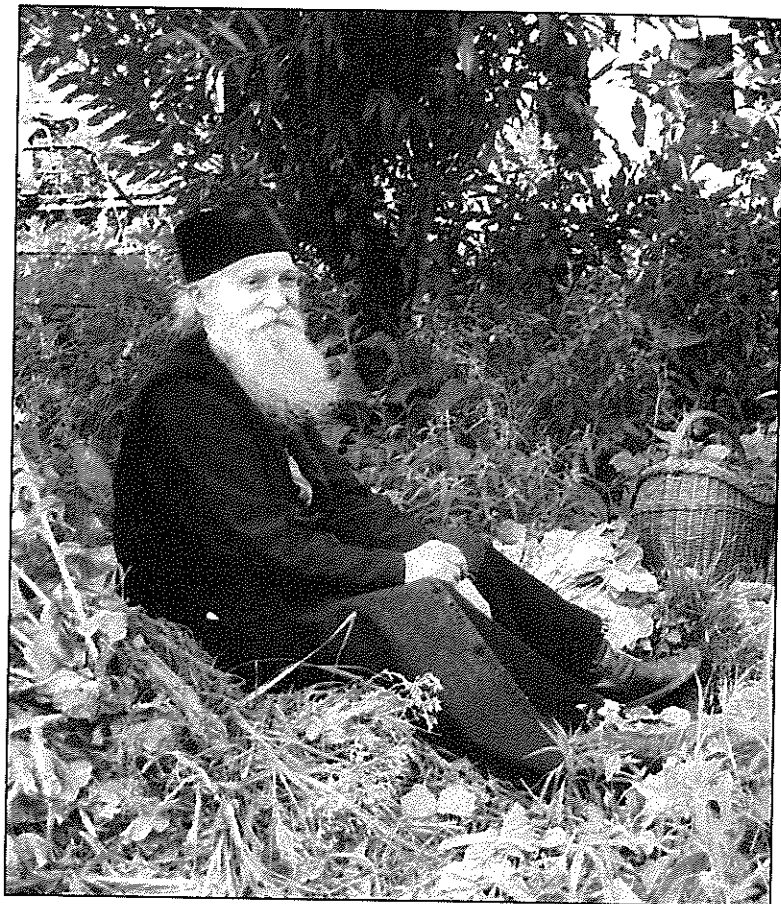




ON THOUGHTS

FROM THE HOLY FATHERS





Elder Thaddeus.

Panodica Grigor

CHAPTER ONE

ON THOUGHTS

1. Our life depends on the kind of thoughts we nurture. If our thoughts are peaceful, calm, meek, and kind, then that is what our life is like. If our attention is turned to the circumstances in which we live, we are drawn into a whirlpool of thoughts and can have neither peace nor tranquility.

2. Everything, both good and evil, comes from our thoughts. Our thoughts become reality. Even today we can see that all of creation, everything that exists on the earth and in the cosmos, is nothing but Divine thought made material in time and space. We humans were created in the image of God. Mankind was given a great gift, but we hardly understand that. God's energy and life is in us, but we do not realize it. Neither do we understand that we greatly influence others with our thoughts. We can be very good or very evil, depending on the kind of thoughts and desires we breed.

If our thoughts are kind, peaceful, and quiet, turned only toward good, then we also influence ourselves and radiate peace all around us—in our family, in the whole country, everywhere. This is true not only here on earth, but in the cosmos as well. When we labor in the fields of the Lord, we create harmony. Divine harmony, peace, and quiet spread everywhere. However, when we breed negative thoughts, that is a great evil. When there is evil in us, we radiate it among our family members and wherever we go. So you see, we can be very good or very evil. If that's the way it is, it is certainly better to choose good! Destructive thoughts destroy the stillness within, and then we have no peace.

Our starting point is always wrong. Instead of beginning with ourselves, we always want to change others first and ourselves last. If everyone were to begin first with themselves, then there would be peace all around! St. John Chrysostom said that no one can harm the man who does not injure himself—not even the devil.¹ You see, we are the sole architects of our future.

By his thoughts man often disturbs the order of creation. That is how the first people were destroyed—in a flood—because of their evil thoughts and intentions. This is true even today; our thoughts are evil, and therefore we do not bear good fruit. We must change. Each individual must change, but it is unfortunate that we do not have examples to guide us, either in our families or in society.

3. The Old Testament people were unable to accept God's boundless love. Likewise, they were unable to accept His commandments and continued to follow the ancient rule of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (cf. Ex. 21:24). Even today, we Christians still adhere to this Old Testament rule and are therefore surrounded by evil. We are also surrounded by many unpleasant things in life which destroy our inner peace. We are unable to forgive even our own brother, let alone others.

You can see now how it goes. When we nurture evil thoughts, we become evil. We may think that we are good, but evil is in us. We do not have the strength to resist it. And we know that, as Christians, we must not even think evil, let alone do it.

We, however, have Divine power, Divine life, and Divine energy. On the day of the Final Judgment we shall have to give an answer for the way we have used this Divine power, life, and energy which have been given to us: whether we have contributed to the harmony in the universe, or have sown disharmony.

¹ See St. John Chrysostom, *Treatise to Prove That No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself*; in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 9 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), pp. 269–84.

4. The Lord has taken all of our sufferings and cares upon Himself, and He has said that He will provide for all our needs, yet we hold on to our cares so tightly that we create unrest in our hearts and minds, in our families, and all around us.

Whenever I am burdened by problems, and when I try to bear all the cares of the monastery and the brotherhood by myself, then there is trouble in store for me and the brethren. Even the easiest job is carried out with great difficulty. But when I commit myself, the brotherhood, and everything else unto the Lord, even the hardest of jobs gets done with ease. There is no pressure, and peace reigns among the brethren.

5. The Lord is present everywhere, and nothing happens without His will or His permission, either in this life or in eternity. When we accept this idea, everything is made easier. If God would allow us to do everything the way we desire and when we desire, this would certainly result in catastrophe. One cannot even imagine the chaos that would occur. God reminds us in different ways of His presence. We, however, quickly forget about it, especially when things are going well for us. We forget that we are here for a short time only, and we think that we will be around forever, but when misfortune strikes, we cry, "Lord have mercy!" This is why we should try hard to change our character for the better.

6. Once, two women came to me and brought a third who was dragging her leg. She could barely walk. She said that she had been to several doctors, but they were not able to say what was wrong with her. I told her that her nerves were weak. I also told her that mine was a worse case than hers! She said that her husband had left her. "Of course he has," I said. "Who is going to take care of the children, who will prepare his meals for him when you are so depressed? You are not physically ill! You are too depressed. Sing! Sing and your husband will come back to you!" I told her that I was going to the church to read some prayers, and that I wanted

her to go home by herself. She looked at me for a while and then practically ran to the car. The other two were amazed. "She is well," I said, "and she no longer needs your help!"

7. A man who has within him the Kingdom of Heaven radiates holy thoughts, Divine thoughts. The Kingdom of God creates within us an atmosphere of heaven, as opposed to the atmosphere of hell that is radiated by a person when hades abides in his heart. The role of Christians in the world is to filter the atmosphere on earth and expand the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God.

We can keep guard over the whole world by keeping guard over the atmosphere of heaven within us, for if we lose the Kingdom of Heaven, we will save neither ourselves nor others. He who has the Kingdom of God in himself will imperceptibly pass it on to others. People will be attracted by the peace and warmth in us; they will want to be near us, and the atmosphere of heaven will gradually pass on to them. It is not even necessary to speak to people about this. The atmosphere of heaven will radiate from us even when we keep silence or talk about ordinary things. It will radiate from us even though we may not be aware of it.

The Kingdom of God will not make its abode in the heart of a person who has no obedience, for such a person always wants his will—rather than God's—to be done. In the Kingdom of God, there is no possibility of a kingdom within a kingdom. This was the goal of the fallen spirits too, and that is why they have fallen away from the Lord, the King of Glory.

A person who is entrapped in the vicious cycle of chaotic thoughts, in the atmosphere of hades, or has only so much as touched it, feels the torments of hell. For example, we read the newspapers or take a walk in the streets, and afterwards we suddenly feel that something is not quite right in our souls; we feel an emptiness; we feel sadness. That is because by reading all sorts of things, our mind becomes distracted and the atmosphere of hades has free access to our minds.

8. The Holy Fathers tell us to let our attention be on the Lord immediately upon waking, to let our thoughts be united with Him during the entire day, and to remember Him at every moment. The Holy Fathers prayed to be delivered from forgetfulness, for we often get carried away by the things of this world and forget the Lord.... We forget that He is everywhere and that any job we do and any task we perform is His. We think that the job we are doing is for someone else and we often perform our tasks unwillingly. When we perform a task unwillingly, soon resistance and a feeling of disgust are born in us, and then our life becomes filled with resistance and disgust for everything, and we grow old in this manner.

9. Your thoughts are burdened because you are influenced by the thoughts of your fellow men. Pray to the Lord that He might take this burden from you. These are the thoughts of others which differ from yours. They have their plan, and their plan is to attack you with their thoughts. Instead of letting go, you have allowed yourself to become part of their plan, so of course you suffer. Had you ignored the attack, you would have kept your peace. They could have thought or said anything at all about you, yet you would have remained calm and at peace. Soon all their anger would have died down, like a deflated balloon, because of the pure and peaceful thoughts that would have come from you. If you are like that, calm and full of love, if all you think are good and kind thoughts, they will stop warring against you in their thoughts and will not threaten you anymore. But if you demand an eye for an eye, that is war. Where there is war there can be no peace. How can there be peace on a battlefield, when everyone is looking over their shoulders and anticipating a surprise attack from the enemy?

10. The Holy Fathers struggled in acquiring peace. One of the Holy Fathers said, "The mind is a great wanderer. It is always

✧ traveling. It cannot rest until the only One Who can lay it to rest appears." If the Holy Fathers fought so hard to acquire peace, we too must always keep in mind that we must strive to be good all the time. And so, this means that our mind cannot attain peace unless the Mighty One, the Holy Spirit, enlightens us. That is when our minds learn to contemplate in the right way, and we come to the realization that quiet and gentle thoughts, full of love and forgiveness, are the way to peace and stillness.

Why does the Lord command us to love our enemies and to pray for them? Not for their sake, but for ours! For as long as we bear grudges, as long as we dwell on how someone offended us, we will have no peace.

✧ If the head of a family is burdened with cares and worries about the future of his family, he will have no peace. All the members of the family will feel his unrest. They will know that something is wrong, but they will not know exactly what. We can see how much our thoughts influence others. Misunderstandings in the family also happen because of our thoughts.

11. In our town of Petrovac there used to be a priest named Fr. B. He had a distinctive personality—a little rough, sharp-spoken, and demanding in discipline—but he had an unbelievable love for animals. There were always dogs and cats in his house. One autumn day he went to bless the home of a parishioner who had a huge ferocious German shepherd. The dog was as big as a calf. When Fr. B. walked through the gate, the dog leapt forward and threw himself at the priest. Everyone was sure that he was attacking him. But the priest spread his arms wide and said, "Come, let's wrestle!" The dog placed his paws on his shoulders and began to lick his face. Everyone was amazed. "He knows I like animals!" said the priest. This is what happens when a person ✧ has good thoughts. When animals, who are not rational beings, feel this, how much more will our fellow men feel our good

thoughts? Our thoughts create either harmony or disharmony in the world.

12. Once a girl came to see me. She was a university student, and both her parents were doctors. She said she had problems with one of her professors, who refused to mark her paper. I told her, "Why do you wage war with your teacher? You should respect her as though she were your mother. She is disciplining you for your own good." The girl would not hear of it. "No, Father," she said. "That teacher is mean—she's like this, she's like that. I give all the right answers to her questions and all she does is tell me to come next time. She hasn't given me a mark yet." I told the girl that her teacher was evidently distracted, but that she was waging a war against her teacher in her mind. I told her that she must pray for her teacher, that the Lord might send an angel of peace, and that He might give her the strength to love her teacher. Then ✧ everything would be all right. The girl thought I was telling her fairy tales. This went on for another year, and she began to lose hope of ever completing her first year. Then she began to pray for her teacher, and the next time she sat for an exam she passed and received a high mark.

13. As soon as a desire or a worldly thought enters our mind, God immediately sends a warning. Instead of coming to our senses and blocking such thoughts and desires, we nurture them and long for them, and afterwards we wonder why bad things happen to us. These signs of warning come in the form of temptations.

14. In our minds we conceive everything we do, say, and plan. ✧ Without this we cannot do or say anything. Everything first receives its shape and form in the mind; all of our energy is first made manifest in our thoughts. Thoughts are the power that conceives everything in the center of our being (the heart), and

when we are united with the Source of life, everything is revealed to us and we are open to all kinds of knowledge.

15. When a person has the Grace of God, his thoughts are unbelievably powerful, because it is the power of God Himself that acts in us. If we have turned away from God in our thoughts and hearts, then our thoughts can be terrible, even death-dealing, to our fellow men. If we are united with the Lord with a heart full of faith, the power of Grace works in us. But if we have not yet
 ✦ cleansed ourselves from pride and still feel offended and angered when others say unkind words to us, then the power of God in us is diminishing.

16. An old woman came to me and told me that her neighbor was bothering her. She said the other woman was constantly throwing things into her yard, so she was at her wits' end. I asked her why she was always quarreling with her neighbor. But the old woman said that she never even spoke to her evil neighbor. I insisted that she quarreled with her every day. I said to her, "You are convinced that she is doing evil things to you, and you are constantly thinking about her. Let her do whatever it is she is doing; you just turn your thoughts to prayer, and you will see that it will stop bothering you."
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17. The Apostle James says, "You say you have faith; show your faith through your works, then" (cf. James 2:18). Satan, too, believes and trembles (cf. James 2:19), yet he opposes God and every good thing. Many people on this earth consider themselves to be atheists, but when we think carefully we understand that there is no rational being on the planet Earth who does not long after true life and absolute love. Absolute love never changes; it lasts forever. We long for absolute good and absolute peace with all our heart. In reality, we long for God. God is life, God is love; He is peace and joy. In our hearts we long for God, but in our thoughts
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we oppose Him. As we said, Satan believes and trembles, yet he opposes God. Likewise, an atheist is not really an atheist, but an opponent of God.

Thus, we long after God in our hearts but oppose Him in our thoughts. Our opposition cannot harm God, for He is Almighty, but it can certainly harm us. Our thoughts, moods, and desires set a path for our life. Our thoughts reflect our whole life. If our thoughts are quiet, peaceful, and full of love, kindness, and purity, then we have peace, for peaceful thoughts make possible the existence of inner peace, which radiates from us. However, if we breed negative thoughts, then our inner peace is shattered.

Here is what the Holy Fathers say about thoughts: "If thoughts that take away our peace assail us, know that they are from hell." ←
 Such thoughts must not be accepted. They must be banished immediately. We must struggle for our own good and strive for peace to take root in our souls—peace, joy, and Divine love. Our Heavenly Father wants all of His children to have His Divine properties. He wants us to be full of love, peace, joy, truthfulness, and kindness. He wants us to be able to comfort others. We also want to become meek and humble, for only such a person radiates goodness and kindness.... Such a person is never insulted even when you shout and scold him; you can even hit him and all he does is pity you for tormenting yourself so. There are very few ✦
 such people on this earth, but they are the reason why the sun still warms planet Earth and why God gives us His blessing to go on living and to have everything we need in order to live. You see now why our thoughts must change.

18. We have very little faith in the Lord, very little trust. If we trusted the Lord as much as we trust a friend when we ask him to do something for us, neither we as individuals nor our whole country would suffer so much. The chaos in our minds and in our whole country comes from our thoughts. We are the ones creating the disharmony of thoughts, and if our politicians were

of one thought and one mind, things would not be like this. We are not aware that we have Divine energy in us, Divine life. The uniting of each individual with others—since we all possess this energy—creates a great power and the enemy flees from it, because here is harmony.

19. Thoughts are planted in our minds all the time, from all sides and directions. Were it given us to see the radii of thoughts, we would see a real net of thoughts. Everyone has a “receiver” in his mind, one that is much more precise and sophisticated than a radio or a television set. How wonderful is the mind of man! Unfortunately, we do not appreciate this. We do not know how to unite ourselves with the Source of life and to feel joy. The adversary is always planting seeds in our minds. St. Anthony was permitted to see the nets of thoughts around him, and when he saw them, he exclaimed, “Lord, who can be saved?” And he heard a voice saying, “Only those who are meek and humble of heart.” The evil spirits cannot touch those who are meek and humble of heart, for they are united with peace and silence. They have no negative thoughts.

20. There is a spiritual child of mine I would like to tell you about. He is a layman, but lives a holier life than many monks. I always tell him, “Do not accept suggestions. Tell yourself, I will not think about this! You will see, you will become well versed in this.” And he did. He would refuse the suggestions that came from his thoughts without even going into battle. He has peace. He is physically a very powerful man, who weighs over 220 pounds. But he has peace!

After he had completed his service in the army, his parents wanted him to get married. But he said to me, “I don’t know, Father. Seems to me I have become like a eunuch.” I told him that of course he did not have to, but again warned him not to accept any suggestions that came from his thoughts, because bodily

passions cannot be ignited without the “movie” that our thoughts play and without our watching that “film.” The body is at peace when there are no such thoughts. I told him, “Be careful lest you start accepting the proposals from your thoughts. If you do, you will soon see that you have not become a eunuch.”

“They want me to get married and I do not wish to,” he said. He was at peace and girls did not interest him. One day, he decided to try to accept a suggestion to watch a “movie.” He came to me saying, “What do I do now, Father? I can’t get it out of my head!” I said to him, “Do you now see how dangerous this is? Now you must be very vigilant in your prayers, and even your knees should smart a little. Everything will be all right after that.” Soon he came back again and told me that he was never going to play with fire again. You see, he has acquired this discipline of thoughts, and he is at peace. Now he wants his friends, who engage in all sorts of unseemly behavior, to be chaste, like him. He tells them to either live in chastity or get married. He talks to them about chastity and the Christian life so much that I had to tell him to tone it down a little, for when a person attempts to pull another away from evil deeds, then the demons attack him relentlessly. And attack him they did. He fought many spiritual battles, and the demons physically attacked him. He would come to me all bruised and beaten—it was unbelievable.

This is how we must live—controlling our thoughts. It is not good to dwell on every thought that comes to us; otherwise we lose our peace. If we learn to refuse such proposals, we are quiet. We do not fantasize or create any images in our mind.

21. While praying, a person should not have any thoughts, but rather become selfless. Even the Holy Fathers say this: “While at prayer, behave as though there were no one else in the world, just you and God.” When praying, we should not be preoccupied with ourselves, because in that case we are so absorbed in our own needs that we ourselves are detrimental to our prayer. We interfere with

our own prayer. We are our own obstacle. We often think that evil is somewhere out there, but if it were not for the evil that already exists in us, the evil "out there" would not be able to touch us. The evil is in us. However, this evil itself is not to blame. We are to blame for having let it into our hearts and for having disturbed our peace. Let us say someone is threatening us, or trying to talk us into doing something bad. Let him do so; this person has a will of his own. Let him do his job, and we will do ours, which is to preserve our inner peace.

CHAPTER TWO

ON FAMILY LIFE

1. Obedience is constructive, and self-will is destructive. A child should learn to be obedient to his parents as to God. He will remember his parents' words during his entire life and will always respect his elders, and not only elders but even those younger than he is. He will be kind and attentive to everyone. Unfortunately, there are very few families who bring up their children like that.

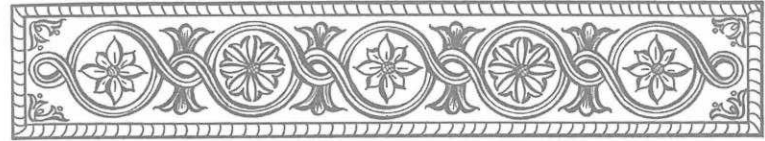
2. The spirits of evil interfere with children's minds ... and try to disturb them. A child should be taught obedience, especially before the fifth year, because that is the period in which a child's character develops. In this manner, learned character traits remain for the rest of the child's life. Parents should teach their children absolute obedience during that period. When a parent says something, the answer should be, "Amen." But today, unfortunately, parents do not know this and teach their children quite the opposite. And so they grow up ...

3. If the parents say, "Stay here," then the child must stay where they told him. But a child is a child; he cannot sit still in one place. What usually happens is that the parents spank the child for being disobedient. But that is not a good manner of teaching a child obedience. Maybe sometimes a spanking is called for, but then it should be out of love, and the child must feel love. Parents should never spank their children when provoked by anger. For if you are going to correct someone when you are angry, you will achieve nothing. You will only hurt both the person and yourself.

PART ONE

THE WAR OF THOUGHTS

*“When man sees everything with good thoughts,
he is purified and receives the Grace of God.
By bad thoughts, man condemns
and wrongs others, preventing divine Grace
from coming, and allowing the devil to come
and do his evil to us and in us.”*



CHAPTER ONE

Good and Evil Thoughts¹

The Power of Good Thought

Geronda, in the Old Testament, in the book Maccabees IV, it is written: *For devout thought does not uproot the passions but is their antagonist.*² What does this mean?

– The passions are deeply rooted in us, but the good, devout thought helps us to not become enslaved to them. When man brings only good thoughts to mind and establishes a strong and healthy spiritual state, then the passions lie dormant, and it is as if they did not exist. In other words, devout thoughts do not uproot the passions altogether, but combat them and can defeat them. I think

1. The term *logismos* (reason, thought) in the ascetic writings denotes either a simple thought that passes through the mind, or an emotion of the soul directed toward good or evil, or even a good or evil tendency, which has been acquired with the help of the mind, the conscience, the emotions and the will. Since a thought precedes every action, for this reason the struggle of every believer, but primarily of every monastic, to be authentic, requires constant vigilance and examination of these thoughts in order to cultivate the good and discard the evil.

2. Cf. 4 Mac 3:5 LXX.

the author is describing what the Holy Seven Young Men, their mother Saint Solomone and their teacher Saint Eleazar were able to endure by having good and devout thoughts,³ and thus is indicating precisely the extent of the power of good thoughts.

One good thought is equal to a very long vigil! It is very powerful. Similar to how certain new weapons can intercept a missile at its base by using laser beams and prevent it from being fired, so good thoughts can also anticipate and immobilize evil thoughts at the devil's "airports", where they are launched from. This is why you must struggle as much as you can – before the tempter devil has a chance to plant evil thoughts in your mind – to plant good thoughts and transform your heart into a flower garden, so that your prayer will be enriched by the divine fragrance of your heart.

When we hold even the slightest grudge, a small bad thought about anyone, any ascetic discipline we may undertake, such as fasting, vigils and so forth, will be in vain. What will be the use of such ascetic disciplines, if one does not struggle concurrently to prevent and reject all evil thoughts? Why not first empty the vessel of any impure residue oil, which is only good for making soap, before putting in the good oil; why should we mix good oil with filthy residue?

A single good and pure thought has more power than any ascetic exercise. For example, a young man is tempted by the devil and has impure thoughts, and he undertakes vigils and three-day fasts in order to be rid of his impure thoughts. But one single good and pure thought which he

3. Cf. 4 Mac 5:1 f. LXX.

manages to bring to mind can have greater effect than the vigils and the fasts; it can be of more positive help to the young man in overcoming his problem.

– Geronda, when you say “pure thought”, are you referring to specific matters or to more general ones?

– I am also referring to more general matters. For when man can see all things with good thoughts, he is purified and filled with the Grace of God. With evil thoughts one condemns and wrongs others, impedes the coming of divine Grace, and then the devil comes to do his evil work to us and in us.

– In other words, Geronda, do we give the devil the right to attack us just because we condemn someone?

– Yes. Everything starts from good thoughts. This is what elevates a person and changes him for the better. One must reach a point of being able to see all things in purity. It is as Christ said: *Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.*⁴ And having acquired this, man can reach the point of seeing everything with spiritual eyes, not physical eyes. All things can be justified, in the good sense of the term.

We must be careful not to accept the devil's evil messages, so as not to pollute *the temple of the Holy Spirit*,⁵ thereby banishing the Grace of God and bringing spiritual darkness to our soul. When the Holy Spirit sees our heart in purity, He comes and dwells in us, because He loves purity – this is why He manifests Himself as a dove.

4. Jn 7:24.

5. Cf. 1 Cor 6:19, 3:16.

The Greatest Disease: Evil Thoughts

– Geronda, I am anxious and can't sleep when I have a problem to deal with.

– Your basic problem is your many thoughts. If you didn't have all these thoughts, you would be able to accomplish much more in your assigned duties and in your spiritual life. Here is one way to avoid all these thoughts: When you think of something that, let's say, needs to be done tomorrow, tell yourself, "This work is not for today, I will think about it tomorrow." Also, when you have to make a decision, do not trouble yourself with the thought of how to make the best decision, and thus end up constantly procrastinating. Make a decision and move on; then let God take care of the rest. Try to avoid being overly meticulous and scholastic about too many details, which will only confuse your mind. Do whatever you are able to do with *philotimo*, simplicity and, above all, with great trust in God. This way we "oblige" God, in a manner of speaking, to help us, when we place our hopes and our future in His hands. Even a healthy person will become useless with too many thoughts running through his mind. One who is sick and suffering can justifiably have worrisome thoughts. But one who is healthy and yet becomes confused and suffers from *sinister*⁶ thoughts, deserves a straitjacket! To be healthy and yet tormented by one's thoughts is a terrible sickness!

In our times, one of the greatest illnesses is the vain thoughts of worldly people. People can have all the good things in life except good thoughts. They are tormented

6. That is to have a thought "from the left side", an evil thought.

simply through not facing up to things in a spiritual manner. For example, someone sets out to go somewhere but has a little car trouble and is a little late getting to his destination. If he has a good thought, he will say, "Perhaps the Benevolent God brought this delay in order to prevent a possible accident. How can I thank You, my God, for this?" So he praises God for the delay. On the contrary, if he does not have a good thought, he will not face the incident in a spiritual manner; he will curse and blame God: "What a misfortune, what a useless delay! And where is God in all this?"

When we accept whatever happens to us with a good and positive thought, we are helped; while on the contrary, we are tormented and come apart at the seams emotionally and physically when negative and evil thoughts prevail. Once, years ago, we got on a truck, which had some boards for seats, in order to go from Ouranoupolis (Chalkidiki) to Thessaloniki. The truck's interior was a mess; suitcases, orange crates, fish, empty and dirty fish crates being returned, students from the *Athonias*⁷ School, some sitting and some standing, monks, lay people... One layman came and sat next to me. He was a little stout, and because he was somewhat squeezed, he began to complain loudly, "What a state!..." A little further inside the truck stood a poor monk surrounded by crates so you could only see his head. In the meantime, as the truck bumped its way along the cart track, the monk had to remain standing and hold on to the wobbling crates to

7. The *Athonias* School was established in 1748 on Mount Athos as an Academy of Greek studies. Today it functions as an Orthodox High School under the jurisdiction of the Church.

prevent them from falling on him. With all of this going on, the other fellow was complaining of being squeezed a little in his seating arrangements. So I told him, "How can you be complaining when you see what that monk is enduring?" So I asked the monk, "How are you managing, Father?" And with a smile he told me, "Geronda, it's better here than hell!" One man was tormented, even though he was able to sit, while the other was content to stand, and be virtually buried under all those crates. And this was a two-hour drive, not just a short ride. The layman's mind was on the comfort he would have had if he were riding on a bus, while the monk was thinking of the suffering in hell, and was happy enough to ride in a filthy truck. He was thinking, "We are going to reach our destination in two hours and get out, while the poor people in hell will be tormented forever. After all, there it is hell, and not some unpleasant accommodations. Glory be to God, it is better here."

– Geronda, how do you explain the varying degree of trust held by two novices toward their Elder?

– Thoughts. One can have fault-finding thoughts about everything and everyone. If a man does not have a good thought and does not remove self-interest and desires from his activities, that is, if he continues to act selfishly, he cannot be helped even by a Saint. A saintly Elder, even Saint Anthony, and all the Saints together, cannot help such a selfish man. Not even God Himself can help such a person, even though He desires it very much. When someone loves himself and is selfish, he interprets everything in a way that suits his inner self. Some people interpret things carnally or in a sinful manner, others in whatever manner suits their ego, and gradually these

irrational interpretations become second nature to them. No matter how you behave, they will be scandalised.

There are some people who soar if you pay them some attention, if you tell them an encouraging and heartening word. If you don't pay any attention to them, they are deeply saddened and have an extreme reaction, which comes from the tempter, the devil. Or they may see some activity going on and say, "Aha! This is what must be happening." Later they convince themselves that this is indeed what happened. Or, they may see someone in a rather thoughtful mood and imagine that he has something against them, while in fact the other person is pen-sive simply because he is troubled by a personal concern.

Some time ago, someone came to me and said, "Why did so and so use to speak to me but doesn't now? Could it be something I said?" So, I told him directly, "Look, he may have seen you but not noticed you, or had something on his mind, such as a sick friend who needed a doctor, or the necessary currency to travel abroad, and so forth." In fact the other person really was worried about a sick friend who needed to be taken care of. But because this man was expecting undivided attention and his friend did not stop to talk to him, he allowed a whole series of bad thoughts to go through his mind.

Good Thoughts Lead to Spiritual Health

– Geronda, what are the characteristics of a *weak* thought?

– What do you mean? This is the first time I have heard of such a thing.

– Geronda, you had said that for one to have a sinister thought, to misunderstand someone’s behaviour...

– And I called that a *weak* thought?

– I remember the person who wanted to stay with you and be a novice under your guidance and you told him, “I cannot keep you, because you have *weak* thoughts.”

– No, I didn’t say it that way. I told him, “I can’t take you as a novice, because you do not have spiritual health.” And he asked me, “What do you mean by spiritual health?” “You do not have good thoughts,” I told him. “As a man I may have my faults, and as a monk all these years I may also have some virtues. If you do not have good thoughts, you will be harmed by both my faults and my virtues.” One may say of a small child that it has weak thoughts because it is still immature, but you can’t say that about a grown-up.

– Are all grown-ups, Geronda, mature?

– Some, because of their mind, their way of thinking, do not mature. And I do not mean someone who is mentally challenged and does not understand. But when someone does not behave and act simply, his thoughts turn to evil things, and he interprets everything the wrong way. Such a person does not have spiritual health, and is not helped even by the good; he is tormented even by the good.

– Geronda, if we notice that something is out of order in the monastery, should we try to find out who is responsible?

– First, see if you’re responsible. That is the best thing to do.

– But, Geronda, what if others provide occasion for doubt?

– How many occasions have *you* provided? If you think of this, you will realise that you are making a mistake to deal with such situations in this way.

– What about when we say, “This is clearly something that Sister so-and-so has done,” is this also a sinister thought?

– Are you sure that it was done by that Sister?

– No, but only because she has done something similar on other occasions.

– Again it is a sinister, an inappropriate thought, since you cannot be sure who did it. And even if it were done by that Sister, no one can know how and why she did it.

– Geronda, what if I see that a certain Sister has a particular passion?

– Are you the Abbess? The Abbess bears responsibility for this; it is her duty to examine the passions of all the Sisters. But why should you be examining the passions of the other Sister? Unfortunately, you haven’t yet learned to work spiritually on yourselves. If you want to do spiritual work on yourselves, do not examine what others are doing around you; instead, have good thoughts about both the good and the bad you see in others. Regardless of the reason why someone does something, you must put a good thought in your mind. A good thought contains love; it disarms the other person and makes him behave properly.

Do you remember the incident with those nuns who took a thief to be an abba? When it was revealed that he was a thief, they continued to think that he was a fool for Jesus Christ and only pretending to be a thief, and

revered him all the more. In the end, they saved both him and his companions.⁸

– Geronda, when a Sister tells me a lie...

– What if she was forced because of *you* to say a lie, or if she forgot, and if what she told you was not a lie? For example, the nun responsible for hospitality, knowing there is salad in the kitchen, asks for a salad from the cook, who replies, “I don’t have any.” If the nun responsible for hospitality does not have good thoughts, she will think, “She’s lying.” But if she has good thoughts, she will say, “The poor nun, she is so busy with her work, she has forgotten that there is still some salad left in the kitchen.” Or she may think, “Perhaps she is saving the salad for someone else.” You do not have spiritual health and this is why you think like that. If you had spiritual health, you would see even the impure as pure. Just as you recognise the value of fruit, you would also recognise the value of manure, because manure helps the fruit to grow.

Whoever has good thoughts also has spiritual health, and what is evil can be changed into good. I remember during the German Occupation, the physically strong children ate with a hearty appetite a piece of bobota,⁹

8. Among the stories about monks in the early years, the following incident is told: A well-known robber, who intended to rob a well-fortified monastery, dressed up and pretended to be a monk and asked for lodging in the monastery. The Abbess and all the nuns received him with much respect as a great Abba. All the nuns gathered to receive his blessing; they washed his feet and kept the water as a blessing. A paralysed nun, who in great faith was washed with that water, was healed and also walked up to receive his blessing – to the amazement of all. The robber, seeing the miracle, was transformed inside, repented, threw away the sword hidden under his cassock, and in time he and his companions became monks and lived with faithfulness the monastic life. (See D. Tsamis, *Miterikon*, Vol. 3, Thessaloniki 1992, p. 18-24).

9. Bread made with corn.

and were very healthy. By contrast, some wealthy children, who ate bread and butter, tended to be sickly because they did not have a strong constitution. Something similar happens in spiritual life. Someone who has good thoughts, even if struck unjustly, will say, “God has permitted this in order to redeem my old faults. Glory be to God!” On the other hand, someone who does not have good thoughts will imagine you are trying to hurt him even when you try to caress him. Take an example from someone who is drunk. If he is bad, he will destroy everything in his drunken stupor. If he is good, he will be either weeping or forgiving everyone, both the dead and the living. One drunken man used to say, “I offer a bucketful of gold sovereigns to whoever envies me!”

*Whoever Has Good Thoughts
Sees Good in Everything*

Some people tell me that they are scandalised because they see many things wrong in the Church. I tell them that if you ask a fly, “Are there any flowers in this area?” it will say, “I don’t know about flowers, but over there in that heap of rubbish you can find all the filth you want.” And it will go on to list all the unclean things it has been to. Now, if you ask a honeybee, “Have you seen any unclean things in this area?”, it will reply, “Unclean things? No, I have not seen any; the place here is full of the most fragrant flowers.” And it will go on to name all the flowers of the garden or the meadow. You see, the fly only knows where the unclean things are, while the honeybee knows where the beautiful iris or the hyacinth is...

As I have come to understand, some people resemble the honeybee and some resemble the fly. Those who resemble the fly seek to find evil in every circumstance and are preoccupied with it; they see no good anywhere. But those who resemble the honeybee only see the good in everything they see. The stupid person thinks stupidly and takes everything in the wrong way, whereas the person who has good thoughts, no matter what he sees, no matter what you tell him, maintains a positive and good thought.

Once a high school student came to my *Kalyvi*¹⁰ and knocked on the metal knocker on the door. Even though I was reading a stack of letters at the time, I decided to go and see what he wanted. “What is it you want, my son?” I asked. “Is this the *Kalyvi* of Father Paisios?” he asked me, adding, “I want to see Father Paisios.” “This is his *Kalyvi*, but he’s not here; he went to buy cigarettes,” I told him. “It looks like he must have gone to help someone,” he responded with a good thought. “He went to buy the cigarettes for himself,” I told him. “He smoked them all and was desperate for a cigarette. He left me here alone, and I don’t know when he’ll be back. If he takes too long, I’ll just leave.” The student’s watery eyes gave away his emotion and again he said with a good thought, “We torment Father Paisios...” “Why do you want to see him?” I asked. “I just want to receive his blessing,” he said. “What blessing do you expect to receive from him, you fool! He’s deluded; I know him well. There’s no Grace in him. Don’t waste your time waiting for him to

10. A dwelling which includes two or three cells and a small Chapel, all of which belongs to one of the twenty major Monasteries of the Holy Mountain.

return. He’ll be grouchy; he may even be drunk, because he drinks, too.” In spite of all this, the young man was still having good thoughts. Finally, I told him, “I will wait for him a little longer, what do you want me to tell him?” “I have a letter to give him,” he said, “but I will wait so I can also receive his blessing.” You see? No matter what negative things I related, he took them all with a good thought. When I told him about the need for cigarettes, his eyes began to well up with tears. “Who knows,” he thought, “he must have gone to help someone.” Other people are well-educated and read a great deal, but they still don’t have the good thoughts of that young student! You demolish his thought, and he immediately creates a better thought and draws an even better conclusion. I marvelled at him! It was the first time I saw such a thing!

*Thoughts of a Sanctified Man and
Thoughts of a Cunning Man*

– Geronda, can one who has sanctity perceive who is cunning?

– Yes, he can discern the cunning man, just as he can discern the sanctity of a Saint. He sees the evil, but at the same time, he sees the inner man and discerns that the evil is from the tempter, the devil; stemming from the outside. Seeing through the eyes of his soul, he magnifies his own faults, while diminishing the faults of others. And what’s more, he sees all these faults in truth, not falsely. He may discern that some of these faults are even crimes; but he will find some justification, in the good sense of the term, for the cunning schemes of an evil man, whom he does not despise or consider to be inferior.

He may even consider the evil man as being better than him, and will knowingly tolerate him for many reasons. For example, he recognises a criminal's evil nature, but thinks that the man may have become a criminal because he did not receive help; he even thinks that he himself could have been a criminal if God had not helped him. This is how he receives much Grace. On the contrary, the cunning man, while seeing the other man's sanctity, does not know the good thoughts in his heart, as even the devil himself does not know them.

He who is doing refined spiritual work justifies others, but not himself. And the more he advances spiritually, the more he is freed, and the more he loves God and other people. Then he cannot understand what evil means, for he always has good thoughts about others, and always thinks purely and sees everything in a spiritual and sanctified light. Such a person benefits even from the falls of others, which he utilises as a strong brake on himself, in order to attend to himself and to avoid being derailed by the same faults. On the contrary, one who has not been purified within thinks cunningly, and sees everything through the dim glow of cunningness. Even good things are polluted by his cunningness. Such a person does not even benefit from the virtues of others, because he is darkened by the darkness of the man-destroying devil, and interprets the virtues through his own cunning vocabulary. He is always aggrieved, and he always grieves others by his spiritual darkness. If he desires to be liberated, he must understand that he is in need of purification, both of the mind and of the heart, which will also bring spiritual clarity.

– Geronda, what happens when the same person is sometimes cunning and sometimes good?

– In that case, a man goes through the commensurate influences and changes. Man is mutable. Cunning thoughts sometimes stem from the tempter, the devil, and at other times, the man himself thinks cunningly. Often the devil creates the conditions that lead a man to evil thoughts. Once an archimandrite came to my *Kalyvi* for the first time, but I did not get a chance to see him. The second time he came, I could not see him because I was seriously ill, and I asked him to come some other time so we could talk. Then he had negative thoughts that I did not want to see him, that I had a grudge against him; so he went down to the monastery and complained. All of this comes from the evil one.

A Person's Thoughts Reveal His Spiritual State

– Geronda, how can the same thing be interpreted differently by two people?

– Do all eyes see with equal clarity? For one to see clearly, he must have the eyes of the soul in a most healthy condition, for it is then that he has inner purity.

– Why is it, Geronda, that one person considers an event to be a blessing but another sees it as a misfortune?

– Each person interprets the event according to his own thought. Each thing can be seen from its good side or its bad side. I had heard about the following event: In a monastery situated near an inhabited area, they kept the rule of celebrating Vespers and Matins at midnight, allowing the neighbours in the surrounding homes – they

were built around the monastery by the time – to attend these church services. Once a young novice monk went to the service and left his cell open and a woman entered. When he learned of this, he was troubled and worried because he considered this to be a very bad thing! “My cell has been polluted!” He took alcohol, poured it on the floor, and set fire to it in order to disinfect it! He almost set the whole monastery on fire. He burned the floor of his cell, but did not burn the thought in his head. He should have burned the thought, because that was where the evil was lurking. If he had had a good thought, he would have said that the woman entered his cell out of devotion, to receive a blessing, to receive grace in order to undertake the spiritual struggle at home more fervently; and in this manner, he would have been spiritually transformed and would have glorified God.

A person’s spiritual state is indicated by the quality of his thoughts. People judge things according to their heart’s spiritual content. If they do not have spiritual content, they will draw the wrong conclusions and do wrong to other people. For example, one who is doing charity work at night so as not to be seen will never think anything evil if he should see someone late at night out on the street. But if a person who spends his nights in sin sees someone out on the street late at night, he will say, “Who knows where that bad fellow is spending his nights?”, because he himself has such experiences. Or, if sounds from the apartment above are heard by someone who has good thoughts, he will say, “They are praying and doing prostrations.” But one with bad thoughts will say, “They are dancing all night long.” If a melody is

heard, the one will say, “What beautiful psalmody,” while the other will say, “What kind of songs are those?”

Do you remember how the two thieves who were crucified with Christ addressed Him? They both saw Christ on the Cross, the earth quaking, and so forth. But what a difference there was in the thought of the one and the thought of the other! The one on the left blasphemed and said, *If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.*¹¹ The other on the right said, *We indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this Man hath done nothing amiss.*¹² One was saved, but the other was lost.

11. Lk 23:39.

12. Lk 23:41.



CHAPTER TWO

Blasphemous Thoughts

Which Thoughts Are Blasphemous

Geronda, I have not yet understood when a thought is blasphemous.

– When inappropriate images come to mind about Christ, the *Panaghia*, the Saints, some holy and sacred thing, or even about our Spiritual Father and so forth, these are blasphemous thoughts. They should not even be uttered aloud.

– Not even to our Spiritual Father?

– To him it is sufficient to simply say, “Blasphemous thoughts go through my mind about Christ, or about the Holy Spirit, or about the *Panaghia*, or about the Saints, or about you, my Spiritual Father.” All of these blasphemous thoughts and sins are the work of the devil; they are not ours. This is why it is not necessary to grieve about them; we do not need to be distressed over the devil’s sins. When I was a novice monk, for a certain period of time, the devil brought to me such blasphemous thoughts even when I was in Church, and I grieved over them a

great deal. Whatever I had heard spoken by others, when I had been a soldier, swear words, curses and so forth, the devil would bring to my mind about the Saints. My Spiritual Father would say to me, “These thoughts are from the devil. The fact that a person is grieved over these impure thoughts which go through his mind about the holy and sacred things, this alone is already proof that they are not his own but, rather, come from the outside.” I, however, continued to be distressed by them. I would go away to the Chapel of Saint John the Forerunner to pray, and his Icon would exude a fragrance when I revered it. Later when such thoughts started coming to mind again, I would go to the Chapel and, again, fragrance would emanate from the Icon! One day during the Divine Liturgy, at the *Trisagion* Hymn, I, with the other monks, was chanting quietly the *Trisagion* Hymn of Neleos.¹ Then I saw a huge and fearful beast with a dog’s head entering from the door of the Litye.² Flames were coming out of its mouth and its eyes! He turned and gave me two gestures of a curse, because I was chanting *Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us*. I turned to the side to see if anyone else had seen the beast, but no one had. Later I told my Spiritual Father, “This and this happened to me.” Then my Spiritual Father said

1. Nelevs Kamarados, who lived in Constantinople around 1880, was a prolific musician who studied the theory of Byzantine Music and distinguished himself as one of the famous chanters of the Church.

2. The inner narthex of monastic Churches, the space between the narthex and the nave or main part of the Church. The name comes from the rather brief worship service called the Litye, which is chanted in this area of the Church on great feast days during the all-night vigil, and which consist of hymns and a “great litye” of petitions and supplications.

to me, “There, you saw him. That’s him. Now, will you stop worrying and be still?”

– Geronda, can one always discern if a thought is blasphemous?

– If one uses the brain God has given him, then one can. For example, some people tell me, “Geronda, how is it possible for Hell to exist? We worry over a person who is in prison, how much more over one who is in Hell.” But this is a blasphemy, because these people present themselves as being more righteous than God. God knows what He is doing. Do you remember an incident mentioned by Saint Gregory the Dialogist?

Once Bishop Fortunatus expelled a demon from a possessed woman. The demon wandered around the city in the guise of a poor man complaining about the Bishop and saying, “That merciless bishop expelled me.” Someone went up to him and said, “That was not right; how could the bishop do this unjust thing? Come into my home, poor man!” The devil entered into that man’s home and soon enough said, “I am cold; throw some wood on the fireplace.” So the man threw more wood in the fireplace and rekindled the fire. Finally, when the fire was blazing, the devil entered into his child, and the poor child jumped into the fire and was set aflame. It was then that the unfortunate man realised what the discerning bishop had expelled and what he himself had taken into his house. Bishop Fortunatus knew very well what he was doing when he expelled the demon.³

3. See Saint Gregory the Dialogist, *Evergetinos*, Vol. I, Subject 35, ed. Matthew Lagges, Athens 1980, p. 510.

Where Do Blasphemous Thoughts Come From

– Geronda, could you tell us something about “good indifference”?

– “Good indifference” is needed in someone who is overly sensitive and the *tagalaki*⁴ torments him with various thoughts. Then it is helpful to become a little insensitive, in the good sense of the term, and not to analyse certain things too much. Moreover, this “blessed indifference” is necessary for one who, although normally indifferent to many things, is overly sensitive about one particular thing, something that the devil has developed in him in order to destroy him. In this case it will be helpful to develop this “good indifference” for a period of time. It will require careful observation. He must confess his thought to his Spiritual Father, who will observe him carefully; otherwise, he can gradually level everything down, go to the other extreme and become completely indifferent.

– Geronda, when I feel sad, I have blasphemous thoughts; why is it that?

– It’s like this. When the *tagalaki* sees you sad, he takes advantage of the situation and offers you a worldly “candy”, a sinful thought. As soon as you fall for the first time, he will lead you to greater sadness and you won’t have the strength to resist. This is why you must never remain in a state of sadness, but strive to do something spiritual that will help you to get out of this state of sorrow.

– Geronda, I am troubled by some thoughts...

– It is from the evil one, the tempter. Be at peace and do not pay attention to them. You are sensitive. The devil

4. This is how the Elder often referred to the devil.

is taking advantage of your sensitivity; he is making you scrutinise certain things so that your mind becomes glued to them and you are tormented for no good reason. The devil may bring to you inappropriate thoughts about the Abbess, or even about me. Do not pay any attention to them. If you pay any attention to even a single blasphemous thought, it can torment you, it can break your spirit. You need a little “good indifference”.

The evil one usually torments with blasphemous thoughts those who are very devout and very sensitive. He magnifies their fall in order to grieve them; and if he does not succeed in bringing them to desperation, even to the point where they may commit suicide, he then at least attempts to bring upon them some mental illness and to render them useless. And if he cannot do even that, it pleases him to at least bring upon them some form of depression or melancholy.

I met someone who constantly spat. People told me, “He is possessed by a demon.” I said, “This is not a habit of someone who is possessed.” As I learned later, that fellow was not at fault in anything that would cause him to be possessed by a demon. He had grown up as an orphan and had a certain sensitivity; but he also had sinister thoughts and unfocused imaginings, which the devil exploited to bring him blasphemous thoughts. Therefore, when the devil instigated such thoughts, he resisted by spitting at them. Another person seeing this behaviour assumed that he was possessed by a demon. It was a shame for the poor fellow to have this sensitivity, and for others to say to him that he was possessed!

Blasphemous thoughts also often come from the devil’s malice. Once in a while, especially after a vigil when

one is very tired and unable to resist, the devil will bring blasphemous thoughts, and then, in order to really confuse him and to bring him to desperation, begins to tell him, “Not even the devil can bring such thoughts! You cannot save yourself now...” The devil even brings blasphemous thoughts about the Holy Spirit and then says that this sin cannot be forgiven, and so on.

– Geronda, can a blasphemous thought come to us through our own fault?

– Yes, a man himself can cause such thoughts to rise up into his consciousness. Where there is no sensitivity, blasphemous thoughts stem from pride, judging others, and so forth. For this reason, when you undertake an ascetic discipline and have blasphemous thoughts or thoughts of disbelief, you should know that your ascetic discipline (fasting, vigils and so on) is being carried out with pride. The mind is dimmed by pride; disbelief begins and the person is deprived of the Grace of God. Or, when one is preoccupied with questions of doctrine without having the necessary qualifications and spiritual preparation, he is then beset with blasphemous thoughts.

Scorn For Blasphemous Thoughts

– Geronda, Abba Isaac says that we overcome the passions *through humility and not through scorning them*.⁵ Is scorn of a passion and scorn of blasphemous thoughts the same thing?

5. See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Appendix B: Epistle to Abba Symeon, p. 433, tr. “Holy Transfiguration Monastery”, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984.

– No, scorn of a passion contains within it pride, self-confidence and, worst of all, self-justification. In other words, you justify yourself and do not acknowledge your passion. It is as if you are saying, “This passion is not mine, it isn’t related to me” and consequently you do not struggle to get rid of it. But blasphemous thoughts we must scorn and reject, because, as I said, they are not ours, they are the devil’s.

– When someone pretends in front of others to have a particular passion, gluttony, for example, does he mock the devil?

– He is then pretending with the good pretence; he is not mocking the devil. You mock the devil when he brings blasphemous thoughts to you and you continue to chant.

– How can one dispel a blasphemous thought that comes to him during the church service?

– By chanting. *I shall open my mouth and the Spirit will inspire it...*⁶ Are you not familiar with the hymn? Do not stir the thought up; scorn it. When someone discusses such thoughts during the hour of prayer, it is like the soldier who is taking apart a hand grenade while making his report to the officer.

– What if it persists?

– If it persists, you should be aware that somewhere within you it has set up a stronghold. The perfect solution is this: scorn the devil because he is the one who is “tutoring” you in cunningness. It is better at that time not even to say the Jesus Prayer, because this way we show that we are seriously concerned over this matter, and the

6. The opening line of the Heirmos of the First Ode in the Canon of the Akathist Hymn.

devil, seeing he has upset us, takes aim at this weak point and begins constantly bombarding us with blasphemous thoughts. It is better if we chant during such a time. You see, even little children, when they wish to mock some other child, sing their familiar “lalala...” We, too, must do the same thing to the devil. But we will chant hymns, not sing songs. Psalmody is prayer addressed to God, but is also a scornful rejection of the devil. Thus, the devil is stricken from both sides, and will soon give up.

– When I am in such a state, Geronda, I cannot bring myself to chant hymns, and I even have difficulty in going for Holy Communion.

– This is very dangerous! The little devil is setting up a blockade against you. You must go and chant, and receive Holy Communion, because these thoughts are not yours. Be obedient in this one thing; just chant an *Axion Estin*⁷ so the little devil will get what’s coming to him and go away. Haven’t I told you the story about a certain monk?

He had come to the Holy Mountain at the young age of twelve. He was an orphan who had lost the tender love of his natural mother and had given all his love to the *Panaghia*. He felt Her to be his mother. If you could only see with what tender devotion he would kiss the Icons! Later, the devil exploited his love and brought blasphemous thoughts. The poor child would not even go to reverence the holy icons. His Elder learned of this, took him by the hand and set him before the Icons of the *Panaghia* and of Jesus Christ, and directed him to kiss them directly on the face, and on the hands; and immediately the devil went away. In a way, it is impudent

7. “It is trully meet to bless You, O Theotokos...”

to kiss the *Panaghia* or Christ on the face, but the Elder directed the young novice to do this in order to dispel the troubling thoughts.

*When We Are at Fault For
Blasphemous Thoughts*

– Geronda, when I'm attacked by a blasphemous thought without my consent, am I at fault?

– If you are troubled by it and do not accept the thought, it is nothing.

– Geronda, when is someone at fault for a blasphemous thought?

– If one is not troubled at having such a thought and sits about discussing it, then one is at fault. And the more he accepts the blasphemous thoughts, the more he will be troubled by the devil. For when a blasphemous thought goes through one's mind and he turns it over in his mind to examine it, he is actually exposed to some demonic influence.

– And how will such thoughts go away, Geronda?

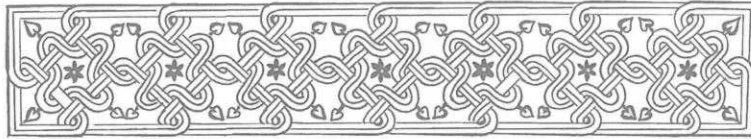
– If one is troubled and upset by them when they come to him, and he does not examine them, they will go away on their own, because they will not be nurtured. A tree that is not watered will die in time. But from the moment someone is pleased with these thoughts, even for a short while, he provides nourishment for them, the old self is thus irrigated, and the inappropriate thoughts will then wither only with great difficulty.

– Geronda, sometimes I accept these blasphemous thoughts; I give my consent, and then I realise what has happened, and then I cannot dispel them.

– Do you know what is happening to you? For a moment, you are distracted and your mind is elsewhere; you're daydreaming with an open mouth. Then the little devil comes and throws candy into your mouth and you begin to suck on it. You taste its sweetness and are then unwilling to spit it out. But you must throw it out immediately, just as soon as you sense its sweet taste; that is, as soon as you realise the temptation.

– Geronda, what happens when a blasphemous thought comes which I accept for a brief moment and then dispel?

– Then it is as the devil has given you candy and, after sucking on it for a little, you suddenly spit it out from your mouth. But you should spit it from the beginning. Otherwise, the devil will outwit you in the beginning with candy, and then he will fill you with poison and mock you.



CHAPTER THREE

On Trusting Our Thoughts

Trusting Our Thoughts Is the Beginning of Error

Geronda, when I am angry, I become like a raging torrent, unable to control myself.

– Why can't you control yourself?

– Because I trust in my thought.

– Well, then, you have your own belief, your own "creed"! Your egoism is at fault. Do not justify your thought. When a foolish thought comes to you, get rid of it yourself; do not accept it.

– And how will I understand that a thought of mine is foolish?

– Well, if you do not understand, tell it to the Abbess, and then directly throw it away and be obedient to whatever spiritual direction she gives you. When a spiritual person trusts his thoughts, it is the beginning of error. His mind is darkened by pride and can be readily led into error. It is better to go insane, for then, at least, one has extenuating circumstances.

– Is there any possibility of getting help from others, Geronda?

– In order for one to be helped while in that state, he must first help himself. He must understand that to believe in his thoughts, which, let's say, tell him that he is the best, that he is a saint and so forth, is an outright error. This kind of thinking cannot be removed even with a machine gun, as long as one holds on to it tenaciously. One must be humbled if it is to go away. Sometimes I am asked to pray in such circumstances. What prayer can I make? As long as someone still has in his soul the wick of the devil, it will flare up again. This is like someone continuing to hold blasting charges in his hands and asking others to help keep him from being blown up.

– Geronda, I have become very crabby and harsh.

– Who says that of you? Is it perhaps your thoughts? I am watching over you from the Holy Mountain. You have not become crabby and harsh. But if you come to believe in the thought which has come over you, then you may lose your mind. Do not believe your thoughts, neither when they tell you that you are terrible, nor when they tell you that you are a saint.

Trusting Our Thoughts Creates Psychological Problems

– Geronda, when someone has the notion that everybody seems to be thinking or talking about him, how can it be dispelled?

– This comes from the devil who is seeking to make him sick. He must become indifferent to such a thought; not trust his thought. For example, if someone who is

suspicious sees an acquaintance speaking quietly to another person he may think, "He is talking about me; I never expected that from him!" Of course, the two are not talking about him at all. If this tendency is not checked, it can lead to dire consequences. He thinks that he is being watched, that he is being pursued. Even if there is some concrete evidence that others are paying attention to him, he must realise that even this is contrived by the enemy to convince him. How the devil can combine such things!

I know a young man who is very intelligent, yet he trusts his thought which tells him that he is not altogether balanced in his mind. By accepting these thoughts that are brought about by the devil, he has become the victim of many complexes. He has even attempted suicide; he has brought great sorrow and distress to his parents. While God has given him many abilities and talents, the enemy is rendering them useless, causing much torment to him and to others. I cannot understand why people accept such devilish thoughts; they are making their own life miserable, and grumbling bitterly against God, Who so loves and benefits us. Nothing you say to such a person seems to help him. If he does not stop trusting in the thoughts the enemy brings to his mind, he will only continue to wear himself out.

– Is the sensitive person weak within, is he sick?

– No, *philotimo* and sensitivity are natural gifts, but, unfortunately, the devil succeeds in exploiting them. The devil can make a sensitive person magnify things so as to render him unable to endure some difficulty, or allow him to endure it for a little while and then make him weary, disheartened and, in the end, useless. If a person manages to properly utilise his inherited sensitivity, it will become

heavenly. But if he allows the devil to exploit it, then it will go to waste; for, if a person does not put to good use his gifts and talents, the devil will come to exploit them for his own purposes. Thus, the gifts of God are thrown away. Instead of showing gratitude to God for these gifts, he takes things in the wrong way; a sensitive person who trusts his thoughts may even end up in a psychiatric ward. Whereas an indifferent person who couldn't care less is not on the right path, but at least he does not end up in a psychiatric ward. This is why the evil one seeks out the sensitive people.

Others will put into their mind, or rather, the devil implants into their mind the thought that they have some inherited burden, and tries to persuade them that there is indeed something wrong with them. He frightens them in order to perplex them and render them useless without reason or cause. Even if something is inherited, it can be overcome with the Grace of God. Do you remember Saint Cyprian, who from being a sorcerer became a Hierarch and a Martyr of the Church?¹ Another example is Moses the Ethiopian,² a notorious robber who became a greatly refined ascetic among the Fathers of the Church. He attained great spiritual heights! When he visited Saint Macarios of Egypt, he asked him, "What must I do? The world is troubling me and I cannot find any peace." He was then told, *Moses, Moses, you are too sensitive; go into Petrea Arabia,³ for you cannot expel the world.⁴* Moses

1. His feast day is celebrated on October 2.

2. His feast day is celebrated on August 28.

3. The inner desert of the northwest region of Arabia.

4. See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Abba Macarios the Great, 22, p. 111, tr. Benedicta Ward, Mowbrays, London & Oxford, 1977.

excelled in spiritual sensitivity even Saint Arsenios the Great, who was a well-educated and cultured person from an aristocratic family, while Moses was a notorious robber and murderer. You see what the Grace of God can do! But, of course, he had great humility.

Peculiarities Begin as Thoughts

– Geronda, how is it that some people are easily disgusted?

– Tell me, what disgusts you?

– Everything disgusts me.

– In that case everything bad will come to you! Worms in your fruit or beans, a hair in your bread, and so forth.

– That is exactly what happens, Geronda!

– Glory be to God! Do you see how much God is helping you to overcome this problem?

– Geronda, doesn't this problem start from the thought? Let's say we find a hair in our bread. We can just take it out.

– This is a blessing! Give it to me, and I'll take it for a blessing! Oh, I remember once at Mount Sinai I was going somewhere with a monk and I gave him two peaches. I noticed that he did not eat them. He wanted to go and wash them before eating them, and he held them in his hand, so they will not pick up more germs by putting them into his pocket. His brother who had eight children used to tell me, "He uses up more soap to wash his hands than my wife uses to wash our eight children!" You should see what happened to him. There at Mount Sinai a Bedouin was assigned to help each monk with the chores and to provide food and so forth. The Bedouin assigned to the fussy monk was the most unclean of all of them.

He was really unkempt; both he and his clothes smelled very badly. He would need to be soaked in water for a whole week to get clean. His hands were so dirty that they needed to be scraped to get them clean. Whenever he picked up the tray to carry the food to the monk, his fingers would go into the food. "Go away, go away!" the monk would shout whenever the Bedouin approached him. In the end, of course, the poor monk did not last even two weeks at the Mount Sinai Monastery.

I remember also at the Coenobium we had a monk who as a layman had been a police captain. They made him a reader because he was educated. He had been in the monastery for years yet was still disgusted by many things. He would not even touch a doorknob! He would try to open a door with his foot, or try to turn the knob with his elbow and then clean his sleeve with alcohol. He would even open the door of the Church with his foot. In his old age, God permitted that his feet develop gangrene, especially the one he used to open the door. I was serving as a nursing aide when he first came to the monastery's hospital with his foot all bandaged up. The nursing orderly told me to untie it while he went to get some bandages. When I untied it, I gasped. It was covered with little worms. "Go down to the sea to wash it and get rid of the worms, and come to have me change the bandages." I was at a loss seeing the condition of his foot, the degree of his punishment. The nursing orderly asked me, "Do you know the cause of his affliction?" "Yes, it's because he opens the door with his foot," I told him.

– And, Geronda, did he continue to open the door with his foot?

– Yes, with his foot! And he had grown old as a monk.

– Didn't he understand in the end?

– I don't know. After that, I went to the Monastery of Stomion in Konitsa. I don't know how he died. But there in the Coenobium on Mount Athos some of the younger monks would eat the food left on the plates of the older monks as a blessing. They would gather the leftovers because they had been blessed. Others would kiss the door-knob touched by the Elders, while the monk who was disgusted by everything would barely touch his moustache to the holy icons when he bowed to reverence them. One can only imagine what his poor moustache had to endure with the rubbing alcohol!

– Geronda, when something like this happens with sacred things, is it not irreverence?

– Of course; this is how things start, and then move on to further developments. This same monk reached the point of not kissing the icons because he feared that the monks who revered them before him had some illness!

– In other words, if one is to avoid being disgusted, he must not be fussy or pay any attention to such things?

– People do not see what trash is mixed into the food they put in their mouth! Even if one has some phobia about getting sick, Christ will help if one makes the sign of the cross with faith. Many people who have various illnesses come by my *Kalyvi*. Some simple folk who come will cross themselves when they pick up the tin cup I have there to drink some water. Others who are afraid do not touch it. Someone who held an important position in a company recently came to see me. He is so afraid of germs that he has bleached his hands white from frequent washings with disinfectant alcohol. He will even rub the steering wheel of his automobile with alcohol. I felt sorry

for him. Do you know what it is like to hold such an important position and to be like that? I gave him some *loukoumi*, and he did not take it because I had touched it. But even if it had still been in the box, he would not have taken it because he would be thinking that someone else must have placed it in the box with his hands in the first place. I took the *loukoumi* and rubbed it on his shoe and ate it. I did a number of things like that in order to help him free himself, even a little, from his feeling of disgust.

Today a young woman came here who was a hypochondriac. She would not receive a blessing when she entered because she was afraid of catching germs. And when she was leaving, after all I had said to help her, she still would not receive a blessing. "I won't kiss your hand, Geronda, because I'm afraid of catching germs," she told me. What can you say? Such people make themselves miserable.

Those Who Suffer From Imaginary Illnesses

A greater sickness than the fear of germs is for someone to imagine that he has some sort of sickness. Such a debilitating thought creates anxiety, worry, loss of appetite, loss of sleep, the need to take medicines and, in the end, an actual illness, when in fact the person was well to begin with. To be sick and to seek treatment I can understand; but to be healthy and to imagine himself to be sick, and to actually become sick over it, does not make sense. For example, while one is actually strong in body and spirit, he begins to imagine that he is sick and unable to do anything, because he has believed in his thought that tells him that he is not well, causing him to waste

away both physically and spiritually. It is not that he is lying. If a person believes that he actually has something wrong with him, he becomes panic-stricken, broken, and then has no strength to do anything. Thus, he is rendered useless for no reason.

Some people come to my *Kalyvi* who are totally broken. "My mind tells me that I have AIDS," they say, and they believe it. I ask them, "Did this or that happen?" And they tell me, "No." "Then don't worry, go and be examined by a doctor so you can get rid of that negative thought." To this advice some will say, "What happens if I am examined and they find that I do have AIDS?" Some will not take my advice and will continue to torment themselves. In contrast, those who do listen and are examined see that they are not actually sick, and their whole life changes and is restored. The others wither away in bed and do not even want to eat. You may happen to have AIDS, but for God there is no difficult problem. If you can try to live more spiritually, if you repent and go to Confession, if you receive Holy Communion and so forth, you will find some help.

– How does one start imagining that he is sick?

– One begins gradually to cultivate this imagination. Often there may be some physical cause, but it is rarely anything serious. Then the imagination adds to it and magnifies it. When I was in the Monastery of Stomion, I knew of a family man who imagined he had tuberculosis. He did not even allow his wife to come near him. "Don't come near me, you will catch it too!" he would say to her. The poor woman would hang a basket of food on a long pole and would give it to him from a distance. She was devastated. His poor children could only look upon him

from afar. Of course, he really had nothing wrong with him, but because he was not out in the sun but remained constantly in bed and covered up, he had become yellow and simply believed that he was sick with tuberculosis. I got up and went to his house. When he saw me, he said, "Monk, do not come near me, I have tuberculosis and you may catch it too and transfer it to the Monastery." "Who told you that you have tuberculosis?" I asked. His wife brought some sweet walnut to serve me. So I told him, "Now open your mouth and be obedient." He opened his mouth not knowing what I was going to do. I put the walnut into his mouth, turned it around, and then took it out and ate it. "Stop, stop! You will get sick!" he shouted. "You do not have any contagious diseases," I told him. "If you did, do you think that I would be crazy enough to do this? Get up now and let's go outside." I directed his wife and said, "Put everything away, the medicines, the blankets..." I got him up and we went outside. After the three years that he had remained closed up in the house, he was looking at the world outside with a strange gaze. Later on, he returned to his work and got back to normal. When we cultivate such negative thoughts, they can be devastating indeed!

Anything Can Be Overcome Through Obedience

– Geronda, how can someone be helped when he imagines that there is something wrong with him?

– To be helped, one must have a Spiritual Father, someone he can trust and be obedient to. He will share his thoughts with his spiritual guide and receive the appropriate guidance: "Pay no attention to this, watch out for

that” and so forth. If he has no trust and does not obey, he will not be able to dispel his negative thoughts. Do you know what it means to be asked for help by people who do nothing to help themselves?

A young man who lives a disorderly life, who has psychosomatic illnesses and is tormented in soul, comes to me with blood-shot eyes from too much smoking, and asks me to help him. He also has a false piety and requests that I give him the icon from the *iconostasis*, as a blessing, yet enters the *Kelli*⁵ with a cigarette! I tell him, “Look here, your eyes are blood-shot like a poor dog with rabies. Not even old men are permitted to smoke in this *Kelli*. I burn incense in here.” He continued to do his own thing, coming to ask for help and doing nothing to abandon his own fixations and habits. “Why don’t you make me well?” he asks me. He wants to become well through some magical means, without himself making any effort of any kind. So I tell him, “You don’t need a miracle. You are not really sick; you simply believe in and rely on your own thoughts.” If he could have only obeyed, he would have received some help. I have observed that one who listens and obeys can make progress and do well. He and his own family can then be content and peaceful.

Once a priest went to a monastery and they told him to chant, but he refused. “Why don’t you chant?” they asked him. “Because the psalm says, *Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their*

5. A *Kelli* (Cell) is a self-sufficient isolated monastic dwelling consisting of a building with a Chapel and the land surrounding it. It is usually situated near a Monastery and is dependent on it; it does not belong to a *Skete* and is bigger than a *Kalyvi*. (When the word “cell” is written with a small c in the book, it refers to the private room of the monks).

hand.”⁶ He was afraid of the sword when raising his voice in chanting, and thus insisted that it was a bad thing to chant. Others attempted to persuade him otherwise, but he would not change his mind at all. What can one do with him? Even if what he was saying were right, and others attempted to dissuade him and he obeyed their wrong advice, this would have provided some Grace, significant Grace, because of his humble obedience.

How many people torment themselves for years because they rely on their own thoughts and do not listen to others! No matter what you tell them, they take everything the wrong way. And it is not as if someone believed once in his own thought and the evil stopped there, but rather, the evil goes on and on. And it can develop to the point of leading one into mental illness. For example, someone is building a house incorrectly and people warn him, “How can you make the house that way? It will fall down and kill you.” If he listens to the advice at the beginning, he can readily correct the problem and build it right. But if he goes on and completes it wrongly, will he then tear it down and begin all over? People still tell him that the house will fall down and kill him; he, too, sees the danger that the house may fall, but he stubbornly thinks to himself that he has spent all this money, that he has worked so hard to build it; and so he does not correct the mistake. In the end the house falls down and crushes him.

– Can such a person be helped?

– If he wants to, he can be helped. But if you tell him that something is not right and he justifies himself, how

6. Ps 149:6 (Ps 149:6 LXX).

then can he be helped? Let us assume, for example, that a young man is diabetic and, because he does not realise the seriousness of the illness, he imagines that it is not serious at all. The doctor tells him, "Sugar is harmful and you must go on a diet." If he follows the advice, he will not have problems. But if he says, "Even though I am diabetic, I will continue to eat sweets, because when I do that, I feel good and warm and can sleep without a cover on my bed; I can even go out in the snow." Now, how can anyone communicate effectively with such a person who insists on believing only his own thoughts?

– Geronda, is it natural for a young person to rely on his own thoughts?

– A young person who relies on his own thoughts has too much egoism.

– How will he realise this?

– Well, for example, if he recalls a few incidents from his childhood that indicate the degree of egoism that he had from a young age, he may be able to understand it. Once I observed two little children. One took a pillow and raised it up high over his head in a natural manner. The other boy took the pillow and pretended to raise it over his head as if it were a heavy bag of cement mix. Such a gesture is indicative of a touch of egoism. But when that child matures a little and understands that this action comes from a sense of egoism, and confesses it, the Grace of God comes to help and to redeem him. Indeed, God is Good and Righteous and desires to help us all!

– Geronda, when I am able to see the future development of some thing within myself, given my prior experience, is there any sinful self-reliance in this?

– Do not draw conclusions on your own. When Christ

invited him, Peter walked on the water. But just as soon as his own thought told him that he would sink, Peter began to sink.⁷ Christ allowed it. *Since you think that you will sink, go ahead and sink.*

And you can see a humble man, who may even be able to do miracles, and yet will not rely on his own thoughts. In the country of Jordan, there was a very simple priest who performed miracles. He would read prayers over people or animals that had some malady, and they would be healed. Even Muslim people went to him for help and he would heal them too. He had the habit of drinking some water or tea with a piece of dry bread before celebrating the Divine Liturgy, and then wouldn't eat anything for the rest of the day. When the Patriarch heard that this priest was eating something before the Divine Liturgy, he summoned him to the Patriarchate. The priest went without knowing why he had been called. He waited inside a room along with other people. It was very hot outside and they had shut the shutters, but a ray of sunlight entered the room from a tiny hole. The humble priest thought the ray of light was a clothesline and, because he had perspired, he removed his cassock and hung it on the ray of light. The others who were sitting in the room with him saw this and were amazed. They went in and told the Patriarch, "The priest who eats before the Divine Liturgy hung his cassock on a ray of light!" The Patriarch invited him into his office and began to question him: "How are you doing? Is everything alright with you? How often do you celebrate the Divine Liturgy? How do you prepare to celebrate the Divine Liturgy?" And he responded, "Well,

7. Cf. Mt 14:28-31.

I read the Service of Matins, do a number of prostrations, then I prepare a little something to eat and drink, and then I begin the Divine Liturgy.” “Why do you do that?” asked the Patriarch. And he responded, “Well, by eating a little something before the Divine Liturgy, when I later receive Holy Communion and consume the Holy Gifts in the end, our Lord Jesus Christ is at the top. But if I eat after the Divine Liturgy, Christ is at the bottom.” He was doing this with a good thought and reason! But then the Patriarch told him, “No, this procedure is not right. You must first celebrate the Divine Liturgy, consume the Holy Gifts, and then eat something.” He made his prostration to the Patriarch and accepted his advice.

What I’m trying to say is that even though the priest was given the Grace to do miracles, he, nevertheless, accepted the advice of the Patriarch and did not insist on his own will. On the contrary, if he had relied on his own thoughts, he could have said something like this, “I read prayers over sick people and animals and they are healed; what is this you are telling me now? My way of thinking is better; otherwise, my food will be on top of Christ.”

I have come to understand that obedience is very helpful. If one has even a little intelligence, if he is obedient, he can become a philosopher. Whether one is intelligent or not, healthy in body and spirit or not, if he is tormented by thoughts, he will be liberated by obedience. Obedience is redemption.

The greatest egoist is he who follows his thoughts and does not ask anyone for guidance and direction, leading himself to destruction. Someone may be extremely smart and very astute, but if he is wilful, self-confident and selfish, he is also constantly tormented. He becomes

very confused and many problems are created for him. In order to find his way, he must open his heart to a Spiritual Father and humbly ask for his help. However, some people, instead of going to a Spiritual Father, opt to go to a psychiatrist. If the psychiatrist is a spiritual person, he will recommend that his patients go to some Spiritual Father. If he is not, he will probably just prescribe some medications for them. But pills alone cannot solve the problems. Spiritual help is also needed to deal appropriately with the particular problem, thus improving their condition and preventing their suffering.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Struggle Against Thoughts

Spiritual Life Is Based on Thought

Geronda, I read that during the Italian war the Greeks first attempted to destroy the fortifications of the enemy and then went on the offensive.

– This is what the devil does, too. Just as the enemy, before going on the offensive with the infantry, will use the air force to bomb the fortifications and destroy them, in the same way the devil will first bomb a person with thoughts and then attack him directly. He will not attack until he has managed to break down the man's thoughts, because a person can defend himself with good thoughts, which are his basic protective trenches.

A sinister thought is a foreign substance that a person must try to reject. This is a battle that all of us have the power to undertake. No one is justified in saying that he is weak and unable to wage such a battle. These are not heavy tools that one may not be able to raise and work with because his hands are weak and shaking. I don't think it's a difficult thing to see and take everything in a positive way. For example, why should I attempt to

examine other people's peculiarities? It is quite possible that what someone is doing is not peculiar, but something that he does intentionally in order to humble himself.

– Geronda, I am troubled because I constantly have sinister thoughts. I do struggle, but I cannot make myself think aright.

– Being able to recognise which thoughts are not pure, being troubled by them, and struggling to dispel them, is progress in itself. If you wish to make spiritual progress, when the devil attacks you with sinister thoughts and seeks to draw you to himself, turn the steering wheel hard away from him and ignore him. Try to have good thoughts about both the younger and the older Sisters, who are carrying on an inner struggle without fanfare, because the evil one is distracting your thoughts in order to delay your spiritual progress. If you hadn't persisted in your thoughts, you would have made great spiritual strides by now. All spiritual life is based on thoughts. Progress in spiritual life depends upon our thoughts.

– Geronda, how can I be helped in the struggle against these sinister thoughts?

– With vigilance and unceasing prayer. If you are vigilant, then you are attentive to good thoughts. For example, you look upon a glass or cup and you recall the sacred Chalice, the Last Supper, Christ and so forth; whereas if you are not vigilant, your mind may wander off to consider non-spiritual things or even wretched things. For this reason, try not to gather useless thoughts, which you will later struggle to get rid off. Concentrate and say the Jesus Prayer. And if your mind wanders, call it back again and again. Do not allow your mind to wander. For even if the mind is not always preoccupied with evil things, but

merely neutral things, these too, nevertheless, will neutralise the mind with useless and wasteful distractions. In fact, the thoughts created from such distractions can be more insidious than the outright evil ones, because we do not always directly recognise them so as to dispel them.

– Geronda, my thought tells me, “You have not made any progress after all these years in the monastery.”

– Tell me, what else does your thought tell you? It seems you pay a lot of attention to the devil who whispers things to you and tries to deceive you! Why do you believe the evil one? Why do you confuse yourself? Be at peace. You worry in vain and torment yourself without reason. The demon presents things in a confused and tangled manner. He fogs your mind with pessimistic thoughts in order to waste your time and distract you from prayer and attention to your daily tasks. Even if you are only a little confused, just enough to take away your desire to fight him, this alone is enough for him to be promoted to a higher rank. When working alone, try to follow this rule: Sing psalms, doxologies, and verbal or silent prayer of the heart, in order to avoid the murmur of thoughts. In other words, try to turn your thoughts to God. Since the devil changes the subject of our thoughts in order to deceive us, why shouldn't we do the same thing? I've told you this before. When I'm speaking with someone and am about to say something which may be useful to him, someone else will come to interrupt, or there will be some distracting sound or something else that forces me to stop. If the tempter the devil devises such machinations against us, why should we not similarly devise our own defensive mechanisms? You must be intelligently vigilant in out-smarting the little devil.

– Geronda, I am troubled by sorrow, by listlessness... I am tormented by it.

– This is martyrdom before the martyrdom! You are placing too much trust in yourself. Self-confidence. Certain sinister thoughts have become entrenched in you and this is why you are being thus tormented. You need to think straight. You have to remove the worn-out machinery of your mental factory and install good machinery. The best enterprise is for someone to establish a factory of good thoughts. Then, even bad thoughts will be transformed into good ones by his mind. For example, when you look upon a person as a soul, as an angel, you can ascend angelically to Heaven and your life becomes a festival. But if you look upon a person in a carnal way, you descend into hell.

– Geronda, sometimes when I think of something good and positive, a sinister thought will soon come to destroy everything for me. Could it be that I don't do this from my heart?

– The goal is to do it from your heart and, if you have a sinister thought, say, “This thought is a stranger; I must send it away. I have signed the eviction; it's gone, it's out of my mind.”

– Geronda, when I have taken great effort in expelling a bad thought, how is it that it returns again after it's been dealt with?

– Yes, the subject may have been dealt with, but the little devil has not finished. The devil never dies. An elder monk used to say, “If you kick a dog a couple of times, it will go away. But the devil does not go away; he persists with his attacks, here, there, everywhere! I light a candle to the Saints of our *Kelli* to make him go away,

and the demons ask me, "Did you light the candle for us?" "You trash, why would I light a candle for you? I lit it for the Saints." "Yes, but it was we who made you light it," they tell me.

– Geronda, when a misfortune happens to someone and he begins to say, "Why, O God, has this happened to me?" can that person be helped?

– How can he be helped? The first thing is for a person to interpret everything with good and positive thoughts; only then can he be helped. Some people have a good machine, many prerequisites for a spiritual life, but their steering wheel is faulty and leads them in the wrong direction. If they turn the steering wheel in the direction of good thoughts, then they can proceed steadily in the right direction.

Cultivating Good Thoughts

– Geronda, do good thoughts come on their own, or do I have to cultivate them?

– You must cultivate them. Observe yourself, scrutinise yourself and, when the enemy sends you bad thoughts, try to expel them and replace them with good thoughts. When you struggle in this manner, the disposition of your soul will be cultivated and become positive and good. Then God, seeing your good disposition, will condescend to help you, and the evil thoughts will find no place in you to dwell. The evil thoughts will be expelled and then you will naturally have good thoughts. You will acquire a habit toward what is good, goodness itself will come into your heart, and then you will provide hospitality in your heart for Jesus Christ Himself. But this does not happen

overnight; it takes time and a constant struggle for the soul to receive the crown of victory. Eventually the war will end for good, because such battles result from our disorderly inner state, which is exploited by the propaganda of the enemies.

– Geronda, does this mean that those who have good thoughts have achieved this spiritual state of being through struggle?

– It depends. Some people have good thoughts from the start of their spiritual life and can thus advance readily. Others, on the contrary, while they may have good thoughts at the beginning, later on are not careful and vigilant, and start to have bad thoughts. Others, again, have sinister thoughts at first, but by being carefully observant of themselves and seeing how often they have fallen, lose their self-confidence and begin to have good and positive thoughts. Other people may have half good and half bad thoughts. Others have more good thoughts, while others may have more bad thoughts.

For example, one who goes to become a monk, depending on the environment and the conditions under which he may have lived, will have both good and bad thoughts. He may have from ten to twenty percent of bad thoughts and even as much as eighty percent. But when he begins to do inner work, observing himself and dispelling the bad thoughts, he will cultivate good thoughts. Following this rule and effort, after a period of time, he will attain a state of having only good thoughts. The duration he had the bad thoughts in the world will determine the duration of the time required to dispel them. After that, gradually over time, even good thoughts stop coming and an emptiness is attained. Then he goes through a period

when he has neither good nor bad thoughts. This phase brings a certain disquietude in the soul and man begins to ask himself, "What is happening? What happens how? I had bad thoughts and they are gone; good thoughts came. Now I have neither bad nor good thoughts." After this emptiness, the mind is filled with the divine Grace, and divine enlightenment comes.

– Geronda, what is the nature of this fullness?

– You cannot describe the brightness of the sun to someone who has not seen the stars. At least if one has seen the stars, you can describe to him something of the nature of the sun.

– Geronda, what can help us achieve this emptiness which you are speaking of?

– Spiritual study, unceasing prayer, silence, and ascetic discipline with *philotimo*. A soul who earnestly takes on the struggle against bad thoughts can attain to a more advanced state than another soul who may have had hardly any bad thoughts. That is to say, at first, she may have had ninety bad thoughts and only ten good ones, but because of her earnest struggle, she can achieve a better state than the other person who had ninety good thoughts and only ten bad ones.

The Purification of the Mind and the Heart

– Geronda, how does one achieve purification of the mind and the heart?

– I have told you that in order to purify the mind and the heart one must not accept the cunning thoughts brought by the devil, nor have any cunning thoughts of one's own. One must always try to have good thoughts, to avoid be-

ing scandalised easily and to view the faults of others with leniency and love. When good thoughts are multiplied, a person is cleansed spiritually, behaves with authentic devotion, becomes peaceful, and lives a life of Paradise. Otherwise, he sees everything with suspicion and his life becomes hell. He himself turns his life into hell.

We must work to achieve purification. We may recognise our wretchedness, but that is not enough. If we stop accepting cunning thoughts, and we ourselves do not think cunningly, but instead have only good thoughts about what we are told and what we see, then our mind and heart will be purified. Of course, the tempter will continue to send us, from time to time, a cunning telegraph message. Even if we get rid of our own thoughts, the devil's temptations will persist; but they will not stick if our heart is pure.

– Geronda, doesn't prayer help in the purification of the mind?

– Prayer alone is not enough. It's of no benefit to burn pounds of incense while we are praying if our mind is filled with evil thoughts about others. The evil telegraph message is transmitted from the mind to the heart and turns a person into a beast. God wants us to have *a clean heart*;¹ and our heart is clean when we do not allow a bad thought about others to pass through our mind.

– Geronda, does a person first have a good thought, and then God helps?

– A person is entitled to divine help only when he has good thoughts. With good thoughts, he purifies his evil

1. Ps 51:10 (Ps 50:12 LXX).

heart, because *out of the heart proceed* all evil things.² And *out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh*.³ Most certainly, God will reward us for the good thoughts we have.

We Must Not Be Suspicious

– Geronda, what will help me to dispel my suspicions?

– Are things always the way you see them? Since you usually see everything in a negative way, place a big question mark after every single one of your thoughts, and spare a good thought for others, in order to avoid being wrong in your judgments. It's better if you place two big question marks, and even better if you place three. This way you calm yourself and benefit, but you also benefit others. Otherwise, with your sinister thoughts you will become all steamed up, troubled and upset, in which case you suffer spiritual harm. But when you confront whatever you see with good thoughts, after a while you will see that everything was indeed as you saw them with your good thoughts. I will tell you of an incident, to show you what a sinister thought can do.

One day a monk came to my *Kalyvi* and told me, "Elder Charalampos is a sorcerer and I saw him practising magic!" "What a silly thing to say! You should be ashamed of yourself!", I told him. "Indeed, I saw him one night when there was a full moon, pouring something from a glass jug into the bushes and saying 'm, m, mmm...'" One day I went to Elder Charalampos and asked him,

2. Mt 15:19.

3. Lk 6:45.

"Father Charalampos, how are you? Is everything all right with you? Someone saw you pouring something from a jug into the bushes and making an 'mmmm' sound." "Oh, there were some beautiful irises in the bushes and I went down to water them," he explained. "As I watered them, I chanted to each one of them, *Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded!*" Do you see what he was doing? And yet the other monk took him to be a sorcerer!

I see some lay people that have such good and wonderful thoughts! And others are tormented with things that not only do not exist, but even the devil would not think of! Once when it rained after a lengthy drought, I felt such great gratitude to God that I was sitting in my *Kalyvi* and saying repeatedly, "O God, I am so grateful, I thank you a million, a billion times..." Outside, without knowing it, there was a layperson who heard me. When later he saw me, he said, "Father, I was shocked. I heard you counting 'a million, a billion' and I thought to myself, 'what is this that Father Paisios is saying?'" Now, what could I tell him? I was expressing gratitude to God for the wonderful rain, and he imagined that I was counting money. And if he had been someone else, he might have thought of coming to rob me of my money, and would have given me a good beating after finding nothing to take.

Another time, someone who had a sick child came to see me. I took him into the Chapel to talk. After listening to his problem, in an effort to help, I told him, "You yourself must do something for the child to be helped. Since you do not do prostrations, you do not fast, and you have no money to offer charity, you must say to God, 'My God, I have nothing good to sacrifice for the health of my son,

but at least I will try to break my habit of smoking cigarettes.’” The poor fellow was moved, and he promised me that he would do it. I went to open the door for him to go out, and he left his lighter and the cigarettes in the Chapel, under the Icon of Christ. I did not notice this at first. After him, another young man entered the Chapel to speak to me; and when he went out, he started to smoke. I had to tell him, “Young man, it is not proper to smoke here; go a little further away.” But he retorted by saying, “Is it permitted to smoke in the Chapel?” He apparently had seen the lighter and the cigarettes left behind by the father of the sick child and imagined that I smoked. I allowed him to leave with his negative thought. After all, even if I did smoke, would I be smoking in the Chapel? Do you see what it is to have negative thoughts?

– Geronda, how much harm can be done to the soul by suspicion, by mistrust?

– The harm is proportionate to the degree of suspicion and mistrust. Suspicious mistrust brings on feelings of weakness and low spirits.

– How is it healed?

– With good thoughts.

– Geronda, when a person recognises that he has made a mistake about his suspicious thoughts, isn’t this of help to him?

– If he makes a mistake once, it is understandable. But if he makes the same mistake twice, he will be greatly harmed. Guarding against suspicion requires attention, because even if one in a thousand things is not as we imagine them to be, we still harm ourselves. Once when I was in the Coenobium, an old monk, Father Dorotheos, was frying some squash. One of the Brothers saw him

as he was placing the squash into the frying pan, and he came to tell me, “Father Dorotheos is frying some big red snapper fish!” But I told him, “It is not possible for Father Dorotheos to be frying fish during Great Lent.” “I saw him with my own eyes frying a big red snapper!” he insisted. Father Dorotheos had come to the Holy Mountain at the age of fifteen and he was like a mother to us all. If he ever saw a monk who was prone to sickness, he would approach him and say, “Come here, I have a secret to tell you” and he would give him some ground sesame with chopped walnuts or something else. He provided for the other older monks in the same way. I went later to Father Dorotheos and saw that he was actually frying some squash for the infirmary!

– Geronda, what happens if a suspicious thought about someone proves to be true?

– Even if such a thought proves to be right, does this mean that such thoughts will always be true? And how can you then be sure that God did not permit such a thought to be proven true in order to test you and provide you with a spiritual lesson in humility?

Certainly one must be careful not to give cause for others to draw the wrong conclusions. For example, someone may have a sinister thought about you simply because he is spiteful; but you, too, may very easily give him cause by your own behaviour. But if even though you have been careful not to give cause, someone still thinks something negative about you, then you should give glory to God and pray for that person.

Conversing With Thoughts

– Geronda, when a proud thought comes to me, I suffer over it.

– Do you hold it within you?

– Yes.

– Why do you hold it within you? You should shut the door to it. You harm yourself by keeping it inside. The thought comes like a thief – you open the door, you let him in, you strike up a conversation with him, and then he robs you. Do you ever strike up a conversation with a thief? Not only do you not start talking with him, but you shut the door to prevent him from entering. You may not talk with him, but why allow him to enter in the first place? Let me give you an example. I am not implying that you have these thoughts, but let's assume that the thought comes to you that you could become the Abbess. Now, the thought has come to you. As soon as it comes, say to yourself, "Very well. Do you want to be the Abbess? First become Abbess to yourself." This way you immediately cut off any conversation. After all, are we going to hold a conversation with the devil? You see, when the devil went to tempt Christ, He told him, *Get behind me, satan.*⁴ Since Christ Himself sent the devil away, who are we to converse with him?

– Geronda, is it bad for me to examine a sinister thought in order to see where it comes from?

– The bad thing is that you are not talking with the thought, as you imagine, but with the devil. You may pass the time pleasantly, but later you are tormented. Do not by

4. Lk 4:8.

any means strike up a conversation with such thoughts. Pick up the hand grenade and throw it back to the enemy to kill him. It takes two or three minutes for the hand grenade to blow up. It's the same with sinister thoughts; they cannot harm you if you dispel them immediately. But sometimes you are not vigilant, you are not saying the Jesus Prayer and you cannot defend yourself. The devil's message comes from the outside, you receive it, you read it, you read it over again, you believe it and you file it away. Those files the devil will present on Judgment Day in order to condemn you.

– When is the attack of a sinister thought a sin?

– When the thought comes and you dispel it immediately, this is not a sin. When it comes and you talk with it, this is sin. It comes, at first you accept it and then you send it away. This is a half sin, because by now harm has already come to you, because the devil has polluted your mind. In other words, it is like the devil has come and you told him, "Good morning, how are you? Sit down, let me give you something to drink. Oh, you are the devil? Now go away." Since you saw he was the devil, why did you ever allow him to come in? You gave him a treat and now he will want to come again.

Consenting to Thoughts

– Geronda, why do I have various bad thoughts now that I am in the monastery, while when I was in the world this did not happen? Am I the one permitting them?

– No, my blessed child! Let them come, but let them also go away. Do the aeroplanes ask for your permission when they fly over the monastery and ruin your peace

and quiet? It's the same with these thoughts. Do not lose hope. These thoughts are the promptings of the devil. They are like the migrating birds that are beautiful to watch when they fly in the sky. But when they land and make nests on your house and have chicks, they will soil the area and become a nuisance.

– But why, Geronda, do such thoughts come to me?

– This is the work of the tempter, the devil. But there is already within you a certain amount of sediment; purification has not yet been achieved. As long as you do not accept these thoughts, you are not responsible. Let those dogs continue to bark. But do not throw too many stones at them. For if you throw too many stones at them, they will continue to bark, and with the many stones they will build up a monastery or a house, whatever..., and then it will be difficult to tear it down.

– In other words, Geronda, when do we actually give our consent to these thoughts?

– When you suck on them like they're candy. You must struggle not to suck on these thoughts that are sugar-coated on the outside but poison inside, causing you to despair. To have bad thoughts pass through us is not a cause for worry; only the Angels and those who are perfect have no bad thoughts. There is reason to worry when a person levels out a part of his heart to make a landing strip and accepts the little devils that come to him. And if this too happens once in a while, then go directly to Confession, plough up the landing strip, the mind and the heart, and plant fruit-bearing trees, to turn the heart again into Paradise.

PART TWO

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND INJUSTICE

*“If all men were unjust to me,
it would be a blessing! I tell you sincerely,
the sweetest spiritual joy
I have felt has been through injustice.”*

breaking, bewitchment, harshness, shamelessness, impudence, obfuscation of thoughts, obtuseness, mental blindness, attraction to what is fleeting, impassionedness, frivolity, disobedience, dullwittedness, drowsiness of soul, excessive sleep, fantasy, heavy drinking, drunkenness, uselessness, slackness, mindless enjoyment, self-indulgence, venery, using foul language, effeminacy, unbridled desire, burning lust, masturbation, pimping, adultery, sodomy, bestiality, defilement, wantonness, a stained soul, incest, uncleanness, pollution, sordidness, feigned affection, laughter, jokes, immodest dancing, clapping, improper songs, revelry, fluteplaying, licence of tongue, excessive love of order, insubordination, disorderliness, reprehensible collusion, conspiracy, warfare, killing, brigandry, sacrilege, illicit gains, usury, wiliness, grave-robbing, hardness of heart, obloquy, complaining, blasphemy, fault-finding, ingratitude, malevolence, contemptuousness, pettiness, confusion, lying, verbosity, empty words, mindless joy, day-dreaming, mindless friendship, bad habits, nonsensicality, silly talk, garrulity, niggardliness, depravity, intolerance, irritability, affluence, rancour, misuse, ill-temper, clinging to life, ostentation, affectation, love of power, dissimulation, irony, treachery, frivolous talk, pusillanimity, satanic love, curiosity, contumely, lack of the fear of God, unteachability, senselessness, haughtiness, self-vaunting, self-inflation, scorn for one's neighbour, mercilessness, insensitivity, hopelessness, spiritual paralysis, hatred of God, despair, suicide, a falling away from God in all things, utter destruction – altogether 298 passions.

These, then, are the passions which I have found named in the Holy Scriptures. I have set them down in a single list, as I did at the beginning of my discourse with the various books I have used. I have not tried, nor would I have been able, to arrange them all in order; this would have been beyond my powers, for the reason given by St John Klimakos: 'If you seek understanding in wicked men, you will not find it.'¹ For all that the demons produce is disorderly. In common with the godless and the unjust, the demons have but one purpose: to destroy the souls of those who accept their evil counsel. Yet sometimes they actually help men to attain holiness. In such instances they are conquered by the patience and faith of those who put their trust in the Lord, and who through their good actions and resistance to evil thoughts counteract the demons and bring down curses upon them.

¹ *Ladder*, Step 15 (897D; E.T., p. 159).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THOUGHTS AND PROVOCATIONS

Our thoughts differ greatly one from the other.¹ Some are altogether free from sin. Others do not initially involve sin: this is the case with what are called provocations, in other words, conceptions of either good or evil, which in themselves are neither commendable nor reprehensible. What follows on these is known as 'coupling'; that is to say, we begin to entertain a particular thought and parley with it, so to speak; and this leads us either to give assent to it or to reject it. Our reaction to the thought, if in accordance with God's will, is praiseworthy, though not highly so; but if it accords with evil, then it deserves censure. After this comes the stage at which our intellect wrestles with the thought, and either conquers it or is conquered by it; and this brings the intellect either credit or punishment when the thought is put into action. The same is true with what is called assent: this is a pleasurable inclination of the soul towards what it sees; and it leads to the state of seduction, or captivity, in which the heart is induced forcibly and unwillingly to put the thought into effect.

When the soul dallies for a long time with an impassioned thought there arises what we call a passion. This in its turn, through its intercourse with the soul, becomes a settled disposition within us, compelling the soul to move of its own accord towards the corresponding action. Where passion is concerned, unquestionably and invariably we must either repent proportionately or else undergo punishment in the age to come, as St John Klimakos states.² We are punished for our lack of repentance, and not because we had to struggle against temptation; otherwise most of us could not receive forgiveness until we had attained total dispassion. But as St John Klimakos again observes, 'It is not possible for all to achieve dispassion, yet all can be saved and reconciled with God.'³

An intelligent person, aware of all this, will thus reject the initial malicious provocation, mother of all evil, so that he may cut off at one stroke all its pernicious consequences. But he is always ready to put

¹ Peter follows here the teaching of Mark the Ascetic and John Klimakos: see Glossary, 'Temptation'.

² *Ladder*, Step 15 (897B; E.T., p. 158).

³ *Ladder*, Step 26 (1029D; E.T., p. 213).

the good provocation into effect, so that his soul and body may grow firmly disposed to virtue and be delivered from the passions through the grace of Christ. For we have nothing that we have not received from Him (cf. 1 Cor. 4 : 7), nor can we offer Him anything except our faculty of free choice. If we lacked this, we would not possess the knowledge or the strength to do what is good. Yet even this faculty of free choice is given to us by God in His love, so that we may not be condemned as incapable of doing anything. For idleness is the source of all evil.

Moreover, according to the *Gerontikon*, even the doing of what is good requires discrimination. For the virgin who fasted for six days in each week, and constantly studied the Old and New Testaments, did not look with detachment on what is pleasant and what is unpleasant.¹ After such labours she ought to have attained the state of dispassion, but this did not happen; for the good is not good unless its purpose is conformed to God's will. On many occasions in divine Scripture God is grieved with someone who is doing something that appears to all to be good, and He looks favourably on someone who appears to be doing evil. A case in point is that of the prophet who asked someone to strike him; when the man refused he was eaten by a wild beast, although he had acted in a way that was ostensibly good (cf. 1 Kgs. 20 : 35-36). St Peter, too, thought he was acting rightly when he refused to have his feet washed, but he was rebuked for this (cf. John 13 : 8). Hence we should do all we can to discern the will of God and to do it, whether it corresponds to what we think good or not. Thus the doing of good is not to be accomplished without effort on our part; for in this way we are deprived neither of our freedom of choice nor of the praise we earn for exerting pressure on ourselves. In short, all that God arranges is admirable, beyond the grasp of intellect and thought.

We must admire not only the inner meaning of all the things that are celebrated in the Church of the Orthodox Christians, but also the sacramental actions through which this meaning is expressed: how through divine baptism we become sons of God by grace, though we have done nothing before this, and do nothing after except keep the commandments; and how these awesome mysteries—I refer to holy baptism and holy communion—cannot take place without the

¹ Paul Evergetinos, *Collection III*, xxix, 3, §4.

priesthood, as St John Chrysostom says.¹ Here, too, we see the significance of the power given to St Peter, chief of the apostles; for if the gates of the kingdom of heaven are not opened by priestly action, no one can enter (cf. Matt. 16 : 19). As the Lord says: 'Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit . . .' (John 3 : 5); and again: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you' (John 6 : 53).

In the same way we must reflect with wonder how the outer part of the temple of the Old Covenant, where the priests performed sacrifices, was an image of the cosmos (cf. 1 Kgs. 8 : 64), while within there was the Holy of Holies (cf. Exod. 30 : 10; Heb. 9 : 3), in which was offered the incense made of four components, fragrant gum, myrrh, balsam and cassia, which represent the four universal virtues.² The ceremonies performed in the outer part were a concession accorded by God, so that the Jews, with their childlike mentality, might not be led astray by songs and revelling to the worship of idols. But the Church of the New Covenant is the image of the blessings held in store, and for this reason what is accomplished within it is spiritual and heavenly. For just as there are nine orders in heaven, so there are nine orders in the Church; patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, readers, singers and monks.

Then we should also marvel how demons and various diseases are dispelled by the sign of the precious and life-giving Cross, which all can make without cost or effort. Who can number the panegyrics composed in its honour? The holy fathers have handed down to us the inner significance of this sign, so that we can refute heretics and unbelievers. The two fingers³ and single hand with which it is made represent the Lord Jesus Christ crucified, and He is thereby acknowledged to exist in two natures and one hypostasis or person. The use of the right hand betokens His infinite power and the fact that He sits at the right hand of the Father. That the sign begins with a downward movement from above signifies His descent to us from heaven. Again, the movement of the hand from the right side to the left drives away our enemies and declares that by His invincible

¹ *On Priesthood III*, 5 (P.G. xlviii, 643).

² Cf. Evagrius, *On Prayer 1* (*The Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 57).

³ In the time of Peter of Damaskos, the sign of the Cross was evidently made with two fingers—as is still done by the Old Ritualists ('Old Believers') in Russia—and not with three fingers (i.e., two fingers and the thumb), as in modern Orthodox practice.

power the Lord overcame the devil, who is on the left side, dark and lacking strength.

Again, we must marvel how through little strokes of colour paintings show us so many wonderful things performed over so many years by our Lord and all His saints, making them look as if they had only just been performed. This comes about through God's providence, so that by becoming eyewitnesses, as it were, of these things, our longing for God may grow even greater, as St Peter, chief of the apostles, says in the account of the martyrdom of his disciple Pankratios.¹

All that has been said from the beginning of this discourse is of no benefit to anyone without the true faith; nor can it be put into practice without faith, just as there is no faith without works (cf. Jas. 2 : 20). Many of the holy fathers have written concerning faith and works. As a concluding reminder I shall say briefly that, to whatever order we belong, we ought all of us to undertake the works I have written about, as well as holding fast to the Orthodox faith we have received from the saints I have cited, so that with them we may attain eternal blessings through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom rightly belong honour and worship, together with His unoriginate Father and His all-holy, blessed and life-giving Spirit, now and always and through all the ages. Amen.

Having completed this I said: 'Christ, glory is rightly Thine.'

¹ Ed. P. F. de'Cavalieri, *Studi e Testi* 19 (Rome, 1908), pp. 109-12; but there is no reference here to the Apostle Peter.

BOOK II

Twenty-Four Discourses

I SPIRITUAL WISDOM¹

In all languages the first letter of the alphabet is A, though some people are unaware of this. Similarly, the first of all the virtues is spiritual wisdom, though it is also their consummation. For if the intellect is not imbued with spiritual wisdom, no one can accomplish anything of value, for he will not even have learnt what is of value. But if he has been enabled by grace to learn something about this, he will to that extent possess wisdom. Yet although learning the alphabet is something elementary, unless we learn it we cannot proceed to any more advanced study. In the same way, although our first steps in spiritual knowledge may be very slight, unless we make them we will not acquire any virtue at all. Because of this I am afraid to write anything about wisdom, since I am entirely lacking in it.

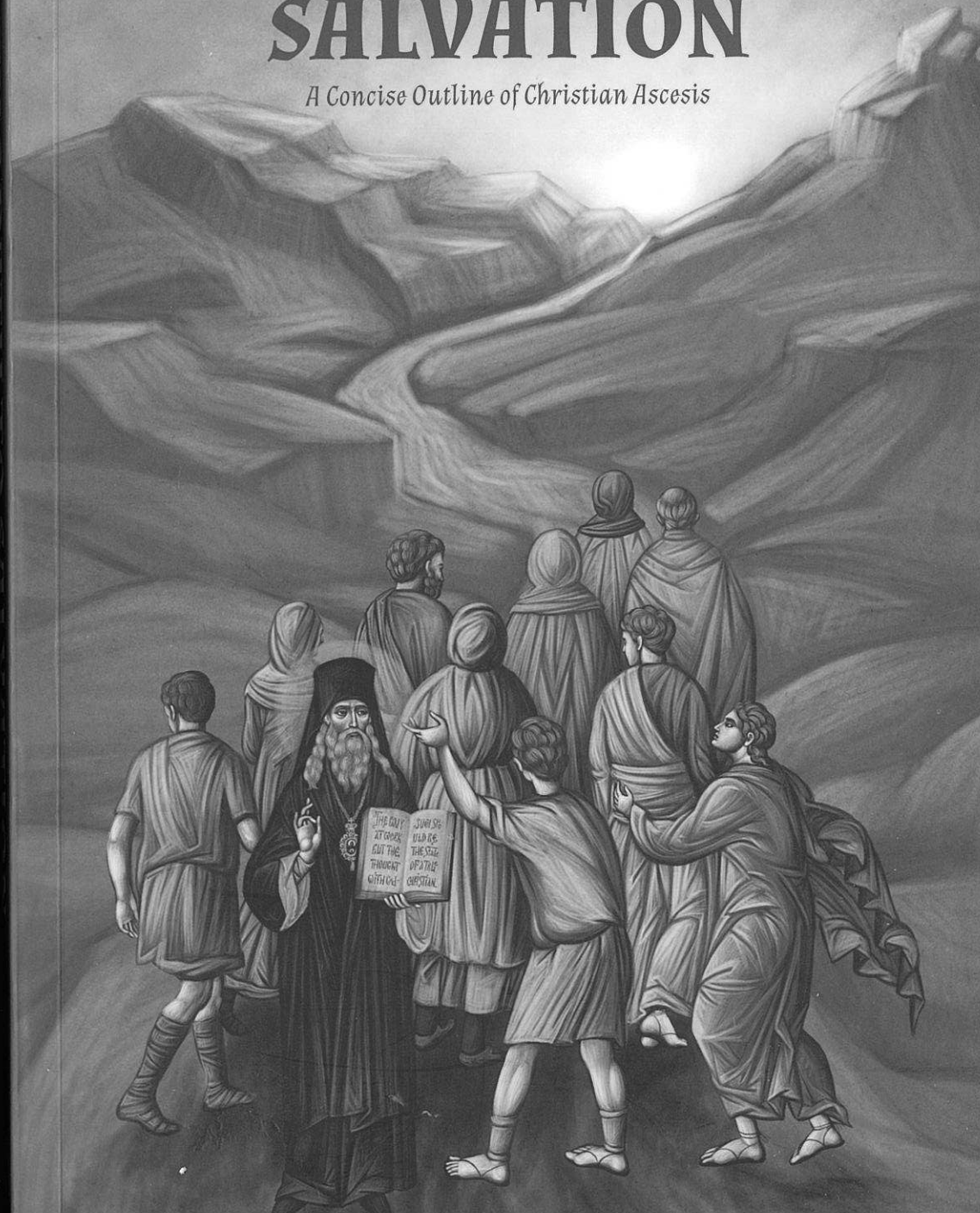
It seems to me that there are four things which make the intellect articulate: first, supranatural grace and blessedness; second, the purity that comes from the practice of the virtues and that restores the soul to its pristine beauty; third, experience of the lower forms of teaching, through human education and secular learning; fourth, the accursed and satanic delusion that works in us through pride and demonic cunning, and distorts our nature. I have no share in any of these things. So how can I write? Perhaps the faith of you who in your devotion to God urge me to write will bring grace to my pen; for my intellect and my hand are unworthy and impure. I know from experience that this can happen. For, fathers, whenever I have wanted to write something I have not been able to formulate it in my intellect

¹ Each of the *Twenty-Four Discourses* begins with four or more lines of verse. Since these add nothing to the substance of the text that follows, and are probably not the work of Peter himself but of some later scribe, they have been omitted from our translation; but we have assigned short titles to each *Discourse*.

ST. THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE

THE PATH TO SALVATION

A Concise Outline of Christian Ascesis



The desire to go deeper within yourself and work on yourself, to cut off your scattered thoughts and cares, of course inevitably requires the following means: solitude on one hand and on the other, cessation of usual occupations both personal and duty-related. First of all, this humbling of the flesh requires a change in the way you satisfy your natural needs. In this light, the most convenient time to change your life should be considered to be during a fast, especially Great Lent. Everything is set up for this during Lent—at home, in church, and even in society.¹ During this time everything is looked upon as preparation for repentance. Just the same, this does not mean that when the beneficial thought has come to change your life, you should put off its fulfillment until the Fast begins. Everything required during this time can be fulfilled at any other time, other than the fasting. But when the holy Fast has arrived it is a sin to miss the chance to take care for the salvation of your soul, as it is often missed at another time. If anyone who has had the salvific thought outside of the Fast to change his life, and whose lifestyle hinders him from carrying it out, it would be better for him to retreat for a time to a monastery. There it will be easier for him to master himself.

Carelessness, insensitivity and blindness

Now you stand before your heart. Before you is your inner man, sunk in the deep slumber of carelessness, insensitivity and blindness. Begin to awaken it. The beneficial thought that came has already troubled it a little. Step up to it with great good hope and mighty mental exertion, collecting all your attention, and begin to force on yourself various images, more or less strong and startling, accepting them all into your inner state.

First of all, remove the veils from the eyes of your mind that keep your mind in a state of *blindness*. If a person does not deny sin and run from it, then that is because he does not know himself and the danger

¹ St. Theophan is obviously speaking of an Orthodox society, as in pre-revolutionary Russia [transl.].

he is in for the sake of his sin. If his eyes were opened he would run from sin as he would run from a house engulfed in flames. Such blindness is the result of inattentiveness to himself—the person does not know himself because he has never entered inside himself, and has never thought about himself or his moral condition. But for the most part his blindness is supported by certain prejudices concerning himself. The person creates a net of thoughts, systematically closing himself off to himself. Perhaps these thoughts are but as spider webs—that is, they are of the slightest probability, but the mind never took them apart carefully, and the heart speaks very loudly of their reality and truthfulness. This is moral delusion or prejudice which comes from the heart's intrusion into things belonging to the reason. That is why it is necessary to unite particular soberness to deep attention at this moment, renouncing every deceit of an evil heart. If the heart needs to feel something at this moment, let it feel it under the influence of the mind's imagination, and not all by itself, sort of running ahead. Otherwise it will again force the reason to imagine things as the heart likes; again it will force the reason to submit to the heart, again bringing disorder to the understanding and, instead of enlightening, it will only sink it into deeper blindness.

**3. THOUGHT PROCESSES
THAT KEEP ONE IN BLINDNESS**

Placing yourself now in such a situation, begin to bring out onto neutral ground the various thought processes that keep you in blindness, and subject them to a severe and unhypocritical judgment.

Contenting yourself with saying "I am a Christian"

I am a Christian, you say, and content yourself with this. This is the first deceit—transferring to yourself the privileges and promise of Christianity, without any care to root true Christianity into yourself; or to ascribe to yourself that which can only be acquired by your strength and inner worthiness. Explain to yourself that it is illusory

and badness; for when a person sees those around him smiling with pleasure at his actions, he continues in his evil ways with a certain self-satisfaction. Would we not also do the same if we should listen so carefully to other people's judgment of us?!

"So, there is badness in me—Am I the only one?"

"Well, so there is badness in me—*Am I the only one?* So-and-so is the same way, and so is that other one, and even this other one. And there are plenty of bad people, even worse than me...." Thus do we blind ourselves with the ordinariness of sin around us. Explain to yourself that the large number of sinners does not change the law of righteousness and does not relieve anyone's responsibility. God does not look at numbers. If everyone has sinned, He will punish everyone. Look at how many people were born before the flood, and all perished except for eight souls. In Sodom and Gomorrah five cities were consumed by fire from heaven, and no one was saved except for Lot and his daughters. The torments in hell will be no easier just because so many are being tormented there—on the contrary, won't this only intensify the suffering of each one?

4. CEASE MAKING EXCUSES IN SINS AND WORK ON YOUR BLINDNESS

With these and similar thought processes, hasten to disperse the mist of prejudicial reasoning which keeps you in blindness and does not allow you to look at yourself as you should. Make this the goal of this chief work on yourself—to bring yourself to the point of realizing your dangerous condition. You will come to this naturally when you begin to take away one false support after another for your blindness. Little by little you will begin to destroy the empty hopes about your own self or anything of your own; little by little you will cease *making excuses in sins*, that is, the tendency to justify yourself always and in everything. Assure yourself that your Christianity does not mean anything; that if you are bad, your mental and physical perfections

reproach you rather than justify you; that your good external behavior is but a God-hating show if your heart is not in good order; that neither the praise of others nor your wide circle of friends in sin will protect you from God's judgment and wrath. Little by little you will separate from your thoughts, and there will remain only one—one thought before the gaze of your mind and conscience, which will speak loudly against you, especially after you have united yourself with that which you are expected to be in Christ. You will find that you have strayed far away from your first-created image. Subsequently, if your consciousness does not work evil against you, you will naturally become timid about yourself. Cut off from everyone and deprived of all your supports, you should be stunned by the sense of danger you are in. You should strive in any way you can before this extreme state to work on your blindness. The renewal of this feeling is always the threshold of sin's retreat, just as in war the wavering of enemy ranks is a sign that they will soon flee.

5. HOW TO SOFTEN YOUR INSENSITIVE HEART

At the very onset of even a slight sense of your sinfulness and the danger of remaining in it, delve ever deeper into yourself, and with even greater force of thought conquer yourself with threats and sobering images; using them, shake up and soften your insensitive heart, as a heavy hammer softens a rough stone.

Remember your fate

Remember your fate. Say to yourself: "Alas, soon will come *death*." Another man you know dies; any time it could be your hour. Do not estrange yourself from this hour of death. Convince yourself that the angel of death has already been sent; he is coming, and draws near. Or imagine yourself to be a person who stands with a sword drawn over his head, ready to cut it off. Then imagine clearly what will happen to you at the time of death and afterwards. The *judge standeth before the*

who do go that far, if there is any hope for their conversion, it occurs through the extraordinary and stunning actions of God's grace.

Most sinners do not lose their faith, or healthy images—according to the Apostle, their rationality—but only become morally corrupted. For these it is enough to be cleansed by forgetting their darkened understanding, and strengthening their conviction weakened by inattention and carelessness toward everything that is good.

Sit and see for yourself what you should believe, how you should live and in what you should trust, according to the Symbol of Faith and the Lord's commandments. If you have trouble, look at the catechesis; and if you cannot do this either, talk with someone, especially with your spiritual father.

When you do this, the truth reigning within you will arise victorious, and it will begin with authority to thrust out the unrighteous deeds, dispositions and feelings that had taken you over. Then it will be easy to reason with yourself, expose your blindness, shatter your insensitivity and cast out your indolence.

8. REASONING WITH YOURSELF ABOUT SALVATION

When so many subjects arise about which you need to reason with yourself, you must not think that only the educated can do it. Anyone can reason with himself about salvation, even children. This is not the same as academic reasoning. Every truth that comes to mind will immediately inspire the thing it requires. Just be conscientious and renew a sincere desire for good in yourself, with the readiness to follow the dictates of truth.¹

¹ When doing all this it is never superfluous to have soul-profitting reading at hand. All the subjects that you must study are clearly and powerfully revealed in them. Invaluable to this study among the writings of St. Tikhon [of Zadonsk] are the articles about sin, about blindness, about forgiveness, to the unrepentant, and cell letters [private letters of instruction]. To aid this self-instruction is an *Anthology of Patristic Writings*, entitled: *Arise, Thou that Sleepest...*

But all of your self-instruction should be conducted in a way that will fit the aim—to act upon the soul and awaken. To this end:

1) When you reason with yourself, do not intellectualize, posing various questions, but having clarified a subject to yourself, take it to heart from the perspective that you feel will be the most impressive, and contemplate it thus.

2) Do not run quickly from one thought to another. This will sooner scatter your thoughts than gather them and influence the soul. The sun would not warm even one creature on earth if it were to run across it instantly. May the measure of reasoning about one thing or another be sympathy. Bring every thought into feeling and do not let it go until it penetrates the heart.

3) If possible, do not leave a thought naked in a reasoned form, as it were, but robe it in some sort of image and then carry it into the head as a constant reminder. It is even better if you can concentrate several striking images into one. Thus St. Tikhon, in order to impress into the mind of the sinner the thought about the danger of his condition, says: "The sword of truth is above you, beneath you is hell ready to slay you; before you is death, behind you is the multitude of your sins, to the right and left of you is a crowd of vicious enemies. Can you possibly be indolent?..." This image is easier to remember and keep in mind, and has a more powerful and impressive influence.

4) ¹ Take short but powerful sayings which apply to your state, and then repeat them often, either mentally or aloud. For example: *The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib* (Isaiah 1:3), but you?; — *Or despisest thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering?* (Rom. 2:4); — *But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God* (Rom. 2:5); — *Watch ye therefore: for ye*

¹ This paragraph and the four paragraphs following it, were omitted in the first edition. Translation provided here by the current editors.

know not when the master of the house cometh (Mk. 13:35); —“Behold, the coffin lieth before me; behold, death confronteth me” (Prayer of St. John Damascene, which is to be said while pointing at thy bed); —*Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? And from Thy presence whither shall I flee?* (Ps. 138:6); —*For the wages of sin is death* (Rom. 6:23); —*Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about* (1 Peter 5:8); —Give account for ruling over the household: *For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required* (Lk. 12:48); — *that servant, which knew his lord's will... shall be beaten with many stripes* (Lk. 12:47); — *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen* (Rev. 2:5), and so on. Gather and memorize such sayings and beat your heart with them. Perhaps one of them will become a fiery bolt which will strike and set you on fire.

However, do not remain in reasoning alone, but rather alternate it with prayer. After all, we are now making an effort similar to when we want to pull up a tree that is rooted in the ground. We come up to it and shake it, exerting the effort of our reasoning with ourselves, of exhorting ourselves, of convincing ourselves. We shake it, but we cannot pull it out—its roots have grown deep. Therefore, we do not have the strength; we do not have the strength even to cut the roots. And so, seek help!

1) If during the time of reflection a certain feeling touches your heart, or some tender compunction is aroused, then stand up and pray. Pray that God might sanctify your labor over your petrified heart, that He grant to some thought of yours the power that destroys and builds, or that He Himself come and soften, awaken, wound.

2) In this prayer, pray with your own words; speak what is on your heart, and reveal your urgent need with full trust, in words that are simple, childlike, brief, or better yet even without words, simply, and fall down before God in your painful appeal to Him.

3) Do not intellectualize, do not compose prayers. Come to Him in simplicity, with your need alone, just as a sick person comes to a doctor, as one bound comes to a liberator, one paralyzed to a rehabilitator, with the sincere confession of your weakness and powerlessness to overcome yourself, and with the surrender of yourself to God's all-effecting action.

4) Fall to the ground and make prostrations—many, many—and beat your breast. Do not leave praying as long as the prayer is moving. When prayer cools, again begin to contemplate, and go from this again to prayer.

5) For prayer, just as for contemplation, make short cries and repeat them often: “Have mercy on Thy creation, O Master! God be merciful to me a sinner! O Lord, save me! O Lord, hasten to my aid!” Bring to mind the inspiring church hymns and sing them: “Behold, the Bridegroom cometh at midnight.... When I think of the many evil things I have done, I, a wretched one, I tremble at the fearful day of judgment.... O my soul, my soul, why art thou sleeping?” and other such hymns.

9. GOD'S GRACE CHOOSES WELL-KNOWN MEANS

Thus force yourself, beat unceasingly at the door of the merciful God. What are we searching for by our labors? The grace of God that awakens. The grace of God is accustomed, in order to have an effect on us, to choose well-known means, as was stated in the description of extraordinary actions of grace. Thus, apply these means to yourself and proceed under their sign and influence. Perhaps some ray of grace will fall on you, just as it has fallen on other sinners like you.

1) God's grace has chosen the churches of God and church rubrics for His activity. You too should go to church, and patiently, attentively and reverently listen to the services; for the church and its structure, the order of services, the singing and reading—all of this can have an

Providence. All your afflictions will turn out to be for your own good. During great trials, my Elder experienced theoria!



Chapter Fourteen

On Thoughts, Fantasies, and Distraction

asting is not just abstention from food, but primarily strict abstinence of the senses. When the senses are fed by external things, they transmit a corresponding amount of poison to the nous and the heart, which kills the poor soul's life in God. Our Watchful Fathers have so much to tell us about the holy fasting of the senses. Their entire teaching is mainly directed at the purification of the nous from sinful fantasies and thoughts, and the purification of the heart from feelings that defile it. Furthermore, they teach that we must eradicate every evil in its beginning to keep the soul clean. As soon as any evil thought whatsoever approaches even slightly, it is absolutely necessary that we drive it away and say the Jesus prayer right away. And when in this manner we confront the thoughts coming from the senses and the devil, very soon we will feel the joy and the profit derived from the fasting of the senses. If Eve had restrained her sense of vision, she would not have poisoned the offspring of her womb, that is, all the people who were born from her. In short, abstinence with the senses saves man from hell.

2. I pray, my child, that you resist egotistic and proud thoughts, for from them and from similar passions all the other evil passions originate, and by them a poor soul is pushed over the cliff of destruction.

Pay no attention to passionate thoughts; disregard them completely, since the ugliness of evil is written all over their face. Disregarding the thoughts suggested by the devil brings salvation. Humility is the best stratagem, for not engaging in a battle of *rebuttal** with them and fleeing for refuge in Christ through prayer is humility.

Passionate thoughts may also be expelled by means of rebuttal, but the fight is difficult and the soldier of Christ must be very experienced to get by without damage, because Satan is also an expert in the Scriptures and he cites arguments to trip up the soldier. Therefore, whatever he suggests to you through your thoughts—whether it is pride, vainglory, criticism, etc.—let it go in one ear and out the other. Since they are passionate thoughts, it is unnecessary to hold a conversation with them. Lock them out! Tell them, “I do not tolerate associating and speaking with heretical thoughts,” and remain firm in your prayer.

3. Pay no attention to whatever the enemy says to you. As soon as he is about to whisper something in your ear, immediately say, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” or “Save me,” rapidly and without stopping, and soon you will see that the thought—or rather the pressure to accept the thought—has weakened, and you will not remember what exactly he was trying to say.

This method is simpler and more effective than rebuttal—that is, to contradict the thoughts suggested—because after the demon has left and finished everything he had to say, there is nothing left behind as a remnant or shadow. Whereas with rebuttal, when he is defeated and departs, he leaves behind remnants and shadows of whatever he suggested to the soul, that is, faint memories of what one fought against. The first method—i.e., to take refuge immediately in the prayer—

is relaxing, and the soul is quickly calmed. On the other hand, the second method—rebuttal—is laborious, and if the soul does not succeed with rebuttal, one is likely to be wounded in proportion to the demon’s skill of persuasion.

4. Flee from sinful thoughts; cut off fantasies, the idol of provocativeness, because Satan—that “know-it-all”—wants to separate you from God your Creator. For when he makes a person guilty by means of sinful consent, the grace of the Holy Spirit leaves, just as a bee flies away from smoke, and then the soul is left without grace and joy, and full of despondency and sorrow. But when we oppose evil fantasies as soon as they first appear in the mind by destroying or repulsing them and immediately seize the sword of the spirit—the holy little prayer of our Jesus—with eagerness and zeal at once we shall see the knavish evil thought abandoning its post and conceding the victory to the governing mind, which the grace and mercy of God strengthened.

The cunning devil cannot tolerate seeing the holy guardian angel of our soul stand near us. This abysmal dragon strives to distance him in order to catch us bereft of a bodyguard and swoop down on us like a fearful tempest and devour us. And since he knows that only unchaste thoughts distance this angel, we see him rouse a multitude of filthy thoughts and fantasies of vain idols in order to defile the mind, heart, and body. But when the soldier of God realizes his malice, he seizes the weapon of Christ immediately and disperses his machinations.

5. My child, be careful with your imagination. All sins originate from the imagination; it is the root of sin. So be careful. As soon as a fantasy of a person or deed comes, of something you saw or heard, immediately drive it away from your mind with anger and the prayer. Say it rapidly and in-

tensely, and at once entreat our Panagia mentally with pain to help you, and I trust in God that you will obtain the victory.

You were proud, and this is why the devil started fighting you. Humble yourself now; abase yourself; insult yourself mentally, and God, seeing your humility, will help you. Just as you avoid fire so that you do not get burned, and a snake so that you do not get bitten, likewise—and even more so—you should avoid the devil's fantasies! Be careful, I repeat, with filthy fantasies; because this is how great spiritual men have fallen and perished.

6. Be careful that your mind does not wander here and there, but affix it tightly to the name of Christ. Entreat Him as if He were in front of you by invoking His name with pain of soul, and then you will see how much benefit you will derive.

Drive evil thoughts away quickly—kick them out! Shout, "Get out of here, you tramps, out of the temple of God, out of my soul!" Do not leave them inside yourself, because you run the risk of being wounded, and then you will weep and sigh. Be patient, my child. Flee from thoughts as from a fire, for they ravage, chill, and deaden the soul! But if we drive them away with anger, with vigilance, and the prayer, they give rise to great benefit.

So struggle; do not be afraid. Call upon our ready Physician. Not many entreaties are needed; He does not ask for money; He is not disgusted by wounds; He accepts tears like a good Samaritan; He nurses and attends to a person wounded by the noetic thieves. Therefore, let us hasten to Him.

7. As for obscene thoughts, they spring from the imaginative part of the soul. That is, within the mind appear people, things, and deeds that the five senses of the body have gathered and transported into the storehouse of the imagination. And in time, the devil will present to the imagination people

or things or songs, etc., that the senses have stored up, and in order to create thoughts he incites the passion so that he may sack the city of God—the heart, that is—and defile it.

Therefore, the whole trick is to drive away fantasies, people, and so on, as soon as they are depicted in our mind. And if we accomplish this, by the grace of God, the evil temptation is eradicated in its beginning and we win with little effort. But if the thoughts persist, we should resist by invoking the name of Christ and confronting those thoughts with anger.

Furthermore, when we see people who scandalize us, we should try not to let the image of them be deposited within us, but we should drive them away at once, lest these images are taken into the imaginative part of our soul, and thus enable the devil to fight us by showing them to us again later.

8. Regarding your blasphemous thoughts, my child, which the devil is putting in your mind, do not fear. It is due to the jealousy of the evil sower. The devil tries to choke the Christian's soul with the idea that he himself is blaspheming, and in this way to poison his heart! Such thoughts should go in one ear and out the other. That is how much you should disregard them, because these thoughts are not yours.

I am telling you, my child, do not fear. I shall take the responsibility for them. When these thoughts come, say to Satan: "Bring whatever you want. From now on I couldn't care less for anything you say, since all these things are contrivances of your malice!"

Even though blasphemous thoughts are clearly from the devil, nevertheless we are also partly responsible for them. How? We are responsible because of the hidden pride of our mind that thinks that we are important: this is revealed by the blasphemous thoughts. They can also originate from our anger, wrath, hatred, etc. Therefore, along with disregarding

them, we should take care to reproach ourselves inwardly and fight off every proud thought. Furthermore, we should be at peace with everyone, even if someone harms us.

9. Do not talk a lot. Stay away from back talk, quarreling, loquacity, and everything that issues from a careless tongue. Drive away evil thoughts and filthy fantasies from your mind as soon as they appear. For when they linger inside the mind and heart, they create a grave condition. Whereas when we are careful at the first appearance of the filthy fantasy and the filthy thought that follows, we remain in peace and enjoy the moral gratification of purity.

Therefore, my children, let us pay attention to ourselves every time various bad thoughts enter, because the same approach applies for every bad thought. Whatever kind it may be, when it finds the nous careless, it enters and creates—corresponding to the passion—the aforementioned unhealthy condition.

Therefore, since a monk is fought primarily by thoughts, the thing that saves him is watchfulness! Watchfulness (*nep-sis*) is derived from the verb “*nēfo*,” that is, to be careful, vigilant, alert, and on our guard. When we are careful, vigilant, alert, and on our guard, the house of our soul will be well-kept and we shall save our souls for which we struggle our whole life.

10. When a person is young, it is impossible not to be fought by filthy thoughts and fantasies. One must drive them away immediately and say the Jesus prayer, and they will leave. But once again they will return; once more he needs to drive them away through the prayer and watchfulness, that is, through the attention and vigilance of the nous.

One must be careful not to let the temptation form an image, because first a fantasy comes, then a thought, and then a

filthy pleasure. So when through watchfulness we do not allow an evil fantasy to form and at the same time we say the prayer, we are delivered from the disturbance. In addition, we are crowned by God for our good intention and desire to please Him.

11. You should always keep in mind, my child, that whatever your thoughts tell you is from the devil with the aim of making you despair, while he sits back and chortles. Therefore, you should also scoff at him and pay no attention to his silly words. You will never suffer harm when you disregard him. Take care to pay no attention to whatever he says, and you are saved. You will suffer no harm whatsoever if you adhere to this advice. Anyone who has believed his thoughts has suffered harm. This is why disregarding them and saying the prayer does wonders.

Do not sorrow, my child, do not despair, do not lose your courage. No matter what the devil whispers in your mind, it is a lie, deceit. Do not believe him at all! He rejoices when he sees people believing him and becoming embittered. On the other hand, he is tremendously grieved when they do not believe him and remain in peace!

As for me, when my Elder told me that these thoughts need to be disregarded, I believed him completely right away and immediately put his advice into practice—which is how I was cured.

For the cure to be complete, you must disregard these thoughts. Believe me, this is the best medicine. See to it that you do not neglect it. All your effort should be how not to think of those thoughts that the devil puts in your mind. Pay no attention to them, and do not grieve at all.

Show no mercy towards filthy fantasies; strike at them with anger, with divine fear, with the double-edged sword of

the prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Shout it intensely, cry out; Jesus is invisibly present to help. "The Lord is near to all that call upon Him."¹

12. Youth does not forget its natural laws. For this reason it hurls rough waves of filthy thoughts against the citadels of the temple of God to render them dirty dens of bestial thoughts. Flee from filthy fantasies. Destroy them and kill the Babylonian thoughts² with the sword of the spirit, the prayer, in order to be blessed on the day when the secret deeds of men will be revealed.

13. Do not be dismayed, my child, by the thoughts of fornication; just learn how to drive them away. If you learn this you will reduce them by half, and your head will be crowned with victories.

As soon as the person who causes filthy thoughts appears in your imagination, immediately, without the slightest delay, drive the image away—just as you shut your eyes when you do not want to see something—get angry with the devil, and say the prayer rapidly with pain and tears, and you will see immediately that the evil thought withdraws. But if the fantasy intensifies, cut the person depicted to pieces and make him ugly so that the repugnance will drive away the pleasure created.

Be very careful not to grow bold and not to pay attention to any evil thought, because this small carelessness will give rise to an enormous battle. Be careful lest the sweetness of the filthy fantasy allures you, and your soul converses with the person imagined, because afterwards, you will extricate yourself only with difficulty, and after this experience, you will see how necessary it is to have vigilance with thoughts.

14. When we struggle against demonic thoughts, the struggle will be considered as a martyrdom. This is because one

¹ Ps. 144:18

² cf. Ps. 136:11-12

suffers a great deal when evil thoughts attack, and God, seeing the toil and pain of his soul, considers it to be a martyrdom.

Thoughts of unbelief are caused by pride and egotism. Therefore, my child, drive away egotistical thoughts and think very humbly about yourself. Do not criticize others; look at only your own faults. Be careful with your words and do not embitter anyone.

Disregard thoughts of unbelief totally since they are demonic and plan to rob you of your fighting spirit. If you don't, they will hand you over to the carnal demon and thereafter to spiritual death. As soon as you begin the struggle, thoughts of pride will come to you—that you are a fighter, and so on—and the thoughts of unbelief will fall aside. Thus you will see how the demons deceive us.

Pay no attention at all to thoughts; disregard them completely. Take hold of the prayer and the remembrance of death, and you will see how the devil changes his guise.

15. We should constantly occupy our mind with beneficial spiritual thoughts, so that the cunning devil will not find the opportunity to bring us a thousand and one filthy and sinful thoughts that defile our soul and render us guilty and unclean before God. So let us attend, my child, to every thought of ours as well as our every word and deed so that we will not grieve our sweetest Jesus Who suffered a cruel and painful death for us, the guilty ones.

My child, attend to your thoughts. Have a fighting spirit and always be ready to confront thoughts. Do not yield, for we pay dearly and gravely for every concession.

16. I received your letter, in which you write about blasphemous thoughts in general. Thoughts of this kind originate from pride. You are deluded in saying that the temptations

have ostracized pride from your soul. A tree is known by its fruit, and a cause by its effect.

An elder has written that the amount of pride dwelling within us corresponds to the number of temptations we shall have. If we had true humble-mindedness, the peace of God would gloriously ripple in the seat of our heart, and everything would be quiet and peaceful. But since the peace of the city is being disturbed, it seems that there are revolts and espionage, and this is why there is trouble amongst the citizens, the thoughts. The remedy is: not reading heretical books; total disregard of blasphemous thoughts; regarding them as foreign and alien, as barking dogs, as products of the devil; humble prayer; reconciliation, if perchance as a human you are upset with someone; vigilance, if negligence has set in. These are the remedies that cure this illness—but it is cured above all by completely despising blasphemous thoughts as “hogwash” of the devil.

When Abba Pambo was being fought by a spirit of blasphemy, he prayed saying: “Lord, how shall I be saved from these thoughts?” And an angel answered him: “Pambo, Pambo, stop worrying about foreign things—that is, blasphemous thoughts—and attend to your sins.”

As far as the truth of Orthodoxy is concerned, there is no room for the slightest doubt. The Holy Spirit presided over the Ecumenical Councils. Whatever the saints of God said, they said with the Spirit of God, and as proof of this, we have the sanctity of their holy relics.

17. Do not be discouraged at all, my child. Every passion that springs up and disconcerts us is a salutary medicine. Drive away the image of every person or matter that disturbs you and leads you into temptation. Get rid of any person's image in your imagination, and let your mouth say the prayer

nonstop, and immediately you will see the benefit of this method. Strive not to let desire and the image of that person win your heart and mind.

Usually in the beginning of one's monastic life, the devil brings to mind dear friends in order to break our soul's strength and crush our soul's struggle, and thus bring about a defeat with uncertain consequences. Therefore, we must not take things lightly, but must bravely resist temptation from the beginning by driving away images of people from our imagination, by saying the prayer, and by abstaining somewhat from food. Then with sincere and perpetual confession and with God's grace as our ally, we trust that the enemy will retreat.

18. I received your letter, my child, and saw the trick the devil played on you. Do not be distressed in such instances, but deal with this “expert” very simply: when he brings thoughts of unbelief, blasphemous thoughts, etc., have nothing to do with him, but pick up your prayer rope and start saying the prayer intensely—continuously, like a motor—and you will see in a little while that the distress and thoughts have left you. In such instances, do not dispute with him! Just say the prayer without any other thought or fantasy, and you will see everything fall apart like a spider's web. Let no anxiety ruin your peacefulness.

19. To progress in the spiritual life, it is necessary to drive away the various evil thoughts as well as their evil fantasies that provoke us and defile our soul. We must not remain tepid in driving away evil thoughts and fantasies, because every sin originates from the imagination and thoughts. So if we uproot evil thoughts and fantasies by diligently driving them away, we should realize that we are undertaking a systematic struggle towards purity from passions, and thereafter one is freed from

spiritual and mental disturbances. But when, on the contrary, we neglect to undertake this struggle to purify our nous from evil thoughts and fantasies, inevitably the vile passions will conquer us and henceforth the demons and sins will control us.

20. Be extremely careful with your imagination. Do not accept any image, because it will become an idol that you will worship. A wandering mind is a shameless bird and paints the most grotesque images: it enters into the depths of our neighbor's conscience and depicts his secret and hidden things. Immediately destroy the image with the prayer as soon as it begins to form. The more you delay, the more you will toil and suffer later.

21. Each one of us needs to attend to himself, to his work, and primarily to his heart—to see if he has remembrance of God, death, hell, heaven, and every other beneficial divine recollection. The fact that we do not have spiritual consolation is due to our daydreaming and lack of introspection along with remembrance of God. Your thoughts should revolve upon yourselves; give spiritual work to your mind, and do not let it wander about here and there. Force yourselves a little to be silent; do not speak unnecessarily; pray constantly; criticize yourselves internally—do not justify yourselves. In conclusion, without compelling and constraining ourselves, nothing spiritual can be accomplished.



face to face
(vid. Cx. 33:11)



Chapter Fifteen

On Prayer and Watchfulness

Time is short, and it is unknown when it will expire. Therefore, let us struggle and be careful and expel every evil thought with anger and fervent prayer. And if we shed tears we shall benefit greatly, for tears cleanse the soul and make it whiter than snow. Let us stand ready for battle courageously, for we wrestle against the powers of darkness, which never make allies and never lessen their attacks. Therefore, let us also rouse ourselves and not be drowsy, for our eternal life is at stake. If we lose the victory, we have lost our soul, have utterly lost eternal rest and joy in God, and have condemned ourselves to the second death, which is eternal separation from God—may this not come to pass.

While practicing watchfulness, let us be vigilant with thoughts. We fall into sin because of our thoughts. So let us fight powerfully against our thoughts and not allow thoughts to become strong within us due to our negligence, but as soon as they arrive let us drive away the fantasy and with anger seize the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God—that is, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” So as we call on the sweet Jesus, He immediately rushes to help us and the demons flee at once. We must not, however, say the prayer