

# COURIER-JOURNAL

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## Faith Today

### JUST IMAGINE!

By Robert Plocheck  
NC News Service

Carmelite Father Stephen Cooley, a psychologist, recently counseled a woman who joined Overeaters Anonymous.

"She told me that she discovered her overeating followed the resentment she had against her husband because of his behavior," Father Cooley said. "She began to pray and through her prayer she formed an image of her husband without the behavior she resented. It was through her imagination that she was able to see him for himself and have a different way of handling his behavior, without the resentment."

Use of our imagination can be an effective way of handling our problems, even in thinking beyond troublesome conditions we cannot change. It is the imagination that can free us.

Father Cooley, who counsels individuals and lectures before church groups frequently, says the ability to handle a situation depends a great deal on the image one has of the situation.

"Behavior follows the mind," he said. "Positive thinking is the whole issue."

When he counsels people, his first task is to get the person to have a more positive image. "We are doing ourselves in by a negative self-image," Father Cooley believes.

Today, possibly because of overexposure to television, we have diminished reliance on the imagination in dealing with everyday life, says Father Cooley. "We are too analytical and logical. We don't get into our dreams, into poetry, the things of the imagination."

In our sports-minded country, one commonplace use of imagination is in athletics. The athlete uses imagination to visualize a feat before he actually does it — what is called "psyching up."

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Father Anselm Walker, a hospital chaplain, cautions that imagination is a two-edged sword, "a blessing and a bane" for people.

On the positive side, he tells of a woman in the psychiatric ward of a Houston hospital who after many months suddenly began recovering. She told Father Walker, who at the time lived 150 miles away, that he had brought Communion to her at 2 a.m.

"I realized that this incident was very important to her, and although that night I had been home in bed, I did not deny what she had imagined



The human imagination. Is it home to grace-filled visions or flights of fancy? Both, suggests writer Robert Plocheck. He writes that imagination can preserve our sanity or allow us to escape from reality.

because I did not know whether this was important to her recovery or not," Father Walker recalls.

On the other hand, the human imagination does not always work to the good. Father Walker recalls many patients, under the influence of medication, hallucinating. "They dream of being run over by an 18-wheeler."

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Imprisonment is an example of where imagination can be used for good or evil, to better or worsen the problem.

Because prison is the classic situation for total confinement, literature abounds with stories of how the human imagination helped sustain prisoners.

Jesuit Father Walter Cizek, in "With God in Russia," tells of a man in Moscow's Lubyanka prison who turned his tiny cell into part of the vast Russian landscape by imagining himself back in his village. He thought of all the neighboring villages within walking distance of his own, calculated the miles into the width of his cell, and proceeded to walk to each village by pacing in his prison room. As he paced, he imagined each feature of that familiar countryside as if he were actually strolling down those roads.

In "Seeds of Greatness," Dennis Waitley tells of prisoners of war in Vietnam. One man played golf over and over in his mind. Another built a house in his mind, board by board, nail by nail.

These detailed imaginings freed them from focusing on their situation and helped them endure the reality of the POW camp.

Father Walker, who was a chaplain in the Texas prison system, says convicts use what he terms "the mystique of the handicapped" (in this case, the handicap of confinement) to help them bear up. Perhaps they imagine themselves as Robin Hoods, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. Or they build fantastic visions of being political rebels, denying their culpability as social criminals.

When we rely on our will or intellect, we need to discern if it is God's or our own in rebellion of God's. The question of the imagination, says Father Walker, is whether our visions are the product of sheer fantasy or the grace of God.

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