

Hesychia and Theology

The Spiritual Law according to St Mark the Ascetic

The Spiritual Law on the Activity of the Passions and their Healing

According to the Orthodox ascetic method of our Church, when a sin is frequently repeated it becomes a passion. A passion is an illness which torments the soul and needs to be cured. It is a distortion of the energies of the soul, which instead of proceeding according to nature, take an unnatural course. Man must strive, therefore, to transform these powers of the soul. This struggle has rules of its own, which the holy Fathers describe, as St Mark the Ascetic does here.

The basic teaching of our holy Fathers is that the devil's provocation comes first, with images, thoughts and fantasies; this is followed by assent; next comes sin; and then repeated sin becomes a passion. We see this too in St Mark the Ascetic's teaching on asceticism.

He writes that wickedness is like an intricate net, and anyone who is careless when partially entangled "gets completely enmeshed". In fact everything that happens "has a small beginning" and when it is nourished it gradually grows. The devil's method is to "belittle" small sins, because otherwise he cannot lead a person on to committing greater ones.

Before the sin comes the "provocation" which is "an image-free stimulation in the heart", a movement of the heart without any sort of visualisation. This provocation takes place in many different ways, sometimes by means of thoughts and images coming from outside, sometimes through the imagination, sometimes through thoughts and images originating from

within.

It is impossible for a passion to come into being and exist without a thought, just as a cloud cannot be formed unless the winds blow. All the changes in our inner world arise from “the uneven quality of our thoughts”. Thoughts have received natural attributes from God, as have all visible things, and they have the ability to lead someone into good or evil. By virtue of this particular attribute of thoughts, a person who is led astray by them is blinded by them and cannot see the causes of sin, even though he can see its actual working. Precisely for this reason, a man who sins should blame “the thought, not the action”, because if the nous had not gone on ahead and committed sin, the body would not have followed.

After the provocation of the thought, which is accompanied by images, there follows “assent” on man’s part. A provocation which is “image-free”, in other words not connected with any visual image, does not involve any guilt. At this critical moment a person has the potential either to flee from the thought, like a brand plucked from the fire, or turn back until the fire blazes up. The fire signifies the provocation; the brand which can catch fire is man.

The outcome of consenting to the provocation and committing sin is that these images become established in man’s heart, in his inner realm, and then provocations and impulses to commit sin originate from there. These images engraved in the heart are described in various ways. At times they are called “images already established in the nous”, sometimes they are characterised as “thoughts activated and placed in the heart” and sometimes they are referred to as “evil dwelling in the heart”. The Fathers are fully aware that, just as there are some snakes which live in the countryside and others in houses, so there are

some passions which take shape in the thoughts, and others which come about through action. The evil that has settled in the heart is the product of long-standing habit. It is certainly the case that the evil which someone muses on in his thoughts “makes the heart brazen”.

The existing images already present in the heart give rise to temptation and are a source of stimulation and provocation. Consequently, there is one sort of provocation that comes through external images, and another which comes from the images ingrained within a person. The former “arise during thinking” and “precede”, whereas the latter, those images established in the nous, arise from the former and are more pernicious and stubborn.

From a pleasure-loving heart contaminated thoughts and words arise. It sometimes happens that man’s nous is still, but the images present in his inner realm are stirred up and provoke the nous.. The Spiritual Law to passion. In that case it is certain that the nous was captured beforehand by thoughts, then brought these thoughts and placed them in the heart.

Provocation, assent and repeated sin create a passion, in accordance with the irrefutable spiritual law which exists in man’s spiritual life. Indeed, many passions come into being, as passions reinforce each other.

St Mark the Ascetic evaluates the passions and records their causes. All vice is caused by self-esteem and sensual pleasure. The love of money is the root of all evil. Moreover, praise from other people is the source of lust. These three passions, namely avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure, blind man’s nous. It is significant that these three passions, which are described as leeches, are loved by their mother, folly. From them originate wrath, anger, wars, murders and the whole list of other evils.

Elsewhere St Mark refers to the “twelve shameful passions”.

The passions are linked. Even if one passion is absent, the action of another passion makes up for it. For instance, if someone abandons the world, thus ridding himself of the passion of avarice, but leads a life of self-indulgence, he is doing in essence what he would have done if he had money, although he has none. Although he has no money at his disposal, he is nevertheless not liberated from the passion of avarice. Likewise, a self-controlled man who has acquired money is a brother to the sort of person we have just described. The difference is that, although he has the same mother, namely “noetic enjoyment”, he has another father, “a different passion”. So in both cases the underlying fact is that the nous delights in avarice, although the results differ.

Self-indulgence is a strange passion, and also the source of other passions. The thoughts of a pleasure-loving man are unstable, because sometimes he weeps and laments for his sins, and at other times he fights and contradicts his neighbour in his pursuit of pleasures. Moreover, self-indulgence is the mother of other passions, as happens with other passions as well. Self-indulgence leads to negligence, and negligence to forgetfulness of everything God has bestowed on us. Forgetfulness as such has no power, but gains strength in proportion to our negligence.

The passions are cunning and difficult to diagnose. For instance, someone can praise another person, and accusation and reproach may be concealed in his praise. Or someone else can be outwardly humble, but esteem himself highly and pursue the empty glory of the world. A time will come, however, when the truth hidden in falsehood will be exposed. It sometimes happens that someone praises another person while

at the same time condemning him. Such a person is possessed by self-esteem and envy. He is trying to hide his jealousy through praise, and through criticism to appear better than the other person. Passions have many grave consequences, as the spiritual law underlines. By the three passions of avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure man's "nous is made blind". Again, if someone is fulfilling a commandment but is serving a passion, through evil thoughts he destroys the goodness of the action. The deceiver who does something evil in secret is a snake who lies on the road and bites people. Anyone who mingles his own will with a commandment is an "adulterer", and because of his stupidity he suffers pain and dishonour in his life. Ignorance and forgetfulness are hell. Seeking human glory will bring shame on a man. At the time of death, when the soul leaves the body, a self-indulgent heart becomes a prison and chain for the soul. Anyone who becomes angry with his neighbour on account of riches, glory or pleasure, does not realise that God orders all things with justice. A person who schemes against his neighbour cannot receive mercy from God and be saved, just as sheep and wolves cannot feed together.

Within the spiritual law there is also an account of the means by which man can be cured of passions. St Mark the Ascetic gives various counsels for this purpose.

Firstly he stresses the need for repentance, as we have seen already. Anyone who sins openly and does not repent, but has suffered nothing before his death, will face judgment without mercy. Both repentance and healing are required. A person should imitate the blind man in the Gospel and cast away his garment, because by so doing he will draw near to Christ and become His disciple and a preacher of more perfect doctrines. We must understand that God and our conscience know all

the secrets concealed in our inner world. Therefore we should try to put these things right. When someone sins without any need, it is hard for him to repent, since his sin was committed deliberately.

Healing from the passions and the images which exist within our soul and constantly provoke us cannot be achieved “except through the action of the Holy Spirit”. So we must seek God’s help through prayer. When someone wanted to do evil, but prayed out of habit, he was providentially prevented from sinning, and later thanked God.

Along with help from God, we must struggle to be healed and delivered from the passions. One method is to know the causes of the passions, because he who is ignorant of them falls easily. We should eliminate the occasions for the three passions, avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure; this means we should not love the world, but not that we should hate God’s creation. It is impossible to overcome a passion unless we hate the cause of every vice, namely self-esteem and sensual pleasure. We must hate avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure, which are mothers of the vices and stepmothers of the virtues. That is what is meant by saying that we should not entangle ourselves in the affairs of this life, because anyone who wants to overcome the passions while entangled in the world, is like a man who tries to put out a fire with straw. We will be able to see the devil’s tricks when we reject all thoughts of greed.

We should not fulfil the desires of the flesh, because only then, with God’s help, will we be healed. At the same time we must strive to acquire the corresponding virtues. A person can kill evil with self-restraint and hope in God. A hard heart is cured by suffering hardship and affliction. The continuous remembrance of God and the recollection of divine retribution

help a man not to sin, as happened in the case of the King and Prophet David, and 83 they also help to deliver him from passions. When someone hears evil words he should be angry with himself and not with those who speak them, because listening in a sinful way will make him sinful too, and the form of the sins he hears about will also be imprinted on him. If someone comes across people gossiping idly, he should consider himself responsible for their talk, or at least realise that he is liable for an old debt.

The struggle to heal the passions has to be all-embracing and conducted on many fronts. It should not be restricted to one passion. It is possible for someone to cut off one passion for the sake of greater self-indulgence. Sometimes such a man is praised by those unaware of his aim, and he may even be unaware himself that his effort is futile.