

Solvitur ambulando

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Solvitur Ambulando, “it is solved by walking.” I first encountered this phrase in Thomas Long’s book *What Shall We Say: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*. (I recommend this book to everyone who asks and even to those who don’t ask; it is that good.)

I first read this phrase in Long’s book and soon after came across it a couple more times. Then I recalled some very wise advice from my New Testament professor: “If it is repeated, it must be important. If it is repeated, it must be important. If it is repeated...” So I have been thinking, or rather walking around with this phrase for a while. I find *solvitur ambulando* helpful in two ways.

The first way is known to anyone who has ever had to solve a problem, or been stuck creatively. At some point, it is best to walk away for a while. Garden, exercise, clean house, take a shower, sleep on it. Any of it works. The act of engaging our bodies and our thoughts with something else seems to allow our unconscious mind the freedom to find a way forward. A bit paradoxical, but it works.

The even greater paradox of *salvitur ambulando* is what Long and others suggest: problems, difficulties, mysteries, trials, fears happiness, love and joy are all best encountered by walking. This can be hard to do. Our inclination, hardwired over many millennia, is what scientists call “fight or flight.” Usually the order in real life is the other way around. Most creatures run; they only fight if cornered. If what is confronting you is a bear, a wolf, a big person with a weapon; running is a smart choice.

Just because we don’t encounter bears on a daily basis doesn’t mean we don’t run. We run away from difficult people and difficult situations. We run away from ourselves, and we run away from God. In reality, running only works for a while. At some point we are cornered, and we have to face what we are running from. Some of us run until death; some have the chance to stop running sooner. But running, it seems to me, always stops. And then what?

Solvitur ambulando.

We walk. We walk toward, and we walk into. And often we walk through and come out on the other side. Walking, not running, is key. We walk deliberately and perhaps slowly. *Solvitur ambulando*, at least for me, involves observing, thinking, praying and then acting.

We all avoid unpleasantness. We delay opening the credit card bill. We pretend to be busy to avoid that difficult person at work. We keep silent when someone tells a racist or sexist joke. We avoid making that phone call, sending that e-mail, writing that paper. We put off saying that necessary but difficult thing. And all the time we are avoiding—at least this is true for me—we are anxious and worried. Inevitably in my life, the worry and anxiety is worse than if I had simply done what I was avoiding.

Solvitur ambulando. Our word "amble" comes from the same Latin word: *ambulare*, to walk. This is something different than the modern slogan "Just do it." *Ambulando* lacks some of the urgency of "just do it". "Just do it" seems more like a shove; *ambulando* suggests I can take some time. I need to be moving, but I don't necessarily need to rush. There is time to think, to research, to consult, to pray. At least there will be if I stop running away and begin walking toward in a timely manner.

Solvitur ambulando is also God's way of doing things. Think of all the walking God does in the Bible. God is always, it seems, moving. Not frantic and rushing, but walking—moving steadily toward us and with us. God walks in the garden. God goes to Abram and guides Abram's travels. God travels with Moses and Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus walks. He walks and calls the disciples. He walks to the weak and the poor. He walks to the outcasts. He walks to those who cannot walk. He also walks to the rich and to the powerful. It seems there is no one Jesus will not walk toward. And then Jesus "set[s] his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). He walks toward Jerusalem—toward the cross, toward death, toward resurrection. After the resurrection, Jesus walks to Emmaus, and along a beach. "Follow me." *Solvitur ambulando.*

It is hard to walk toward some things. We may have dangerous things to face in life: illness, divorce, dementia, death, tragedy of all sorts. We also have wonderful things to face: birth, marriage, graduation, new jobs, new starts. Life after illness; life after divorce. The good news is that we do not walk alone. We have each other: family,

friends, coworkers, doctors, therapists, classmates, neighbors. And most of all. we have Jesus—who has already been wherever we are going, and who will walk with us. *Solvitur ambulando.*

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