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On the Practice of the Life of Stillness

It is not possible to repent without the life of stillness. It is no less impossible to attain to purity without withdrawal from life. One cannot both meet and engage with men, and also be judged worthy of meeting and contemplating God. Therefore to those who want to repent on account of their faults, and in order to purify their passions, it is given to put themselves at stake in meeting and contemplating God. Such is the end and the aim of those who lead their lives in God, and such is, if it is permitted me to say it, the deposit of the eternal inheritance and of God, which receives those who, by all means, seek out the life of stillness. They are, for their own good, fixedly determined to retire into solitude and to flee men. There is found all that the state of their soul demands.

The beginning of these things is therefore grief, the blame and condemnation of himself, which one assumes in the life of stillness, so as to become purer. Then the watches, the hours passed in upright prayer, the temperance, the bodily pains, which lead finally to tears, which roll from the eyes devoted to humility, in compunction of heart. It is in this way that one approaches purification. It is by this action that one arrives, that one bears at last the peace of thought, at the same time that tears flow, as has been said.

And it is then that the intellect of its own volition begins to examine the nature of beings, to investigate the art of God, to conceive divine thoughts, to contemplate the power, the wisdom, the glory, the goodness and the other attributes of God. It sets itself to work, and approaches the secrets of Scripture. It tastes supernatural goods. It enjoys the beauty higher than the world. It makes itself into the place of the love of God. It is seized. It rejoices and exults to raise itself to the summit of virtues, the love of the Creator of the universe. It ceases in consequence to bear or to fall back into error. It can slip, undergo sinful impulses and the disorders which are imposed on it by many causes, for it is subject to change. It is necessary then to return to itself and to keep itself away from despair. It is necessary for it to rise on the wings of hope, toward the divine who brings the love of man, devote itself to tears, to prayer, to other goods of which we have spoken, and, as much as possible, enjoy the delights of the divine Paradise of love: to see nothing, not image, depth, form, nor anything else but tears, peace of thought, and the love of God. So it is that one keeps oneself from all error and acquires salvation of soul. For the soul is modest, still and watchful, and prayerful, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When you are sitting in your cell, you intellect must confine itself to God in total humility. See that it is humble, and this owing to your base condition and your nothingness. But it

should have confidence, on account of the love and the incommensurable patience which God has for man. For it is thus that the soul honours God: truly it knows that it is sinful, it confides itself to the love that God has for man, and it attaches itself to him. That is why Paul commands us: 'Approach the throne of grace with confidence' (Heb. 4 : 16). Confidence in God is truly like an eye of prayer, or its wing, or a second nature. Do not get to thinking that one puts confidence in God because one is in oneself good. Distance from yourself any such disposition. It is through the thought of love and the patience of God, by his ineffable love for man, that one rises as if on wings toward divine hope. Pray therefore with a humble heart, offering your life in total confidence, nourished on hopefulness in God, as we have said, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is necessary to attentively research what calms the body and what delivers the intellect. That is to say: eat moderately, drink lightly, do not sleep a lot, stand as much as possible, kneel when one can, holding oneself in humility, dress simply, speak soberly and when necessary only, sleep on the ground, do whatever makes the body submit partially. It is necessary in the extreme to research everything which awakens the intellect and contributes to attaching us to God. That is to say: measured reading of the Scriptures and the Saints who interpret them; comprehensible psalmody; study of the words of Scriptures and the marvels which are given us to contemplate in creation; finally the prayers which the mouth pronounces, until holy grace of the Spirit makes the intellect obviously rise in the heart: it is now another feast, the time for an other celebration, no longer spoken by through the mouth, but accomplished by the heart in the Spirit.

Now see how you should research these things: kneel as often as you can, and remain so during prayer. When you feel listlessness on account of prayer, put yourself to reading, as already described, then return to prayer. If you fall back into listlessness, stand up and psalmodise for a while, then return straightaway to praying. Finally, to block all listlessness, holy brother, it is necessary to work with your hands a while, as the Fathers have taught you. In all that you do in the name of God, from dawn to dawn prayer should be first. Everything else will never have any end but to remedy listlessness which accompanies prayer. But while mercy of God rescues the soul, and the grace of the Spirit pours prayer from the heart like a well, then the intellect does not consecrate itself to anything more than prayer and contemplation, it detaches from everything, it finds itself delight in the pure prayer and in the contemplation in the paradise of the love of God.

Prayer has power over all other good works. It is what engenders tears of repentance. Never giving consideration to anything other than God alone, which is supreme peace, it contributes greatly to peace of thought. This is what gives birth in use to the love of God. This alone purifies the thoughts of the soul, by contemplating God which brings about the purification even of angels themselves. It maintains desire in purity which bears the soul toward God. Confiding in God infinitely and supernaturally good and beautiful, and talking with him, it attaches to him all his intense longing. Finally it so pacifies the ardour which brings it down, invokes and calls on God, and bears the soul toward humility while prostrating itself before him. For no one, when he prays and invokes, can have a proud and irritable heart. That is why in a word the holy prayer purifies and corrects all the powers of the soul, all the energies of action and of the mind, above all through a life vowed to stillness, and through a conduct like the one we have described, it attaches itself to the contemplation of God and to divine intense longing which goes with that. That your thought turns within yourself, fix your meditation and your vision in the place of the heart from which tears flow, while praying at the same time as you breathe air inward. And let it remain there, as long as possible. This thing is a great help. It is a source of abundant and continual tears. It delivers the intellect from its captivity. It dispenses peace. It arouses prayer of the intellect. It contributes, with God, to the discovery of the prayer of the heart, through the grace of the vivifying Spirit in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You must know this. Just as the contemplative, he who sees what is hidden and who enjoys it, has two natures (he is at the same time God and man), just so whether you talk generally or in a specific manner, there are likewise two modes (the afflictions, and following them the tears). Afflictions and tears differ from one another greatly, even if both are good, gifts of God, and call on the divine good will and the inheritance which it accords. The first have their source in the fear of God and in the signs of grief; the second in divine love and in God himself. The first do not bear us directly to joyfulness. But the second arouse an immense joy. The first appertains to beginners; the second to those who through grace are arrived at perfection.

The life of stillness is made of five duties: prayer (the continual memory of Jesus, introduced by breathing in the heart, outside of all thought) at which one arrives through the greatest temperance, that of the stomach, that of sleep, and that of all the senses, while remaining humbly in the cell; partial psalmody, the reading of the Gospels and the divine Fathers, their chapters on prayer, and specifically those of the New Theologian, of Hesychios and of Nikephoros; meditation on the Judgement of God, or the recollection of death and of what it implies; and a little work of the hands; then to apply oneself to prayer again, no matter how constraining, until the intellect, through the recollection of the Lord and the continual descent in the trouble of the heart, habituates itself to rejection of all agitation of itself. Such is the work of

novice monks who want to live the life of stillness. Such a monk need not make a habit of leaving his cell. He should keep himself protect himself against conversing with others and seeing them, save when that is completely necessary, but always with attention and prudence, and rarely. For not only among novices, but among those who are advanced already, such things provoke dispersion.

So prayer is allied to the attention which deals a blow to all thoughts. By saying 'Lord Jesus Christ Son of God', the intellect tends toward the Lord whom it recalls in an immaterial manner and completely in silence. When saying 'have mercy on me', it turns toward itself. It can do nothing other than pray for itself. Being advanced toward love, it tends toward the Lord himself, in union, through experience; then the second part of the prayer the intellect receives full certainty. That is why the Fathers do not always hand to us the entire prayer. But some give us the prayer in its entirety, as St John Chrysostom. Another says simply 'Lord Jesus', as Paul does, who adds: 'in the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12 : 3). The heart prays when it receives the energy of the Holy Spirit. That in fact is the activity of those who are advanced. But it is not yet entirely the summit, which is illumination. John Klimakos says: 'Through the name of Jesus, beat the adversaries. For the remembrance of Jesus attaches itself to your breathing.'¹ He adds nothing else.

It is permitted to novices either to say all the words of the prayer, or to spiritually say only a part, as we have mentioned. But we should not continually alternate the prayer, to avoid falling into a division by doing this. It is necessary to remain attached to the method which we have described: to the way of pure prayer. If the thoughts and presumptions which block prayer have not deterred him, he who fights arrive at a state of being where he it is allowed him to pray at total liberty, holding the intellect in the heart. At the moment of inspiration or breathing in, the intellect does not force its way into the heart only to rapidly exit again. But it stays there as if resident with it, and it prays from there. It is the prayer of the heart, and that is what we call it. It is preceded in the heart through a certain warmth, which chases away everything which blocks the first pure being fulfilled clearly. So the intellect remains and prays freely in the heart. It is in such warmth and through such prayer that love for the Lord Jesus which we have recalled, is born in the heart, from where gentle tears flow which make the desire for Jesus spring in abundance, when we see him in the memory.

But so that a man may be judged worthy of all these things and those which follow from them and which we've spoken of here, he must force himself, we have said, with the memory of Jesus, to have before his eyes the fear of God at the depth of his heart, and not only around it, so as to avoid without trouble any evil works, but also passionate thoughts, and through this to come to clear certainty that God loves him. But

¹ Ladder, Chp 20, 7 and Ch. 17, 62.

he should not seek out the manifestation of God, so as not to receive he who is darkness and who counterfeits the light. Rather, when he is not looking for it, his intellect sees the light, so that he can neither acquire it, nor refuse it any longer. But he should question whoever has the power to instruct him. And he should hold onto true things. If he has found someone to teach him, not only by virtue of his reading of Scripture, but because he has himself received the light in complete holiness, thanks should be given to God. If not it is better that he does not receive any vision, but humbly return to God, considering himself unworthy of such contemplation, as the Fathers have done and have taught us. In other writings they speak of signs of real illumination and of illusory illumination. But as it is necessary to have heard from a living voice the things we have written here, so it is necessary to hear these last things in their time. And now is not the time.

At the same time as these things, and before all other things, it is necessary above all now to be instructed about this: just as a one who wants to bend the bow does not do so without a target, so he who wants to start to live in the life of stillness should have the target of being always gentle in the heart. He himself should take an interest in nothing else, and nothing should preoccupy him, if not concern for piety. This is a thing

to which one easily arrives, if one distances himself from everything, and if one falls silent most of the time. And if one does anything wrong, one should repent straightaway, blame oneself, and be attentive meanwhile to invoke above all the name of Jesus in stillness and with a pure conscience, as we have said, so as to have his divine grace which reposes in the soul while advancing on the road, and not only that, but also have the soul which can repose far from the demons and passions which troubled it at other times, and which give it rejoicing with ineffable joy. For when indeed they come to trouble him again, they will be able to do nothing: the intellect is not attached to them, and it does not desire the pleasure which they dispense. All desire of such a man is simply directed toward the Lord who gives his grace. Then the Lord does not abandon him, but he permits that he will face combat. Why? So that his intellect does not fill itself with pride with the good it has found. The fact that it is embattled renders it humble always. And only humility permits him not only to defeat the proud ones who fight him, but to always be judged worthy of the greatest gifts, which we also receive from Christ who humiliated himself for us (cf. Phil. 2 : 8) and dispenses to the humble the abundance of his grace (cf. James 4 : 6), now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.