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Pope Francis talks to visitors during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Feb. 14, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Cindy Wooden

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The vice of "acedia," often translated as "sloth," can cause laziness, but it is much more than that; it is a lack of caring for anything and being bored with everything, even one's relationship with God, Pope Francis said.

"The demon of acedia wants precisely to destroy the simple joy of the here and now, the grateful wonder of reality; it wants to make you believe that it is all in vain, that nothing has meaning, that it is not worth taking care of anything or anyone," the pope said at his weekly general audience Feb. 14.

Holding his audience on Ash Wednesday, Francis prayed that God would accompany and bless people through their Lenten journey, but his main talk was a continuation of his series on vices and virtues.

People spend too little time talking about "the capital sin" of acedia, he said, and even when they do, they refer to it as sloth or laziness.

But "in reality, laziness is an effect more than a cause," the pope said. "When a person is idle, indolent, apathetic, we say he is lazy. But as the wisdom of the ancient desert fathers teaches us, often the root is acedia, which from its Greek origin literally means a 'lack of care.' "

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Francis described acedia as "a very dangerous temptation that one should not mess around with," because it makes a person "feel disgust at everything; their relationship with God becomes boring to them; and even the holiest acts, those that in the past warmed their hearts, now appear entirely useless to them."

Acedia can sometimes feel like depression, but it is a vice that tempts people to let go of caring for themselves and for others, he said. "For those caught up in acedia, life loses meaning, praying is boring (and) every battle seems meaningless."

"It is a bit like dying in advance and it's awful," the pope said.

When a person feels acedia creeping in, he said, they need to try to cultivate "the patience of faith" with a few small steps.

"In the clutches of acedia, one's desire is to be elsewhere, to escape from reality," the pope said, so to fight it "one must instead have the courage to remain and to welcome God's presence in the 'here and now,' in the situation as it is."

Take a breath, he said, set smaller goals and "persevere by leaning on Jesus, who never abandons us in temptation."

The pope ended the audience encouraging Catholics to live Lent "as an opportunity for conversion and inner renewal in listening to the Word of God and in caring for our brothers and sisters most in need," including by praying for those suffering because of war and violence in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel.