

## COLUMNISTS

*Overbooked and trying to keep a good soul*

Last Friday I was invited to deliver the invocation at a downtown business luncheon. By the time I arrived, I felt pretty frantic because of the morning I had already put in. I have a habit of overbooking, and had already completed about four other appointments, meetings and tasks. I anticipated a crammed and busy afternoon as well, so I was anything but peaceful as I sat waiting for my cue.

As I sat there feeling particularly agitated and unprayerful (about to lead a prayer, no less!), the young man sitting next to me introduced himself as a seminary student at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School. He explained that he was actually filling in for someone else, a young woman who, he said, had come down with the flu. When I heard her name, I recalled that she also is a very busy person, active in many projects all around town. I commented about this, saying something like, "How does Marilyn do all she does? Not only does she get so much done, but she always seems so cheerful and unflustered by her many duties and responsibilities."

The young man then said: "Marilyn keeps a good soul."

I kept playing with this phrase in my mind; she "keeps a good soul." At the moment of hearing it, I was so conscious of my lack of peacefulness that it sounded



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

like something I should add to my calendar immediately and get going on it. Then I saw signs of a customary pathology of mine, which is to add yet another project to an already overloaded calendar.

What I did was a bit better, I guess. I went back to my office where I'd kept a book I'm always meaning to think more about. And I browsed through it for a few minutes. The book is by Dallas Willard, titled *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Harper, 1988). Willard is a philosophy professor and a Southern Baptist minister who writes clear, practical, down-to-earth ideas about trying to put together better patterns of living.

In one chapter, he entertains particular activities that we might need to take up to improve the state of our souls. I decided to

look for something in this section that would suit me. Among his suggestions were: some form of voluntary exile, rejecting sleep to concentrate on spiritual matters, keeping a spiritual diary, introducing physical labor into one's routines.

None of this seemed quite right for me. I already practice a bit of exile at the end of each work day; I'm more of an insomniac than a big sleeper anyway; I will never be consistent at diary-keeping; the only physical labor I really like is shoveling snow, and that's melted now.

I moved on. The next section introduced "The Disciplines of Abstinence." Among these, Willard introduces solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy (keeping our good deeds quiet) and sacrifice. That list looked absolutely awful to me, and I didn't even care to find out what he meant by any of those items.

So I zoomed onto the next section, titled "The Disciplines of Engagement." These are: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession (letting others know our deepest weaknesses and failures) and submission, which he defines as engaging the experience of those wiser than ourselves who can direct our efforts. That list looked exhausting and I didn't even want to entertain a single one of them, either.

At the end of this little exercise I was quite frustrated. Still, I must admit that here I was, in good American style, looking for a quick fix. I think Dallas Willard has written a fine book. I'm sure it's very helpful to many people. I think, however, that seeking which disciplines would be helpful to one's own life requires more.

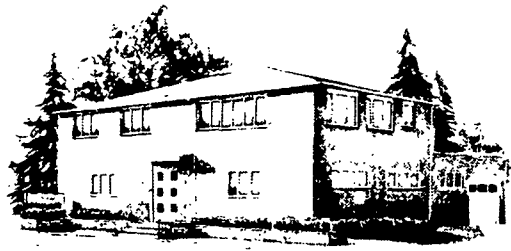
Early in Western thought several theological traditions identified seven "capital" sins. Arrogance, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lasciviousness were named as the vices that kept people from lives lived for the kingdom of God. It was in response to these root sins that a large part of the practices of Christian asceticism and sanctification arose. This pattern is probably a wise one for each of us to consider.

My own problem of overbooking at the expense of "keeping a good soul" will require more by way of correction than taking on even more activities, whether these are more akin to abstinence or engagement. A period of reflection on the problem, its origin and history in my own life, and some small steps at which I'm likely to succeed will be more helpful, I think, than finding a new "self-help" book.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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**Kids' Answers from page 7**

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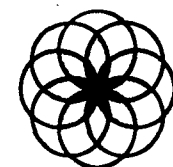
— John and Betty Fulton  
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