

EXTRACTS FROM THE HOLY FATHERS

On Prayer and Attention

Every effort of the ascetic should carry this imperative: that the high condition of the soul should not be overturned by the descent into sensory pleasures. How can the soul pulled down low by pleasure of the body still tend with a free vision toward the light of intellect to which it is related? This is why, above all, temperance is needed: temperance protects the ground for chastity. The intellect which has guided us should not allow itself to be absorbed by impure mind. The vigilance of the interior man is therefore necessary, if we want the intellect not to be scattered by wandering, but pulled to the goal of the glory of God, so as to escape the judgement of the Lord who has said: 'Woe to you, because you are like white sepulchres, which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and corruption. You also on the outside appear fair to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and injustice' (Matt. 23 : 27-8).

That is why by means of heart, word and action, we must lead a great and just combat, so as not to receive the grace of God in vain (cf. 2 Cor. 6 : 1). But just as wax is modelled by the sculptor's art, so our interior man is modelled by the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. We accomplish the word of Paul with every action then, when he says: 'You were divested of the old man and his works, and have clothed yourself in the new man, who renews himself in spiritual knowledge, in the image of his Creator' (Col 3 : 9-10). He calls all of our sins and our blemishes the old man. We put on the interior man, he says, in sign of the new life (Rom. 6 : 1) until death, so as to be worthy of saying in truth: 'It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2 : 20).

So it requires a great deal of attention, a great deal of vigilance so as not fall short in any of the duties we have spoken about, while we accomplish the commandments. For then we would not only be deprived of such great reward, but we would fall under the fall beneath the blows of these redoubtable threats. When the devil sets his traps and, with a lot of violence, shoots thoughts like flaming arrows (cf. Eph. 6 : 16) which he hides and uses against the soul living the life of stillness and in the calm, when he embraces it suddenly, when he prolongs indefinitely and renders unbreakable the memory of what has been lost to the spirit, then one must escape these traps through watchfulness and a more intense attention, like an athlete who, with a more expert defence and a quickness of his body, works out how to circumvent the designs of his adversaries. In the end through prayer and invocation of alliance with the Most high, he might end the war and deflect the arrows. That is what Paul has taught us,

when he says: 'Put on the whole armour of faith...' (Eph. 6 : 16).

When the soul which has relaxed its rigour and the ardour of reflection recalls by chance all which has happened to it, then thought, carried beyond all its education and all science toward the things it recalls and absorbed by them, goes from wandering to greater wandering, and ends often by falling into inflamed and absurd ideas. But this negligence and fracture of the soul should be corrected with a more rigorous and vigilant effort of mind, the soul must be made to return to itself, and give to it constantly the consideration of the present so as to see its beauty. Whether in a public place, whether it participates in a festival, whether on a mountain, or on the plain, whether in the middle of the crowd, the good philosopher makes of his body the place of his meditation and the sure home of the soul, it finds itself there as in a natural monastery, it pulls in the intellect and think on what it needs in all wisdom. For it can happen that he who remains seated in his cell, yet is negligent, lets his thoughts disperse outside, while he who goes into a public place, but is watchful and still, might be as if in a desert, turned toward himself and to God alone, the senses closed to troubles which assail his soul through the things of the senses.

It is necessary then that he who approaches the Body and the Blood of Christ in memory of him (cf. Luke 22 : 19) who died for us and was resurrected (cf. 2 Cor. 5 : 15), purify himself of any stain of the flesh and the spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 11 : 29), so as not to eat and drink to his own condemnation (cf. 2 Cor. 7 : 11). But again by this means he can clearly show the same mind as Him who died for us and was resurrected; so he not only purifies himself of all sin, but also dies to sin, to the world, and to himself, in living for God (cf. Rom. 6 : 11).

Among the evil thoughts, some do not reach the soul, while we protect ourselves. Others are born and grow in us, when we have been negligent: if we foresee them they are quickly suffocated and they disappear. And still others, when we persevere in negligence, are born and grow, lead us to evil actions and change all the health of our soul. Blessedness is therefore to not receive any evil thought; then to reject the thoughts of those entering and not allowing them to stay in us, so that they will stop dispensing evil. But when indeed we become always negligent, the love that God has for man can correct this negligence. His ineffable goodness can again prepare remedies for such injuries.

So I pray you, as much as you are in your body, do not relax your heart. Just as the farmer can never be certain of any crops which come from his fields, for he does not know what will happen to that harvest before it is in his granary, so man cannot relax his heart while he has breath in his nostrils. And as no man, until his last breath, knows what troubles he will experience, so the monk, while he is alive, cannot relax his heart. But he must continually call out to God, asking for his Kingdom and his mercy. Now the evil one knows well that he who prays to God without ceasing will be able to accomplish great things. He forces himself therefore, through the ways of reason or those of madness, to scatter the intellect. And it is to us, while we are aware of this, to oppose our enemy. When we hold ourselves in prayer, when we bend our knee, not letting any thought penetrate our heart, not black, not white, not right, not left, whether it has been written or whether it has never been written. We do not let anything enter the heart

but the supplication tending toward God, and the illumination, the shining sun which comes from heaven to clarify the mind.

It is necessary to have led a great battle, have passed a great deal of time in prayer, to discover the serenity of the mind; as in the other heaven, the heaven of the heart where Christ abides, as the Apostle says: 'Don't you know that Christ abides in you?' (2 Cor. 13 : 5) If one wants to arrive at the state of the intellect, then he should watch every thought. Then the intellect will come of itself equal to a heavenly sapphire. For if it is not higher than all the thoughts which link themselves to things, the intellect will not come in itself in the place of God. And it will not be higher, if it does not pluck out the passions which by means of thoughts are attached to sensible things. It surpasses the passions by means of the virtues; simple thoughts are surpassed by spiritual contemplation; and contemplation is surpassed by naturally, when the light will shine on it.