

ST SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

On the Three Ways of Prayer

There are three ways of attention and of prayer, by which the soul, either raises itself and progresses, or else falls and is lost. If it makes use of these three ways at the right time and in the right manner, the soul will progress. But if it makes use of them without consideration and at inappropriate times, it will fall. Attention should therefore be inseparably bound to prayer, as the body is inseparably bound to the soul. The one cannot stand without the other. Attention should go before it and shove aside enemies, like a guard. It is this which will be the first to know sin and to oppose evil thoughts which enter into the soul. Then comes prayer, which destroys and bring defeat on the field to all evil thought, against which in the first instance the attention was struggling. For attention cannot, alone, defeat them. Now it is on this combat of the attention and of prayer that the life and death of the soul depend. For if, through attention, we keep guard over pure prayer, we progress. But if we neglect to keep guard over pure prayer, if we do not watch over it, if we let it be dirtied by evil thoughts, we are useless and we will not progress.

There are then three types of attention and of prayer. And it is necessary to say what the properties of these are. Thus he who loves his safety will be able to chose the best, and not the worst.

THE FIRST WAY OF ATTENTION AND PRAYER

These are the properties of the first way. When anyone put himself to pray, he raises toward the heavens his hands, his eyes, and his intellect. He represents to himself divine thoughts, the goods of heaven, the orders of angels and the dwelling place of saints. He quickly gathers and recollects in his intellect all which he has heard from the divine Scriptures. He carries in this way his soul toward desire and love of God. Sometimes he exults, and weeps. But then his heart grows proud, without his noticing. It seems to him that what is happening and what he does comes from divine grace, to console him, and he asks God to make him always worthy of acting like this. This is a mark of error. For the good is not good when it has gone along an erroneous path and manner. If indeed such a man were to try to live in an extreme stillness, it is impossible that such a man would not lose his good sense and become mad. And if it does not come to that, still he will not arrive at spiritual knowledge, nor maintain in himself the virtues associated with dispassion. It is in this way that they

are lost who see a visible light and a flame with the eyes of their body, who have smelt a perfume with their own nose, and who have heard voices with their actual ears, or who have experienced things of similar kind. Some of these have been possessed by the evil one, and have gone from place to place, out of themselves. The others have received counterfeits made by the evil one: he appeared to them like an angel of light, and they were misguided, were never corrected, never wanted to hear the counsel of any brother. Still others have been pushed by the devil to kill themselves: they have thrown themselves from precipices, hung themselves. Who can describe all the illusions through which the devil misleads them? It is not possible.

But after what we have said, every man with sense can understand what harm he is exposed to when following this way of prayer and attention. So, if it happens that one of those who use this way is not harmed by it, because he finds himself in the company of other brothers (those anchorites who know such an evil), nevertheless, throughout an entire lifetime, he would not progress by this way.

THE SECOND WAY

This is the second way of attention and prayer. When anyone recollects his intellect into himself, detaching it from the sensible world, when he keeps his senses and assembles all his thoughts so that they do not take flight among the empty things of this world, when more than usually he examines his conscience and is more than usually attentive to the words of his prayer, when at such moments he moves behind his thoughts which the devil has captured, and which draw him into evil and vanity, when at another moment, after having been dominated and vanquished by passion, he returns to himself, then it is impossible that such a man, who has in himself such a fight, should ever be at peace, nor that he should find the time to work on virtue and receive the crown of justice (cf. 2 Tim. 4 : 8). For it is as with one who fights his enemies at night, in the dark. He hears their voices and receives their blows. But he cannot see clearly who they are, where they come from, how and why they harm him, because the darkness of his intellect and the torments of his thoughts devastate him. It is impossible for him to be delivered from his enemies, those demons who beat him. This unhappy man labours in vain, for he loses his salary, dominated as he is by

vanity. He does not understand. He seems to himself to be attentive. Often, in his pride, he despises and accuses others. He imagines that he can lead them, and that he is worthy of becoming their shepherd. He is like a blind man trying to lead the blind (cf. Matt. 15 : 14).

It is necessary that whoever wants to be saved knows the damage that this second way can cause the soul, and that he pays attention. Nevertheless this second way is better than the first, as the night where the moon shines is better than the totally dark night.

THE THIRD WAY

The third way is a thing truly paradoxical and difficult to explain. Not only those who do not know about it will find it difficult to understand, but it will appear almost unbelievable to them. They do not believe that such a thing can exist, because in our day this way is not lived by many, but by very few. Something so good, I think, left us at the same time as obedience left us. For it is obedience to a spiritual father which permits one to no longer worry about anything, because he remits these cares to his father, so that he is far then from the tendencies of the world, and he is a worker entirely zealous and diligent for this method. Again he must find himself a master and a true spiritual father, disengaged from all error. For he who, with a true obedience, consecrates himself to God and to his spiritual father, who no longer lives his own life and no longer does his own will, but is dead to the tendencies of the world and to his own body, then by what passing thing can he be overcome or enslaved? Or what disquiet and what distraction can such a man have? So by this way, and through obedience, all the artifices of the demons are dissipated and made to disappear, along with the ruses which they bring to us to trap the intellect in all sorts of thoughts. Now the intellect of this man is delivered from them all. It is with a great liberty that it examines the thoughts which the demons bear. It is with a real aptitude that it chases them away. And it is with a pure heart that it offers its prayers to God. Such is the beginning of the true road. Those who do not consecrate themselves to this beginning labour in vain, and they will never know it.

Now the beginning of this third way is not to look toward the heights, to raise the hands, to put the intellect into the heavens, and then to implore safety. These are the ones, we have said, which characterise the first way: which belong to illusion. Still less is it to keep watch over the senses with the intellect, to be attentive to nothing but that, to avoid looking within the soul and noticing the war which the enemies make there and to take no notice. For these are the marks of the second way. Those who undertake these methods are injured by the demons, but he does not harm them. He is stabbed, and he does not realise it. He is reduced to slavery, he is enslaved, and he cannot take vengeance on those who make a slave of

him, but the enemies do not cease to fight him openly and secretly, making him vain and proud.

But you, beloved, if you want your health, you must consecrate yourself to begin the third way. After perfect obedience which you owe, as we have said, to your spiritual father, it is necessary to do everything with a clear conscience, as if you were before the face of God. For without obedience, the conscience cannot be pure. And you should keep it pure for three reasons. Firstly, for God. Secondly, for your spiritual father. Thirdly, for other men and for the things of the world.

You should keep your conscience clear. For God, that is to say do not do anything to upset God or do anything which you know does not please him. For your spiritual father: do everything which he asks, do nothing more, and do nothing less, but walk following his intention and following his will. For other men: do not do them anything which you dislike yourself and what you would not want them to do (cf. Matt. 7 : 12). For the things of the world: keep yourself from abuse, in other words use everything as it is meant to be used, in food, drink, clothing. In a word, you should act as if you were stood before God, so that your conscience has nothing to reproach you with, whatever you do, and that it has no reason to make you suffer where you have not done good. Walk the veridical and sure road of the third way of attention and prayer, as follows.

The intellect must watch the heart at the moment when it prays. It must never turn away from the heart. And from the bottom of the heart it address its prayers to God. Because it will have tasted there that the Lord is good (cf. Ps. 34 : 8), and it will have been surrounded with gentleness, it will not distance itself from the place of the heart, and it will say the same words as those of Peter: 'It is good to be here' (Matt. 17 : 4). It not wait any longer but watch the heart and turn inwards, pushing and chasing all thoughts which the enemy sowed, the devil. To those who have no idea and who do not know it, this salutary work seems uncomfortable and difficult. But those who have tasted its gentleness and have enjoyed the pleasure that it gives to the depth of the heart say, along with the divine Paul: 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' (Rom. 8 : 35).

For our Fathers, hearing the Lord say in the holy Gospel that it is from the heart that bad thoughts emerge, the murders, the sexual perversion, the adulteries, the thefts, the false witnesses, the blasphemies, and that it is there that the man is made filthy (cf. Matt. 15 : 19-20), hearing also that the Gospel demands that we purify the interior of the cup, so that the exterior would equally become pure (cf. Matt. 23 : 26), have left all other spiritual work and are given entirely to this combat, that is to say the watch over the heart, persuaded that, by this work, they can easily acquire every other virtue, because it is not possible that any virtue can endure otherwise. This work, some among our Fathers have called it the life of

stillness of the heart, other have called it attention, still others watchfulness and sobriety, and refutation, and others examination of thought and guard of the intellect. It is for this that all have laboured, and its for this that all have been rendered worthy of divine charismatic gifts. That is why the Ecclesiast says: 'Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and walk in the paths of the heart, integrated and pure, and put thought far from your heart' (Eccl. 11 : 9). The author of the Proverbs says the same thing: If the suggestion of the devil assails you, 'do not give place to him' (Eccl. 10 : 4). By place, he means the heart. And our Lord says in the holy Gospel: 'Do not let yourself be worried' (Luke 12 : 29), which is to say do not disperse your intellect here and there. He says elsewhere: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matt. 5 : 8), which is to say: 'Blessed are those who do not have in their hearts any idea of this world, and who are poor, stripped naked of any worldly thought. All the Fathers have written a great deal about this. Whoever wants can read what is said by Mark the Ascetic, John Klimakos, Hesychios and Philotheos of Sinai, Abba Isaiah, the great Barsanuphios, and many others.

In a word, he who is not attentive to keep his intellect cannot become pure in his heart, so as to be judged worthy of seeing God (cf. Matt. 5 : 8). He who is not attentive cannot become poor in spirit (cf. Matt. 5 : 3). He can no longer be afflicted and weep (cf. Matt. 5 : 4), nor become gentle (cf. Matt. 5 : 5) and peaceful, nor have hunger and thirst for justice (cf. Matt. 5 : 6). To summarise, it is not possible to acquire the other virtues otherwise than by this attention. It is therefore to it that you should apply yourself above all, so as to comprehend by experience that of which I have spoken. And if you want to know how to act, I say to you here, as much as possible. Be attentive.

Three things above all must be done. Do not concern yourself with anything, neither what is reasonable nor what is unreasonable and vain, which is to say die to all things. Secondly, have a clear conscience: so that your conscience has nothing to reproach you with. Thirdly, have no desire: so that your thinking does not carry out outside to what is in the world. Then sit yourself down in a secluded place, a calm dwelling place, alone, and close the door, recollect and gather in your intellect far from all passing and vain things. Put you chin on your breast, be attentive to yourself with your intellect and your physical eyes. Withhold a moment your respiration, the time that your intellect finds the place of the heart, and so that it remains entire and complete. At the start everything will appear dark and very hard. But when you will work without relaxing, day and night, at this work of attention, of miracle, you will discover in yourself a continual joy. For the intellect which leads the battle will find the place of the heart. Then it sees down inside where it has never seen and which it usually ignores. It sees that space which is in the interior of the heart and it sees itself entirely shining, full of wisdom and of discernment. Perhaps now, from some aspect a thought arises, before it even enters, is conceived and formed, the intellect chases it and makes it disappear at the name of Jesus,

that is to say with the invocation 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'. It is now that it begins to hold the demons in aversion, that it undertakes a fight against them without relaxation, that it opposes them with natural ardour, that it pursues them, that it beats, that it forces them to disappear. What happens in the aftermath, with the help of God, you alone will know, through experience, thanks to attention of the intellect, and by guarding Jesus in your heart, that is to say his prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'. A Father days in fact: 'Remain in your cell, and it will teach you everything.'¹

QUESTION

Why are the first and second ways about which we have spoken unable to lead to good work?

REPSONSE

Because we do not practice them as we should. St John Klimakos compares these ways to a ladder with four steps, and says: 'Some humiliate and reduce the passions. Others psalmodise, that is to say pray with their mouths. Still others give themselves to inner essential prayer. And others arrive at contemplation.'² Thus those who want to overcome these four steps do not start at the top and go to the bottom, but they go from low to high. They raise themselves to the first step, then the second, followed by the third and finally the fourth. This is manner by which to rise from the earth and ascend to the heaven. Firstly, at the start, reduce and stop the passions. Secondly, give yourself to psalmody, then prayer with the mouth, for there where the passions have been reduced, there prayer gives natureally pleasure and gentleness to the tongue, and it appears agreeable to God. Thirdly, pray with the intellect. And fourthly, raise yourself to contemplation. The first step is that of novices. The second is available to those who are progressing. The third to those who have arrived at the end of any progress. And the fourth is that of the perfect.

Therefore the beginning is nothing else than the reduction of the passions, which will not let go of the soul except by the watch and the attention on the heart. For it is from the heart, as our Master says, that evil thoughts come, those which defile man (cf. Matt. 15 : 19), and it is there that watching and attention are necessary. When the passions are stopped and are reduced to nothing through war which the heart and with the aversion which it bears for them, the intellect sets itself to desire and seek reconciliation with God. It increases the prayer, and it attains its goal. Through prayer, it beats and chases away the thoughts which turn around the heart and try

¹ *Apophthegmata*, alphabetical collection, Moses 6; E.T., Sister Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (2nd ed., London/Oxford, 1981), p. 139.

² *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, E.T., Step 27 §35.

to enter. That is the war. The demons are excited, oppose and, through the passions, arouse confusion and vertigo down below in the heart. But at the name of Jesus Christ, they disappear and go to ground like ashes in fire. Chased away, escaped from the heart, they do not rest if they can continue to trouble the intellect, but from the outside now, through the senses. That is why the intellect perceives very quickly the first fruits of serenity and of the life of stillness, for the demons do not have the power to trouble it in depth, but only at the outside, on the surface. Nevertheless, it is impossible to be totally delivered from the war and to not be in a state of battle with these evil spirits. This only appertains to the perfect, to those who are entirely retired from all and who give themselves constantly to attention of the heart.

Then he who takes the three ways in order, each in its time, can in the end, after having purified his heart and passions, devote himself entirely to psalmody, fight with thoughts, raise to heaven the physical eyes (when he feels the need), contemplate with the eye of the soul, and consecrate the self to pure prayer, in truth, as must be.

Nevertheless, regarding turning toward the heavens, this should not be done too often, from fear of evil spirits which live in the air and which are called aerial spirits, for they arouse many illusions, and it is right to be aware and attentive. God demands only one thing: that our heart should be purified by watching and attention. If the root is holy, as the Apostle says, it is obvious that the branches and the fruit are healthy (cf. Rom. 11 : 16). Outside such a pathway, he who raises his eyes and his intellect to the heavens and wishes to represent the inner essences, sees only imaginary things, things of illusion and not true things, for the heart is impure.

As we have already said, the first and the second ways do not make man progress. When we want to construct a house, we do not position the roof and after that the foundations, for it is not possible. But we position rather the foundations, then we build the house, and only then we put on the roof. It is in this way that we should look at the spiritual. First the foundations, that is to say watch the heart and draw in bit by bit the passions. After that build the spiritual house: chase away the cares of evil spirits which fight us through the senses, and flee quickly the war which they make on us. Then lay the roof: withdraw entirely from all things, pacify ourselves as must be, give ourselves totally to God. In this way we will finish a spiritual house, in Christ Jesus our Lord. To him the glory in the ages of ages. Amen.