

## The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition

### *The passions*

– You said that when thoughts (logismoi) remain within us for a long time, and we do not manage to cut them off or to reject them, using the Orthodox method, they evolve into sin and passion, said Irene. Could you be more specific concerning passions? What exactly are they?

– This is a major chapter in the ascetical teachings of the Fathers of the Church. Many people, even other anthropocentric systems, speak about the passions, but they understand them very differently from our Orthodox Tradition. Therefore, I think that we should say a few basic things, without, of course, exhausting this huge topic. According to the teaching of the holy Fathers, the passions are not powers which entered into us and, consequently, need to be uprooted. They are energies of the soul which have been corrupted and so need to be transformed. We explained, when we spoke about man's soul, that it is divided, with regard to passions, into three powers: the rational, appetitive and incensive faculties. The holy Fathers also refer to these divisions as the reason, desire and will. These three powers of the soul ought to be turned toward God. When they turn against God and against our brothers, the passions develop. So a passion is a movement of the soul contrary to nature. St. John of the Ladder uses a few examples to make this clear. Sexual intercourse is natural after the Fall for procreation, but we have changed it into fornication. Anger is natural when we turn it against the devil, and yet we use it against our brothers. Jealousy is natural so that we can emulate the vir-

tues of the saints and try to obtain them. However, we use it against our brothers. The desire for glory is natural, so that we desire and long for the Kingdom of Heaven, but we desire vain, ephemeral and worthless things. Pride accompanied by glory is natural if employed against the demons. Joy is natural only when it is in Christ. We received resentment from God as a weapon against the demons. We received the desire for real enjoyment, which relates to eternal blessings, yet we misuse it in dissipation. Thus the passions are the powers of the soul when they are functioning contrary to nature.

– When you speak about the soul functioning contrary to nature, you simultaneously imply that it can function in a natural or a supranatural way. I think if this is clarified, the subject will become more comprehensible. I do not mean we have not understood up until now, but we would definitely grasp it more fully.

– It is wrong to try to understand everything rationally, without gaining experience from spiritual warfare. Certainly, I would not claim that this teaching is not necessary, but alongside it, we must also seek personal experience. Otherwise, we will resemble a general who has learned how to fight a war through exercises at his desk, but is completely ignorant of practical warfare. For this reason, in the army, together with the exercises at their desks, they also engage in mock battles, in order to obtain personal experience of war. I think that we must also apply this to our own case. We know that Christian life is constant warfare against the enemy of our salvation. The sense of being at war is absolutely necessary, so that we can become conscious of this state and later reach the stage of victorious battles, by the power of divine grace. In any case, I think I can mention a characteristic example which St. Maximos uses. He writes that

reason (logos), desire and will are the natural powers of the soul. The natural function of these powers is for the reason to move toward God through knowledge, for desire to be drawn to God with longing, and for the will to struggle to attain only God. When these powers operate according to nature, a person reaches the life that is above nature, and this is love. This love is not an abstract state. It comes about when reason (logos), desire and will are united with God. The life of love, the life above nature, is a result of living in a natural way. And this life according to nature is an impetus towards God. Today we think that living naturally means living without God, whereas living with God is called unnatural. But life with God, which is described as supernatural in relation to human abilities, is natural life for someone who lives in the Church and is inspired by the uncreated energy of God. The powers of the soul function contrary to nature when the reason (logos) is associated with ignorance of God, desire with self-love and the will with tyranny. In this state, man is totally enslaved.

Can you see that St. Maximos, a distinguished theologian and Father of the Church, is not a follower of an academic type of theology? He is not a philosopher, but an ascetic theologian. When we study his teaching, or the teaching of any of the holy Fathers, we realise that theology is connected with asceticism, and asceticism is the true method which leads a person to theologise safely.

– Are there differences between the passions? Can we separate them into various categories? asked Fr. Philip.

– We certainly can. The holy Fathers speak about such categories. How the passions are divided up depends on which aspect we examine. One distinction can be made between passions associated with the body and those associated with the

soul. Of course, both the body and soul participate in the development and formation of passions, but we make this distinction for the sake of simplicity, to enable us to examine the subject more easily. Another division is between those passions which are found in monks and those which are found in laypeople. Monks are confronted by different passions from those which confront people living in the world, though some passions may be common to both categories. Another division is based on how they develop. Some passions are called “mothers” and others “daughters”, because they are derived from the first group. For example, vainglory (when we seek praise from others) engenders pride or despondency or talkativeness. Blasphemy is an offspring of pride. There are also passions which develop at a certain age. St. Gregory Palamas says that, as a person grows up, the first passions of the appetitive part of the soul to develop are love of possessions and avarice. This is why small children want to have lots of things and try to acquire them. Later, love of praise develops, which is expressed by beautifying the body, wearing attractive clothes and being ostentatious in virtue. Finally, in adolescence, gluttony develops, which is the origin of all sins of the flesh.

– Can we clearly see our passions? Is it possible to distinguish which passions we are dominated by?

– This is a difficult task. Certain passions, such as anger, are easily discernible. However, there are passions which are not easily distinguishable, because they are covered by seeming virtues. For example, the passion of love of pleasure may be hidden under a false appearance of love. We claim that we really love somebody, yet a fearsome passion may be hidden beneath this apparent love. Often gluttony is concealed under the virtue of hospitality and arrogant superiority hides under silence.

That is why a discerning, experienced spiritual father is needed to distinguish our passions so that we can fight against them and struggle to heal them.

– It is exactly here that we come to an interesting point, said Fr. Philip. Just as it is not enough for a sick person simply to become aware of his illness, but he must proceed to its cure, the same applies to the passions of both body and soul. So we would like you to describe the method of healing.

– This is a matter for your spiritual father. The struggle against passions is difficult and risky, precisely because they are entangled with various virtues and depend on a person's age and way of life. So it is not easy to deal with the subject in an open discussion. Even so, I can underline a few general therapeutic principles. Again, I should stress that we need a healer-priest to cure us of the demonic states caused by the passions.

A general principle is that healing does not mean the eradication of passions, but their transformation. Since passions are the movement of the energies of the soul contrary to nature, they must be directed according to nature. God gave us love so that we could be motivated towards Him, but we have turned it towards created things instead. Now we must transform it, we must turn it again towards God. It must become a dispassionate passion. The same must be done with all passions.

This reorientation of the energies of the soul is effected with the energy of God, but also with the synergy (co-operation) of man. Neither God alone nor man alone can accomplish it.

We receive the power and grace of God through prayer, particularly through sacred confession. We give great importance and priority to this. We know from personal experience that confession, when it is honest and thorough, sets us at ease. If we learn to open ourselves to God, we avoid many problems

which are the result of the inner isolation of our soul. Confession, which forms part of repentance, abolishes the monologue with ourselves and opens up a dialogue with the living God.

We need to struggle, under the guidance of our spiritual father, against the passion which oppresses us most. Everyone has a dominant passion, which holds him captive on earth and does not allow him to open up to God. We make a strenuous effort against this specific passion, which may be the source of other passions. Thus, when we fight against this passion, we also cure others.

We should not feed our passions. When we are aware of a passion, we try to deprive it of everything that strengthens it. Then, slowly but surely, it withers and dies. The Fathers say that, if we have a wild animal in a cage and do not feed it daily, the time will come when it will fall ill and die. We do the same with passions. We try not to feed them: we cut off thoughts (*logismoi*) and the causes of passions.

In the beginning, we struggle to cut off the active passions, those which attempt to express themselves externally. For example, a person is dominated by anger. At first, when he feels angry, he tries not to express it. He practises this for a period of time. This is also a degree of dispassion, and when it is achieved, then he struggles not to feel anger, even inwardly. Furthermore, he strives to transform it into hatred for sin, but also into real, selfless love for the people who grieve him.

We cultivate the corresponding virtues. We fight against pride by trying to live in humility.

In patristic teaching, there are specific directions for fighting against each passion. Yet the same passion needs different treatment in each person. Two people have the passion of anger. One may be cured by *hesychia* and silence, and the other by

obedience. For this reason, the same instruction concerning the same passion may be a remedy for one and poison for another. So an experienced healer is needed, who is an expert in this warfare but also God's instrument, so that he will know by God's illumination on each occasion which remedy to give the patient.

I should not tire you more with this issue. I would just like to say that, when a person struggles against his passions, helped by the energy of God, the guidance of his spiritual director, the sacramental life of the Church but also his personal ascetic life, he transforms these passions and reaches dispassion according to God.