

Morning of Reflection

February 10, 2026

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of this day and this opportunity to come together in friendship and fellowship, to hear the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas, Fr. Ron Rolheiser, and St. John of the Cross as they help us to understand the emotion of sorrow. And we ask now that You send Your Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds with Your wisdom and truth, and to inflame our hearts with the fire of Your love, so that all that we do here this morning may be directed to our spiritual good, the good of Your Kingdom, and for Your greater honor and glory. We pray these things through Christ our Lord. Amen.

And Mary, our Mother of Sorrows... and let's pray for Deacon. Amen.

About our lives: And at the end, we're going to hear a little bit from, generally speaking, John of the Cross and his understanding of the dark night of the soul. We'll also be touching a little bit on depression—things that might be related to sorrow in our lives.

But before I give you St. Thomas Aquinas' definition of sorrow—and we know who he is, right? St. Thomas Aquinas is one of the smartest guys the Church has ever raised up. He was a Dominican friar in the 13th century, famous for his philosophical and theological input, his gift to our faith, and he has this tremendous understanding of human nature. And so, he's going to share that with us this morning.

But before he does, what is your definition of sorrow? Let's see if we can get the three points that St. Thomas Aquinas makes about sorrow.

So, sorrow is what? What do you think it is? Just shout it out. A broken heart.

Okay, that's not correct. That may be a cause of sorrow. Okay. But what, like... sincerity.

Sincerity. Well, I think we're getting closer. What means hopelessness? Suffering. God's love. Absence is joy.

Okay... Perfect. Can you be more general?

Okay, here's what Thomas says: Sorrow is a passion of the sensitive appetite. And for us to translate that, we might say it's an emotion. It's a feeling. The sensitive appetite is something that we feel.

Sorrow is something we feel. It's an emotion, right? Yeah.

Now, how does that emotion feel? What does it feel like? What does sorrow feel like?

According to Aquinas, I think it feels like mental distress, weariness, or heaviness.

So, it's an emotion that feels like mental distress, weariness, or heaviness. What causes it?

What about life makes us feel sorrow? What makes us feel that mental distress, that weariness, that heaviness?

Separation. Absence of good. Oh, yeah—absence of good, or the privation of good, which is a present evil, or what is so common to all of us: loss of a loved one. Grief is sorrow.

Right? So those are two main things he says cause sorrow: an unsuitable evil or loss.

He also says the key aspects of sorrow are: it's a kind of pain—it doesn't feel good. It is caused by a present evil. It has this heavy, depressing effect on us. The reason it happens is the loss or the privation of a good, or the presence of something harmful, or a loss.

And it's actually related to some other things which we're going to talk about now. But it can also be a virtue, right?

Have you ever thought about that? How can sorrow be a virtue?

Sorrow can be a virtue when it causes us to turn to God or to be compassionate toward someone else. We're going to talk about that—feeling compassion for someone else's misery.

Does all that make sense? Do we have any theological objections to that?

You were all around that. I think you were a little bit too specific. Very good.

So, to sum up: Aquinas sees sorrow as the soul's natural, though heavy response to perceived evil — a key part of the human experience that can lead to deeper understanding, or if excessive or misdirected, can become problematic.

One of the things that we want to understand about sorrow, what St. Thomas tells us, is it's a natural emotion that we feel. Which means: consider how misdirected we can be if we pray to God, "Please take away my sorrow in this moment." Jesus was sorrowful, right? He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. Our Blessed Mother Mary was sorrowful, especially at the foot of the cross and as Jesus went through His passion. I suspect that the apostles were often sorrowful — a sorrow that came from their frustration and not understanding the things that Jesus was telling them.

So sorrow is not something that God will ever take away from us as an emotion. God will certainly use it, and it is something that we can learn from. So, let's go a little bit deeper into that.

Because what Aquinas wants to tell us: these are ways to kind of — if we go back to that Benedictine spirituality — to kind of balance sorrow out when it's in our lives. Loss, evil, is a cause of sorrow, but there's some other things that are related or that cause sorrow in our lives.

One of them is envy. Now, St. Thomas Aquinas is borrowing this from St. John Damascene. Isn't this fascinating how these saints thought about this stuff? What's causing these movements within us?

So envy, causing sorrow: envy is a sadness or sorrow at the good fortune of another, perceived as distracting from one's own sense of self-worth or status. It's considered a capital sin or a deadly sin because it can lead to further sinful behavior like gossip, hatred, and resentment. It is rooted in pride, and envy opposes the virtue of charity, which calls us to will the good of the other. And Aquinas emphasizes that overcoming envy involves cultivating humility and charity, allowing us to truly celebrate the successes of others.

So isn't that interesting? If we tend to be an envious person, there might be a lingering sorrow in our life if we are not able to exercise humility and charity and be happy at the good fortune of others.

Does that make sense?

Okay, another — he's calling them like a species of sorrow — is pity (which I think today we often speak more of maybe sympathy). Pity is sorrow we feel for another person's misfortune. And even if something bad doesn't happen to us, we can still feel sad because we empathize with the other person's suffering. And especially if that person is close to us, we can feel very deep sympathy for them, as if we are in their shoes.

Now, have you ever experienced that — that something bad happened to someone and you felt very, very sad for them? Very common human experience.

But you know, there's a flip side to that, that becomes a sin. Do you know what the German word for that is? Schadenfreude. Schadenfreude. Schadenfreude. "Schaden" means harm or damage. "Freude" means joy. And it means taking joy in someone else's misfortune. That's the exact opposite of sympathy.

And pity can be virtuous; sympathy can be virtuous, in that it moves us to compassion — to actually reach out and help someone else who is suffering.

And then — boy — here comes a big one that can cause sorrow and sadness in our lives: anxiety. Isn't that amazing that, in the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas is able to recognize this and talk about it?

Again, Aquinas quotes St. John Damascene, who says: Anxiety is the dreaded evil that gives rise to fear. The present evil is the cause of sorrow. When we worry about the bad thing that might happen to us in life, we feel afraid. But when the bad thing actually happens to us and hits us like a ton of bricks, that's when we can feel a profound sense of sadness or sorrow.

A lot of people struggle with anxiety. Sometimes anxiety is actually diagnosed as a mental illness. It is said that anywhere from 30 to 60 percent of these cases of anxiety are diagnosed

as having a connection to heredity, to genes. So if that's in your family, there's a 30 to 60 percent greater chance that you might have this genetically — a genetic predisposition to it.

But another cause of anxiety is also the environment — nature and nurture, how we were brought up. In many spiritual training courses, they're taught to look at trauma that people have experienced in their upbringing. Was it dysfunctional in this way or that way?

And one of the ways of looking at anxiety is they say that genes load the gun, but environment pulls the trigger. And anxiety is — Aquinas describes anxiety as that which weighs on the mind so as to make escape seem impossible.

And so that causes deep sorrow and deep sadness along with perhaps some other feelings. And those things — talking about anxiety disorder — we believe as Catholics that professional help might be needed in terms of therapy or counseling, medications and drugs, although they can also have kind of a deleterious effect on the person. But also, the part that society leaves out is the spiritual component to that. We believe, according to Pope St. John Paul II, that we are integral human beings. It's not just about the mind — it's about the mind and the body and the soul. It's about everything. And so we want to treat and look at everything so as to help people find that balance back in life.

Because anxiety is something that's really never cured. There's no cure for it. Have you ever heard of a cure? There's only medication, really, and the attempt to rebalance a person so that they're not living in this state of dread and fear and sadness. That's one of the harder ones to overcome.

But in speaking about our Catholic spiritual theology, that doesn't mean that if a person is so overwhelmed with an anxiety disorder that they have no spiritual life. It means they have no spiritual life, but one of their greatest battles in that spiritual life is their anxiety disorder. That's all the journey. We all have some baggage. We're all taking baggage with us of one sort or another. But this is a big one that can considerably hold people back.

So if you or someone you know is dealing with such an issue, I'd be happy to speak to you about it. I'm not a psychologist, certainly not a psychiatrist, but I do try to help people and guide them in their spiritual lives.

So that's three. There's one more kind of species or thing that can cause sadness in our lives.

Have you ever heard the word "torpor"? Remember, we're talking about the 13th century here. Does anybody know what torpor is?

It's listless. I heard somebody say listless. It's sluggishness, a heaviness. And Aquinas writes: the mind is weighed down so much that even the limbs become motionless.

Torpor is a kind of sluggishness we feel when we're sad. And while anxiety can make our nervous minds race, torpor does the opposite — kind of puts them in park. This kind of sadness

often makes us feel tired and lethargic and not willing — not really wanting to do anything because in the end, what's the use? Why bother?

So those are some things that we may not think about as causes of sadness in our lives. And Aquinas now has five ways to deal with all of those things — the things that cause sadness: loss, privation of good (which is evil), the torpor, the anxiety, the pity, the envy — these are all things causing sadness in our lives. But there's something we can do about it to get that rebalance back in our lives.

So at this point, do we have any discussion on what sadness or sorrow is, or what causes it? We all accept that it is a part of our humanity. And we all have experienced it, right?

And we all have experienced it, right? We all have experienced evil, or have lost someone, or maybe felt the sorrow of envy or that spiritual sluggishness.

Did Jesus experience sorrow?

Jesus did experience sorrow. Absolutely. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus.

So this is what Aquinas says, and this may sound kind of obvious, but I think it's good for us to get a handle on it. It also helps us to see the balance of a healthy spiritual life.

What do you think is one way to combat sorrow in someone's life? Generally speaking — if it's caused by torpor, or envy, or loss, maybe the loss of a loved one or the loss of a job, or someone experiences evil — their basement floods and they're really sad about that — what is something that you might do to help them?

Community. Compassion. Love around them. Just listen. A community that surrounds people. If someone sits at home feeling sluggish and lethargic and doesn't get out, they lose their joy.

What would you do as a woman for another woman?

Lesson one.

Again, I think we're all around it. This is what Aquinas says. It's just one word: pleasure.

Now you were very specific. Aquinas is more general here. Pleasure. And he gives a theological reason for this. Pleasure is a kind of repose of the appetite in a suitable good. Appetite meaning a desire. While sorrow arises from something unsuited to the appetite. Consequently, in movements of the appetite, pleasure is to sorrow what repose is to weariness in our bodies.

So when we're sorrowful, we're not balanced out. We're looking to become rebalanced. Seeking pleasure — the kind of pleasure that is moral and good and holy — is something we can seek out.

You're all women here. A glass of wine if somebody is going through a difficult time and they're very sad. Shopping therapy. Come on, we're going to take a walk. We're going to get a massage. You're going to get your nails done. We're going to have lunch.

But think about this: one of the greatest minds in the Church is telling us this is okay to do — and actually prescribed to do it. Now having said that, seeking pleasure in these ways also depends on the personality we're dealing with and the person's readiness to move, depending on how deep the hurt or sadness is.

Those things that are stereotypical of women, in a good way, are actually very theologically sound. And yes, I like that first response — a glass of wine. That's going to come up again at the end.

So we have pleasure. Can you think of another way to help someone who is dealing with sorrow?

The next one is tears. Crying. Encouraging someone not to hold it in, but to share that sorrow and go ahead and cry.

Aquinas says this: a hurtful thing hurts more if we keep it shut up. We all know that, right? Isn't it amazing that these things we've known for years are actually theologically and humanly sound?

So he says: go ahead and cry. Why is that good? Because that pain dissipates. It's like getting the sorrow out. And that's not only spiritual — it's biological. Tears cause the brain to release chemicals that dull pain and elevate mood.

Did you ever notice that sometimes you feel better after a good cry? That may not just be spiritual — it may very well be biological.

Tears shed from sorrow are chemically different from tears caused by things like onions. The body is responding in a very healthy way. We shouldn't be afraid to cry. An action that befits a person according to their actual disposition is always pleasing to them.

What that means is: when we're sad, it's okay to act sad. If anyone has ever been told to snap out of it and put on a happy face, Aquinas is saying that doesn't work. Trying to act happy when we are devastated is not consonant with who we really are.

We want to be consistent on the outside with what's going on on the inside. Jesus even talked about that in terms of hypocrisy.

Are we okay with tears? How about men crying?

Regarding tears, one of the things I learned from my spiritual director in the seminary was this: go into your room with a box of tissues, close the door, and let it all out. That's what the Bible calls a lamentation.

God doesn't want the polished version of us in prayer. He wants the mess. Crying is spiritually good according to Aquinas, and biologically good according to modern science.

Putting on a happy face long-term when you're devastated is unhealthy.

So we went from pleasure to tears. The third rebalancing agent is friendship.

But not the kind of friendship Job had. Job's friends thought they knew what his problem was and what God was doing. They actually added to his suffering. We don't want to be that kind of friend.

Sometimes friendship is simply presence. Knowing someone cares. We don't have to be the Savior. We don't have to have the perfect words. Presence is often enough.

Now we move to prayer, or contemplation — the lifting of our minds to the true, the good, and the beautiful.

The least helpful prayer is "God, take it away," because that's asking God to remove part of your humanity. God won't do that. But prayer helps us ground ourselves, trust God, and not waste our suffering.

Prayer can help us offer our suffering as something redemptive. Sitting quietly with God allows His light to illuminate the situation causing sorrow. Gratitude often balances grief.

When we're angry or afraid or confused, quiet prayer can help us come to a different understanding — maybe even gratitude instead of bitterness.

That kind of prayer takes patience. It takes silence. Listening matters. When you do all the talking in prayer, no one is enriched — not you and certainly not God.

And then the final antidote: sleep and baths.

Aquinas quotes St. Ambrose: sleep restores tired limbs, refreshes the weary mind, and banishes sorrow — at least in part. Sleep and bodily care help restore equilibrium.

That doesn't mean oversleeping due to depression is healthy — that's imbalance. But proper rest helps us return to a normal disposition of body and soul.

We are meant to live in equilibrium. Sorrow disrupts that. These remedies help restore it.

And that's why depression and anxiety disorders are not good for us spiritually, as well as bodily and mentally, because we're not at that equilibrium where we're meant to be.

A question comes up a lot: if someone is depressed and all they want to do is sleep, isn't that different from restorative sleep? Yes, it is. Sleeping to escape is not the same as sleep that restores body and soul. That's why doctors, medication, therapy, and spiritual direction often work together to help someone move back toward balance.

That's really the heart of this talk: the things we can do to maintain a healthy spiritual equilibrium as we go through the inevitable sadness and sorrows of everyday life.

And we are going to talk a little bit about depression and the dark night of the soul.

Clinical depression is very different from the dark night of the soul. Clinical depression has to do with something in the brain or mind and often needs medical treatment. The dark night of the soul is a spiritual experience — a purification — not a pathology.

All of us experience sorrow from time to time, especially when there is loss. That sorrow may not be constant, but it can return unexpectedly. That does not mean something is wrong. It means we are human.

Those kinds of traumatic events can wound us. Sometimes the wound never completely disappears. When something touches that wound again, sorrow returns. That's not bad. It means you have compassion. It means you are human.

Anger can sometimes be mixed into sorrow. According to Aquinas, anger can be good or bad. We should be angry at injustice. That kind of anger can be virtuous. But when anger consumes us and prevents us from living fully, it becomes destructive.

Often what we call anger is actually hurt or fear underneath. Those emotions can get tangled together, and it takes patience and prayer to sort them out.

Now let's turn to some wisdom from Father Ron Rolheiser.

He borrows from Karl Rahner's image of life as an unfinished symphony. Our lives are incomplete. We are always in the middle of things. We want resolution, but much of life remains unresolved.

One of the first lessons is this: don't ask life to give you what it cannot give. Accept that life is unfinished.

"In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we learn that here in this life there is no finished symphony."

You will leave here with questions. You will leave changed, but not complete. There is still a long way to go.

Another lesson: don't put messianic expectations on any person. No one can be your messiah. Not even a priest. Jesus Christ alone is your Savior.

We have to be responsible for our own spiritual lives. The Church is an instrument. Priests serve that mission, but they are not the Savior.

Another insight, especially for married couples: the first task of a couple in marriage is to console one another for the fact that you cannot not disappoint each other. Disappointment is part of every human relationship.

Another reflection comes from a preacher who says that many people sitting in the pews are the walking wounded. In a world obsessed with happiness, people need permission to be sad.

Give people permission to be disappointed. Give people permission to break down. Give people permission to remember. Give people permission to grieve. Let people experience the fullness of their humanity — just as Jesus did.

We are all the walking wounded. But if we accept our woundedness, we can become wounded healers.

Before getting serious about Jesus, Dan Berrigan once said, first consider carefully how good you are going to look on wood. That wood, of course, is the Cross.

We like the holiness part of discipleship. The crucifixion part is harder. But following Christ means carrying the Cross, not just admiring it.

Finally, especially for the young, we need to give people tools to handle frustration and incompleteness. Many today have been groomed for comfort rather than resilience.

Mental illness among young people is at an all-time high. Friendship has been replaced by screens. Real friendship matters — not numbers, not followers, but a few people who truly know you.

St. Thomas Aquinas said that friendship is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. If you have two or three real friends, consider yourself blessed.

We need to foster that kind of friendship in our homes, our schools, and our churches — to help people find purpose, direction, and balance in a world that often pulls them apart.

Jesus was sorrowful because He was fully human. He had real friends. He loved deeply. His sorrow shows us that sorrow itself is not a failure — it is part of love.