

## Orthodox Psychotherapy

### *Therapy of the Soul*

It is not advice or medicines that heal the sick soul, that give life to the dead nous, that purify the impure heart, but the ascetic method of the Church, self-control, love, prayer and guarding of the nous from Satan's provocations through evil thoughts. Therefore the Orthodox tradition is very important for our time, for it is the only thing that can free a man and heal him from the anxiety and insecurity brought on by the death of his soul."

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### *Sickness of the heart*

It is clear throughout the Biblical and patristic tradition that when the heart of man ceases to conform to the will of God and does the desires of the devil, it sickens and is deadened. One speaks of the sickness, hardening, uncleanness, spiritual death of the heart... The devil enters the heart of man and takes it captive...

Fantasy is what leads the devil's provocation into the heart. In fallen man fantasy, which is more subtle than thought and coarser than the nous, is the beginning of evil. Therefore the Fathers advise us to keep our fantasy pure, or better, to live in such a way as not to activate fantasy, but rather to mortify the imagination...

Hardness and callousness is another disease of the heart. Because it does not accept the grace of God, which changes everything, it remains hard...

Another sickness of the heart is inward self-indulgence. The heart's pleasure, instead of centring on and delighting in the

love of God, revolves around and enjoys carnal things, things displeasing to God. A self-indulgent heart is a prison of the soul, especially at the hour of death. According to St Mark the Ascetic, "A self-indulgent heart becomes a prison and chain for the soul when it leaves this life." The passions of the soul are satisfied as long as there is a body. But when the soul has been released from the body it will not be able to be satisfied, since it will lack material things. Therefore these passions, mainly self-indulgence of the soul, not finding satisfaction, will strangle the soul. This is the state of the 'toll-houses' spoken of in the patristic writings. This is why a self-indulgent heart is a prison and chain for the soul at the time of departure from this life.

A man's sick and dead soul transmits the sickness and darkening to his whole psychosomatic being. Whatever he thinks and desires is dead. Therefore Abba Dorotheos says that as long as we are subject to passion we must not trust our heart at all. For a crooked ruler makes even straight things crooked. And St Mark the Ascetic advises: "Until you have eradicated evil, do not obey your heart."

The sick heart must be healed. If it is not healed, man's whole organism is sick.

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### *Curing the heart*

After attempting to keep our nous pure and to drive away evil thoughts and fantasies, in order to keep our heart pure we must control our tongue and belly. For wordiness and gluttony are the things which defile the nous with their exhalations and then also defile the heart, since the nous is the supplier of food for the heart. "A brother asked Abba Tithoes, 'How should I guard my heart?' The old man said to him, 'How can we guard our hearts

when our mouths and our stomachs are open?””

Consequently, in order to seek a conscious Christian life and to attain salvation, one must find the place of the heart...

We must acquire a sense of the heart. The entire ascetic life in Christ is aimed at this. And when we find the heart we must make every effort for it to be cured of its spiritual sicknesses. Finding and curing the heart is essentially finding salvation.

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### *Consequences of thoughts*

When an evil thought lingers in someone and is not opposed but put into action, it reinforces the passion in him, and then it fights and torments him further.

Thoughts rot us and crush us, also creating problems in relations between people. ‘We spend all our time corrupting ourselves by the thoughts which we have against one another and tormenting ourselves...’[Abba Dorotheos]

Evil thoughts defile and pollute the soul, they damage it, they poison it...

Since thoughts separate man from God, they are followed by other, bodily abnormalities. Anguish, insecurity and physical illnesses are caused by thoughts. Physicians too have become aware of this. One thought can let someone lie sleepless for a whole night. So thoughts disturb a man’s soul and body.

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### *Curing thoughts*

...Facing thoughts with courage is a second martyrdom. The advice of all the Fathers is not to be agitated when one is attacked by satanic thoughts. St Barsanuphius says: “If the thought comes, do not be alarmed but understand what it wants

to do and counteract it without agitation, calling on the Lord.”

...We cannot rid ourselves of demonic thoughts by means of human thinking. We must abandon every thought, even if we are wise, and rest all our hope in God, saying, “Lord, arrange the matter as You wish and as You know...”[Abba Dorotheos]

...An effective method of getting rid of thoughts is to confess them to an experienced spiritual father. St John Cassian says, “Just as a snake which is brought from its dark hole into the light makes every effort to escape and hide itself, so the malicious thoughts that someone brings out into the open by sincere confession seek to depart from him.” Nothing so harms a monk and brings such joy to the demons as hiding his thoughts from his spiritual father. In this way his whole spiritual life is twisted and he becomes a plaything in the hands of the devil, who can do what he likes with him. Therefore St John Cassian teaches that nothing leads so surely to salvation as confessing our private thoughts to the most discriminating of the fathers and being guided by them towards virtue, rather than by our own thoughts and judgment. “He who conceals his thoughts remains unhealed.” Therefore we must confess the persistent thought, bring it to our spiritual father who has responsibility for our salvation. “Any thought that tarries in you and engages you in warfare, reveal to your Abba, and he, with God’s help, will heal you.” When we refer to a persistent thought we mean one that does not go away in spite of our objection, scorn and prayer, but continues to wage war against us, as well as the impassioned thought which is united with the passion...

When someone has learnt to open himself to God through his spiritual father and to expose all the wounds created by thoughts, and the thoughts themselves, and at the same time listens to his advice, he is set free from everything, he is inwardly

at peace, and he knows what the peace of Christ means.