. What do we mean by attachments?
3. What do we mean by inordinate?
4. How do we become detached?

Creatures

First then, we will address these creatures. We ask, what creatures can we become *inordinately* attached to? Well the answer is any creature. There is no creature to whom or to which we cannot be or cannot become inordinately attached. There is only one Being to whom we cannot be inordinately attached and that is the Creator. We can never love Him too much.

To spell this out, here is a short litany of possible creatures who can captivate us and whom we can become more or less slaves:

Persons

- It can be a person, either living or dead.
(Honest, we can become inordinately attached

to a person who is dead.) It can be a relative or an acquaintance. It can be a man or a woman. It can be an adult or a child. Disparity of age has nothing to do with the possibility of inordinate attachments.

- It can be a person who is living nearby or it can be a person who is far away. Distance seems not to matter; neither space nor time are a hindrance to this obstacle to holiness.
- It can be, and this is surprising, one who is also attached to us or one who is not even interested in us. You would think that we couldn't become attached to someone who probably doesn't even know we exist. Strange creatures we are but, yes, we can become attached to someone who doesn't know us.
- It can be a real person; it can even be an imaginary one. There are women who are so attached to the “man of their dreams” that they never really give themselves to their husbands. They are in love with a dream.

Places

- It can be a place. You name it and we can become attached to it inordinately. It can be a particular country or region, a high place or a low place, the Rockies or Death Valley. It can be a cold place or a hot place, urban or rural. It can be a building, a room or even a part of the room (and don't you dare move something in that room).

Things

- It can be a material thing, which is no great surprise; or spiritual, which is a surprise. It can be visible or invisible.
- Yet after all this list of creatures is covered, the creature to whom we can be most strongly, most easily and most unduly attached is ourselves. So much then for creatures.

Ordinate Attachments

Before we look to see what it means to be *inordinately* attached to creatures, it may be useful to ask what “attachment” itself means. It is a strange word. The word is symbolic: To “attach” one thing to another is to nail, or glue, or cement, or somehow firmly join one thing to something else so that the two, as a result of the attachment, are not easily separated. This is a figure of speech as all things in human life can be expressed only

symbolically. What they stand for is no symbol but a reality.

Affections

Using, then, this figure of speech, the Church's masters of spirituality apply it to the "affections" we have for persons, places or things. Our affections can be and, in many ways, should be firmly attached to what appeals to us. There is nothing wrong with attachments. What's wrong is when those attachments are "inordinate." For example, unless two people become attached to each other, they would not marry or, better, they should not marry—or they will not stay married. The same as for our affection for religious life and for the people with whom we live. This needed attachment bears emphasis less we make the mistake of supposing that, because affections can be disorderly, there is something wrong with affections. NO, oh no. We better have them or life would be unlivable without attachments.

Disaffections: Aversions and Fears

Let's make one more observation, however, before we get into this business of the inordinate attachments. We should note that attachments also have their negative counterparts. While most spiritual writers correctly, or shall I say, generally, speak of inordinate attachments, they do not mean to exclude inordinate "disaffections." Just as our affections can be unruly, so can our disaffections towards persons, places or things; what we commonly call our aversions or fears. These, too—our aversions, or more generally, our fears, can be perfectly natural. If we did not fear height—let's say we are at the top of a tall building, well you know what would happen—we would be careless and the law of gravity would take over. To this there are no exceptions. It is one law that everybody obeys unless they wish to destroy themselves. So these fears can also be perfectly natural and normal and in themselves are morally neutral. We naturally dread pain, sickness, humiliation, failure; and there is nothing wrong with this. The best evidence is the agony of Christ in the garden. He naturally shrank, with His human nature, from the prospects of death.

Inordinate Attachments

Now for inordinate attachments. This is the hub of our subject, *inordinate* attachments which, by implication, we also always include *inordinate fear* or *aversion*. The word attachment covers both.

What makes our attitude towards certain creatures unruly or disorderly? What makes it inordinate?

Let me repeat the question with a distinction and answer each section. Clarity here is ever so important in acquiring that self-mastery which is at the heart of the pursuit of holiness.

1. First, we ask, what makes our *affections* or *aversions* inordinate? What makes for *inordinateness*? Why do we call certain attitudes *disorderly*?
2. Secondly, how can we recognize in ourselves when or whether they are *inordinate*?

The distinction between what makes an affection or aversion inordinate and how we recognize it is very important because it is not easy to recognize when our own affections or fears are disorderly. In fact, once we recognize our own inordinate attachments, the task of setting them *in order* is half done.

In other words, the most difficult part of acquiring that self-mastery which we need to serve Christ the way we should, so that our affections and fears, in a word our "attachments," are not inordinate is to RECOGNIZE that we have them and which ones we have. We often have the ability to spot the exact area of disorder in other people's lives; the speck and the beam of which Christ spoke about. He knew: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (*Matthew 7:3*) RSVCE.

Inordinateness—The Meaning

First then, what does *inordinateness* mean? This can be easily answered. Theologically, the essence of *inordinateness*, that is, in our attitude toward creatures, is that some creature, otherwise good in itself is, nevertheless, an obstacle to our perfect service of God. It stands in the way of that total following of Christ.

How to Recognize Inordinateness

The real problem is the second question: How to *recognize it*?

First, let's assume that the object that somehow I possess, in terms of attachment, is not in itself sinful. We are not talking about sin, because then it cannot be a question of inordinate attachment. We would need to have a positive detachment from the creature which is a

sinful creature. Thus, the creature must be something which is not in itself sinful. If I am unduly attached to a creature, I can recognize this by certain signs. Some signs are outside of me; some signs are deeply inside of me.

Signs

- If the object, person, place or thing *occupies my mind* at times when my mind should be free of such preoccupation, like during prayer or necessary duties; or if the amount of attention I give to the person, place or thing is out of proportion to its objective value and importance. Thus, there is a hierarchy of values. The *supernatural* is more important than the *merely intellectual*. The *intellectual* is higher than the *merely material*. Some people can be so preoccupied with their bodies as to overlook the fact that they have a soul. Consequently, there are few hypochondriacs when it comes to spiritual disease but many when it comes to physical disease. Psychology knows a lot, in fact, some years ago, a big thick book in medical therapy listed hundreds of simulated diseases that people can think they have but they don't because they are so attached to their health. Also, if I am more concerned with an intellectual project than with my spiritual obligations to the evident detriment to the latter, I am unduly affected by things of the mind.
- If I find myself habitually taking self-satisfaction in some possession to the point where I tend to have contempt for or pity others for lacking what I have, though it may be a good thing that I have, I am overly attached to it. I never pity somebody for not having what I have if my attachment to what I have is *ordinate*.
- If I often "lose peace of mind" from definable or undefinable causes on account of what I have or do, I am too attached to the object, person, or practice. **If my affection is *orderly*, it will always produce tranquility of mind which is the essence of peace.** That sentence is worth a million dollars; it is a key in the spiritual life.

Therefore, always remember:

- 1) *Orderly affections produce peace.*
- 2) *Inordinate affections deprive one of peace.*

- If I am often afraid of losing or being hindered in the use of some gift or possession; or if I feel dissatisfied with what I have—whether its amount or quality or perfection, I am too enamored with the object because the right kind of affection always precludes anxiety. So on the other side of the spectrum, just as *peace* is the sign of *orderly affection*, so *anxiety* is the sign of *inordinate affection*.
- If I regularly talk about my achievements along certain lines, or advertise what I have, for no better reason than the pleasure I get from being recognized.
- If I am inclined to envy others (this is a very subtle sign) for some kind of talent, production, or gift which I feel outshines or obscures my own. I must consider that, whatever creature it is, I am unduly attached to it because *orderly affections exclude envy*.
- If I tend to be jealous of what I have (that is the opposite of envy), which means that I am slow to share it with others or fearful that others may acquire the same, then I am overly in love with the creature—no matter how lawfully I acquired it or even how holy the thing may be in itself. You see, we can be unduly attached even to holy creatures. That's right; it's strange but true.

Overcoming Inordinate Attachments: An Attitude of the Mind

How do we overcome our inordinate attachments? As in so many things in the spiritual life, we can express the principle very simply but putting it into practice is hard. The principle of how to get rid of inordinate attachments consists in reaching the following *attitude of mind*:

"I decide that I will, if necessary, surrender the creature to which I am unduly attached."

I DECIDE WITH MY MIND that I will, if necessary, give up or surrender the creature to which I am unduly attached.

We are saying the creature is not in itself sinful, but nevertheless, for me it is an obstacle. Now let us add that it may not be necessary to give it up. That is not the point. The giving up may not be necessary but my *willingness* to give it up is absolutely necessary.

Let me go back for a few minutes and see what Saint Ignatius, the great master on this subject, says about why the true test of detachment is the willingness either to keep or to put away a creature to which before God I have convinced myself I am unduly attached. Why would this be necessary? Why is it necessary to be ready to physically relinquish something, whatever it is—a person, a possession, an object, a trinket? The objective value of a thing is no measure of the degree of attachment to that thing. Why is it necessary to be ready to give it up as a guarantee that I am detached from the creature in question? Why is it not sufficient to just get my mind off of it psychologically, yet retain the object? The reason lies very deep in Christian asceticism; any creature I possess and to which I am strongly attached carries with it certain *beneficial effects which I enjoy when and in so far as the creature is used.*

Money is an obvious creature to easily illustrate the principle. Less obvious but equally important, for example, would be cultural possessions or even spiritual things. For priests, we like to preach or we like to teach or we don't like to preach; or we like certain forms of prayer or certain opinions. You name it and we can be inordinately attached to that thing. My will may become more or less bound to anyone of these because I have learned from experience what comfort, pleasure or consolation can be afforded me when I use them. But when, after preferable reflection, I discover that my attachment is out of order, I am faced with the decision of either compromising, "I'll keep it off my mind, I'll pray about it, I'll make a novena," or of going all-out and ridding myself of the disorderly affection. Saint Ignatius would have it that, unless I am ready to be rid of the thing itself, I am not really sincere in the desire to correct my malaffection. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius gives us a meditation on inordinate attachments called the "Three Classes of People." Each class wants to do what is pleasing to God but they are laboring under the difficulty of an inordinate attachment to money. They all recognize that they have this inordinate attachment but they differ in their willingness to go all-out and rid themselves of it. (See chart, "The Three Classes of People.")

Fault is Mine –Not the Creature's

Whenever a creature produces an undue attraction, the fault or defect must not be sought in the creature itself (this is crucial as this is our usual tendency), but rather

in me. Evidently, this must be true because the same creature may be safely possessed by someone else with no detriment or even with positive benefits to his or her spiritual life. Why is it a problem for me? Well, you can do all kinds of psychoanalysis but, in the last analysis, it is a problem. Perhaps I have not received the grace necessary to physically keep the disturbing creature and to spiritually profit from it—some people can, but I can't. I may be lacking, culpably or otherwise, in those qualities of mind and temperament needed to overcome the natural seductiveness of what disturbs my peace of mind. Almost certainly, the state of life to which God has called me makes demands on my generosity and self-sacrifice which cannot be properly fulfilled except at the cost of being free from certain inordinate affections.

Remove the Creature

If I find out that I have disordered attachments to a creature, there is no objective assurance that I can both have it and not suffer in keeping it. There is no assurance of becoming detached unless I remove what stimulates the attachment, namely the creature itself. There is a limit to my ability to be exposed to the stimulus and to remain ordinarily attached; and even this limit is unpredictable, undefinable and uncertain. Some can do it; I cannot. To make sure I am delivered from the troublesome affection or attachment I must remove its source. The degree of my readiness to do this determines my sincerity before God.

Conclusion

We all have inordinate attachments; none of us are exempt. Hence, it means self-reflection and the transcendent importance of daily self-examination. Secondly, it means absolute honesty with God. It finally and especially means grace, for which we should ask:

"Lord, give me the strength to be willing to give up what stands between You and me."

He may take the creature away and if He does, so be it. If He doesn't, thank Him. The willingness to remove what keeps me from God is the guarantee of my also receiving the grace to be able to do it.

Transcription of Father Hardon's August 1974 retreat to the Handmaids of the Precious Blood.

Copyright 2020 © Inter Mirifica. Used with permission.