

Lukewarmness

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Lukewarmness or tepidity, in spiritual theology, signifies the state of soul to which the warmth and fervor of charity is wanting, but has not yet completely deteriorated into the coldness of indifference and hatred. The classical origin of the word is the warning addressed to the Church of Laodicea (Rv 3.16) that has been so frequently quoted by preachers that it is probably the best-known text of Revelation. The preceding verse—"I know thy works; thou art neither cold nor hot. I would that thou wert cold or hot"—brings out the meaning of lukewarmness in unmistakable fashion. The word χλιαρός, which the Vulgate renders *tepidus*, is natural enough in the language of love; the metaphor is continued in the threat, "I am about to vomit thee out of my mouth." The following verse apparently indicates that the lukewarmness of the Laodiceans was connected with self-complacency: "because thou sayest, 'I am rich and have grown wealthy and have need of nothing' and dost not know that thou art the wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked one."

Whatever the local conditions, physical or moral, that occasioned this stern rebuke, Christian theology has adapted the description to those who, while still living the life of grace, are not advancing in the fervor of charity. Such people have been called "retarded" souls by analogy with physical and mental failure to grow. St. John of the Cross gives a brilliant psychological description of the return of the capital vices in a more subtle, spiritual form in those he calls "beginners," and thus argues for a second conversion in the "night of the senses" at the threshold of contemplation (*Dark Night*, 1.2-6). Nevertheless, tepidity should not be confused with aridity or dryness in prayer, since the Christian experience of grace and charity, although significant, need not correspond completely or perfectly to the reality of their presence and activity. Lukewarmness is apparently caused by venial sins, especially the deliberate variety (*acedia* is frequently mentioned), and "imperfections" that are unheeded. Although charity cannot be directly diminished, the refusal of further sacrifice and, even more so, acts outside charity not only dispose the will to an act against it, but interrupt the dialogue with God (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae, 24.10).

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