

# Thoughts and how to confront them

*Hiermonk Benedict of Holy Mount Athos*



*"Just as it is natural for ocean rocks to be pounded by waves,  
similarly man will undoubtedly come into contact with the assaults borne of thoughts"  
(St. Ephraim the Syrian).*

Translation by Calliope Hatzidimitriou  
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## **PREFACE**

Among the problems which man must confront at his moments of prayer, are the various thoughts which enter his mind, or nous.

This booklet is not the result of an experienced study on this important topic of thoughts and reasonings. It is a discourse which took place some time ago. It is presented here in a much improved version without having lost its original figure of speech. Since there are many who struggle with obscene and impure thoughts and even more who "panic", this attempt is made so that the combatant and fighting Christian may understand what thoughts are, where they come from, what their results are, and how they are confronted.

If anyone is benefited by this small piece of work, let him pray for those who labored for it.  
Hiermonk Benedict

### **Translator's Note**

In this age of knowledge and technology, an age full of facts concerning the nature of man's body and soul, one still thirsts for the truth as given to us by Our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, in addition to His Saints and our Holy Fathers of The Church. We cannot be Christians if we do not know and believe, in full, what Our Lord tells us. He warns us of the existence of the evil one and shows us exactly how to win over him, lest he win over us who call ourselves the children of Christ. The beginner Christian who takes his first steps on the ladder towards Christ will no doubt experience many wonderful moments in his strengthening of faith. There will come a time during his journey up this ladder, when he will desire to plunge himself more deeply into Christ. That is when he will come to the point in his spiritual journey when he will combat with his thoughts. He will desire to examine each thought individually to determine if it is Christ's will or not. He will be surprised at the frequency of thoughts which arise from the devil and his company. In this age of temptations, if a person is single, he may have lustful thoughts, whereas if married, he may have thoughts of divorcing his spouse, etc. This age of advanced technology allows us to separate and destroy our families as if they were worthless, thus causing irreparable wounds to our own loved ones, as well as ourselves...to our souls and our bodily health. There will be times when even prayer will seem impossible! We are told by our knowledgeable psychologists that dreams and thoughts are caused by suppressed desires and fears. However, Our Lord teaches us that we must not even accept corrupt thoughts since they are also sin. "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man". (Matthew 15:18-20).

In the war against thoughts we must constantly remember Our Lord's words: "Be holy, for I Am Holy" (1 Peter 1:16), and have faith that He will teach us. "I who speak to you am He" (The Messiah) (John 4:25-26). Our Lord tells us that: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth". Most assuredly, "I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day...Therefore, everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. I am the bread of life. I am the living bread. If anyone eats of

this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whosoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up at the last day. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one. If you love Me, keep My Commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. Peace I leave with you. Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid. I am the vine, you are the branches. When He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world just as I am not of the world. As you sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. (John).

He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none he says, "I will return to my house from which I came". And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds and to him who knocks it will be opened\*.(Luke).

"Be near Me beloved children. Understand that your souls live, and evil exists. All that is written in My Blessed Word is not a myth; Satan exists and seeks to ruin your souls. I suffer to see you slumbering and unaware of his existence. I come, giving you warnings, giving you signs, but how many of you will read My warnings like fairytales? Beloved, I am your

Saviour; do not deny My Word; turn to Me and feel the pangs of love I have for you. Why are you so willing to thrust yourselves at Satan's feet? O come! All of you who believe no more in Me. Come and behold...All you who wound My Soul, arise, revive, and see My Light. Do not fear Me; I will take your sins, and My Blood will wash them. I come to look for you, My lost sheep". ("True Life in God\*\ V. Ryden, Vol. 1,1991).

"Every sinful person is all mixed up inside. We must open a small crack in our souls so that Christ's Light and Love can enter. That is how we begin to straighten out our soul. Christ always takes the initiative. We must be open to Him and afterwards, through our own vigilant effort (with prayer, confession, Holy Communion and love) we may feel the magnificence that God reveals to us. He has destined all of us for Paradise. And what is Paradise? Christ is. When you love Christ, despite all your feeling of sinfulness and your weaknesses, you have the certainty that you have gone beyond death because you dwell in the communion of Christ's Love. May God make us worthy to see the Face of The Lord, both here on earth and from there, where we are going" ("Elder Porphyries", K. Ioannidis, Holy Convent of Transfiguration of the Saviour, Athens, Greece,1997).

"I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit". We should be aware that Satan knows Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God, but he does not love Him. In fact, he hates Him and all mankind. ("The Devil and Magic", Hiermonk Benedict, New Skiti, Holy Mount Athos, Greece, 1997). The evil one is constantly attacking us. For this reason we must stay close to Jesus Christ by reading His Word.

As Bishop Kallistos Ware says in "Inner Kingdom", we should read The Holy Bible every day and by opening it randomly we achieve three things: 1) you will learn His Law, 2) at the same time you will be in prayer, 3) the Lord will speak to you.

With The Lord's help everyone who desires His Holy Spirit will find it. AMEN.

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## **1. The difficult war**

It has been stated many times that prayer is a dynamic action which is beneficial for the person who offers the prayer as well as being pleasing to God.

The fact that all this is real irritates the devil and makes him fight against the person who engages in prayer.

In this manner, the faithful person who desires to unite himself to God through prayer, faces obstacles placed by demons. These demons place barriers which are systematically organized and planned in order for their attacks to be successful.

Due to this inevitable attack, prayer becomes an act of labor which causes great toil. More so than any other type of work. That is why one of the "Desert Fathers" emphasizes that "there is no grater gatigue than for someone to pray to God. In order for someone to pray until his last breath he is required to struggle.

It is not only prayer which is tiring. It is mostly the implacable battle of the demons which makes prayer much more fatiguing.

Therefore, the hatred which the demons have for those who pray is a reality. The war between the person who prays and the demons, has two aspects to it: the visible (mostly for the beginners) and the invisible for the spiritually advanced. They use sound, objects, and cause noises in order to draw their attention away from prayer. Whether beginner or advanced, the demons often fight a person by use of thoughts.

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It is truly a difficult battle for whoever has chosen to commence the battle against thoughts. For, the thoughts and reasonings are the greatest barrier man faces in order to achieve his spiritual education and perfection. And this perfection can by no other means be achieved than by the

continuous invocation of the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. In fact, the invocation must be done often enough, as Saint Gregory, the Theologian emphasizes, so that "it is more desirable for one to commemorate God than it is to breathe".

There exists, however, the internal war. There is no war more fierce than an irrational thought which nests in our soul. All that which originates from inside us, is more intense than that which strikes us from the outside. The illnesses which are borne from inside us are sly and treacherous, causing greater damage than an external wound. Even nations were harder hit by internal enemies, compared to those who invaded from a nation's exterior.

In this way then, the soul cannot be destroyed as much by the machinations that come from the outside as by the diseases which grow inside us, which are the loathsome, obscene and blasphemous thoughts.

## **2. Thoughts and their origin**

What are thoughts and where do they originate? When we say thoughts, we do not simply mean reflections, but also the images and the conditions under which they exist with each occurrence along with the most suitable reflections. Thus, the descriptive images, along with the reflections, are called thoughts and reasonings.

The first and foremost cause of thoughts in man is The Original Sin. Up to that point, man's mind, was "one-tracked", that is, it was not distracted to think of other things. It's only thoughts were for God! From the time of The Original Sin, the thoughts of doubt began and, in continuation, came all the other thoughts.

The second cause of instigation of thoughts in man are his senses, when they are not properly governed by their ruling mind. It is especially so for hearing and sight. Today, particularly due to technology, (T.V. Radio, etc) the senses receive more stimulations than ever before. For this reason, the battle against thoughts is more intense.

The third cause is the passions which exist in man. It is because of these that the demons gain the opportunity to mobilize the malicious thoughts against us.

The fourth and primary cause, are the demons. St. Gregory of Sinai, characteristically emphasizes: "Thoughts are the words of the demons and forerunners of passions".

In addition, St. Isaac, the Syrian, accentuates that "the natural desire" which exists in us as well as our soul's inclinations and tendencies, cause thoughts to arise.

This war is especially intense against monks, who many times have had to combat against the demons body to body, during the attack by cunning thoughts. That is why St. Maximus, the Confessor, states that this war is much more difficult than the perceptible war.

In addition, cunning thoughts may arise due to the temperament and constitution of the body, and even from daily meals, as well as the movements and motions undergone by the body itself. The above-mentioned causes give rise to lewd and impure thoughts.

### **3. The journey towards the world of sin**

Externally, the act of sin may appear to be a simple fact, such as a car accident or some other incident. However, in order to commit this act, many other successive instrumentations must have taken place. For example, in order for a murder to take place, there must have, beforehand, occurred thousands of reflections and plans in the human mind. The human mind, in order to come to the point of committing the act of murder, had first become an entire base of demonic thoughts. This is what happens with the commitment of any act of sin. And it all started because of one simple thought...

Let us proceed, however, to see what happens, after the assault of one simple thought.

We are not held liable for a simple thought or image which passes through our mind, nor is it difficult for us to confront it. However, from the moment that we open the door to welcome in this thought and commence to ponder it, it is then that the thought takes its position within us and become a prevailing thought.

The thought is the main reason "for the journey towards the act of sin". This journey is for us the same as the path and the evolution of disease in the human body. Just as for someone to go to a hospital, a various series of events must have previously taken place in the human organism, it is the same for someone to reach the point of having committed the act of sin. A great war must have previously taken place. It is similar to the birth of a child. A complete series of events first take place: from the conception up to the lengthy pregnancy. It is exactly so in the case of sin. The conception of the thoughts, their gestation period and their birth. St. Nikodimus, the Athonite, believes that the thought is the beginning, or the root out of which sprouts the trunk, the branches and the complete tree of sin!

The damage begins from the instance of the first thought, and, in continuation, it intensifies. When someone throws a pebble into a well, the waves caused by its tossing create one small ripple in the beginning. The small ripple creates a larger ripple, that goes on to create a larger one, up until the wave reaches the walls of the well.

It is exactly so with sin. Before the sin is committed, a succession of mechanisms and events previously take place and each one follows the other in consecutive order.

#### **4. The stages of sin**

We are able to perceive three stages in the journey towards the world of sin in this order:

a. the assault, b. the consent or approval, and c. the captivity or imprisonment.

How does this mechanism work? It works in this way: Some cunning thought such as conceit, vainglory, stinginess, gluttony, condemnation, etc., enters the person's mind. Temptation works through the use of the imagination and its fantasies. It presents the situation as enticing as possible. In this way, its presentation becomes stronger and more attractive.

Up to this point, man is not liable for the thought. The first stage is an assault, an attack from the enemy, or more simply put, the enemy's knocking on that person's door! This situation is normal... physiological. It is not possible for a human to exist without having received an assault. St. Ephraim, the Syrian, says that just as it is normal for someone to find weeds and flowers growing together in a garden, or just as the islands are pounded by waves all around their coastline, so it is for man. It is most certain that the will come into contact with the attacks of evil thoughts.

From this point on comes the stage of sinning. The commencement of the battle is the assault. If man tosses it out of his mind, without deliberating on it, he then saves himself and liberates himself from the wretched consequences which would follow. If, however, he accepts the discourse with the cunning thought, he opens the door to this impure thought which



previously was simply a "knocking on his door". He creates a friendship with it and then comes to the point of approval of the sin. This is the second stage of the execution of the sin. The person, rehearses the sin in the inaccessible depths of his soul and imagines himself having an active part in sinning. He condemns, blasphemes, fornicates, commits adultery, murders, and carries out countless crimes and commits whatever the human mind is capable of imagining. Later, nothing else remains but the third stage, which is the actual execution of the act of sin by the person whose mind has become a hostage of the thought. This person no longer controls the thought, but is imprisoned by it.

Thus, the thought, which began with a simple knocking of the door (the assault), caused the opening of that door (the consent). In Conclusion, the person was unable to control and dismiss the thought, and he eventually committed the act of sin. This is the path towards sin, which begins with one single thought.

## **5. Passions are the source of sinful thoughts**

Up to the point of a man's death and as long as his soul remains in his body, it is impossible for him not to have evil thoughts.

The main reason for the existence of these evil thoughts is the war which the devil wages against us. Most thoughts are of diabolical origin. It is the devil's aim to cast man into sinning, either through the use of evil thoughts or through the performance of the act itself. St. Makarios, the Egyptian, states that spiritual adultery is the consent one gives to cunning thoughts. This is why he says: "a person is obliged to maintain his soul pure and clean, since it is the bride of Christ".

In most instances, evil thoughts resemble themselves to "a river current", in front of which a man begins to panic. That is why the demons first bout with us by use of diabolical thoughts and then follow with materialistic things. If one yields to them, they will then slowly push that person into sinning by execution of the act of sin.

St. John of Damascus, tells us that the dominating reasons for evil are eight, the following: 1. Gluttony, 2. Fornication, 3. Stinginess, 4. Rage, 5. Grief, 6. Indifference, 7. Vainglory and 8. Pride and haughtiness.

Someone else may tell us that the most basic passion in a human, from which all the passions originate, is selfishness and conceit. Selfishness is the illogical self-love and care given to our own self. This is also the passion of today's human being. It is from selfishness that the three dominating thoughts originate: 1. Gluttony, 2. Vainglory, and 3. Haughtiness. From these three vices arise all evil thoughts.

## **6. Categories of thoughts**

All that has been stated previously refer to cunning thoughts. However, in addition to those, there exist the good-hearted thoughts and the idle and unprofitable, or human thoughts. The good-hearted arise from God. How shall we then discern them from those which are cunning and impure?

A fellow monk once asked Abba Varsanoufio about this issue and received the following explanation: "The thoughts which originate from God bring internal peace and joy to the person. On the contrary, the thoughts which originate from the devil are filled with agitation, disturbance and grief.

## **7. Thoughts are the beginning of the war**

Generally speaking, as previously mentioned, the thoughts are the beginning of the war which the devil wages against us. The war begins with assault of cunning thoughts and later proceeds to the consent and approval of the sin.

This is the path and the development of thoughts which predominantly arise from the devil and from man.

## **8. The demonic cunningness**

Let us examine, then, how man is attacked by thoughts, or which methods the demons use in order to overtake us through the use of thoughts.

The craftiness of the demons, which desire to sow within us countless impure thoughts, is indescribable. The devil will even take advantage of the most unimportant incident that has taken place in our lives, or the most improbable and unlikely situation to contaminate us.

To begin with, before they cast us into sin, they implant in us the thought that God is a philanthropist. After the act of sin, however, they bombard us with the thought that God is abrupt, rude and harsh. They do this in order to bring us to the point of despair. "Before the fall, they call God a philanthropist, whereas after the fall abrupt and harsh".

## **9. Blasphemous thoughts**

In following, they attempt to infect the holy moments, such as those of prayer, and the Holy Eucharist, or by implanting in our minds thoughts of blasphemy against God.

Thus, this vile and impure being adores the moments of Holy Gatherings and especially the dreadful moments of the Holy Sacraments (The Holy Eucharist) in order to blaspheme the Lord and the Sacred Feasts. That is, when the ceremony of The Holy Eucharist takes place, Satan comes and implants in us various blasphemous thoughts. Thoughts such as: "The Holy Eucharist is not The Holy Body and Blood of Christ", and that "that which we go to receive in us is absolutely nothing"! Worthless! There are even more impure and wretchedly vile thoughts which one dares not mention.

St. John of Mount Sinai, mentions that a monk was fighting a war against such thoughts for fourteen whole years. There is no other thought as difficult to withdraw and cast out as that of the thought of blasphemy, which may lead a person to despair.

This is a war in which the Abbot Pamvo took part and, while he was praying to the Lord for assistance, heard a divine voice from above which said: "Pamvo, Pamvo, do not distress yourself with the sins of others, but tend to your own acts".

These blasphemous and vile thoughts battled with many other formidable and virtuous men, such as Meletios the Confessor, as well as others who witnessed and died because of their faith in The Lord. Amongst those saints who confirm this is St. Peter of Alexandria and Pafnoutios the Confessor, who suffered persecution. St. Peter of Alexandria narrates that: "While I was admitting and confessing my faith in The Lord Jesus Christ in the court of law, where they were, by the use of various means, flogging, skinning and burning my body, the demon inside me was blaspheming God".

It is certain, as St. Nikodemus the Athonite points out, that these types of thoughts originate mainly due to the condemnation, the haughtiness, and the jealousy of the demons. For these reasons, the best weapons one may use against them are humility and self reproach.

## **10. The chain of thoughts**

The following are referred to in the writings of St. John of the Climacus, of Mount Sinai: "Let us take notice and we will observe that at the time when the church bells sound and we see our brethren gather into the Church, the invisible enemies also gather themselves there. Still others gather themselves at the time when we prepare to wake up to go to Church and do so in order to suggest to us that we should return to our sleep. They say, "...stay and rest until

the introductory and preliminary hymns are completed and then you can go to Church'. Again, others, while we are deep in prayer, come to us in order to bring us drowsiness, others to bring hunger, others to suggest to us to lean on the wall as if we were tired, and others cause us to yawn". Others remind us of loan payments, contracts and bank accounts. So, it is, that in this manner, we leave the Church harmed instead of benefited, without having heard even the most fundamental parts of the Holy Liturgy. There are even many times while we are in prayer, that our mind becomes filled with improper and indecent thoughts. Yet, as the time the prayer finishes, every temptation suddenly disappears.

The devil is well-aware of the benefits which are borne from prayer. For this reason, he attempts to contaminate it.

Even if we are victorious over the demon, he installs in us the thoughts of pride and haughtiness through the use of other means, such as the fact that we have attained virtue, since, for example, all the cunning and tempting thoughts have been terminated.

This thought, that we are victorious, resembles a snake which is coiled and hidden in the dung heap of haughtiness. Cunning and tempting thoughts are hidden and nesting in the depths of our hearts!

There are demons who infect our soul at the moment we lay down to sleep and there are others who contaminate our very first thoughts when we wake up in the morning. The devil never loses the chance of fighting us.

There are times when he implants in us thoughts which are against our spiritual confessor and guide. In other occasions immediately after the confession of our sins, he reminds us of the sins we have just confessed in order to bring us to the point of despair. Yet other times, he even casts us into sin and, following that, installs in us the thought of teaching others to perform the same sin!

These, in general terms, are the thoughts which are created by the devil.

Let us now examine the thoughts which are created by man, himself.

The human mind is fond of creating havoc. That is, just as a dog goes to the butcher store in order to grab some piece of meat, or a food-lover is fond of continually speaking of food, the human mind resembles these examples. Many times, it feeds on improper and unclean notions.

A monk who has no possessions, who owns no property (and by definition is Christian), therefore has no troublesome temptations at the time of his prayer. There are no thoughts of problems or issues concerning possessions or lands, which enter his mind to break his concentration at the time of prayer. However, a person who owns properties and possessions and is fond of them, has his reflections and thoughts on materialistic things at the time of his

prayer.

The person who cannot control himself, that is a person who is a glutton, has his mind and thoughts continuously concerned about impure images. St. John of the Climacus gives us an example of this. Just as a dung heap gives rise to vermin, so does the multitude of food generate downfalls through the production of cunning thoughts and indecent dreams.

Gluttony is for fornication the same as wood is for fire.

It is for this reason that St. John of Mount Sinai when writing in "The Climacus", after his dissertation concerning gluttony very wisely placed the topic of fornication.

"For, I believe", he states, "that gluttony is the mother of fornication".

So then, where do the thoughts of fornication originate? If a person enjoys a leisurely life with all the necessary comfort and, as a result, does not know how to endure hardships and has no knowledge of how to engage in spiritual exercises of ascetic nature, then it is very natural for this person to have thoughts of fornication which will eventually lead to the act. In other instances, again, when a person liberates senses in order to view some other person or to touch someone with his hand, or hear something indecent, it is as if at that moment, he has opened the door to impure thoughts. Of course, man's nature is prone him to having such thoughts.

Even the disobedience to God's covenants gives birth to a "warehouse of thoughts". That is, the human mind becomes a storage of cunning thoughts. The same types of thoughts are also created by disobeying our confessor and spiritual father.

Many times, human curiosity to explore God's mysteries creates blasphemous thoughts, such as the thought that God is unjust and favors some persons over others. That to some He gives visions and miracles and yet to others He gives nothing!

## **11. Combination of thoughts**

There exist, however, thoughts which originate from man as well as the devil. These are the "combination thoughts".

"7 have seen", says St. John of The Climacus, "a few men eating with delight and not being immediately attacked (by the impure thoughts). Also others, dining and keeping company with women and yet not having had any cunning thought pass through their mind at that moment in time. However, at the time when they thought that they were in their cell in a condition of peace and security, that is when they were suddenly overtaken by disaster. Nature is what pushed them to dining and drinking delightfully and viewing wantonly.

Satan used the moment and cast them into sin".

These are, in general terms, the thoughts which originate from man as well as the devil.

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Throughout all this battle, there exists a ladder; attack, combination, consent, captivity.

The enemy attacks the person with one simple thought or with one image. When that person accepts, then the consent takes place. Then begins the conversation with the thought. From this moment on begins the person's own responsibility for thoughts or actions. Following, the person consents with delight in order to fulfill that which the thought suggests, and in the end he submits and is imprisoned by the passion.

## **12. Results of the thoughts**

When the thought ages inside us, we then become servants to attempt its accomplishment. Attempt is the attachment of a person to material items and his desire to obtain only these items. Thus, the person's mind becomes detached from the eternal nourishment. And when the person's mind withdraws totally from God, then "it becomes either ferocious or devilish". That is, the person becomes either as a beast or a demon. We observe this happening in today's consumer society. The person's mind has become adhered only to the earthly and has no thought whatsoever of heaven. The result is that the person is transformed into a beast and handicraft (technology) in whatever form, has been deified.

Man becomes unrestrained. He cannot control himself. When a person does not fight against the cunning thought, he then becomes a slave of sin. "Whoever retains the thoughts of sin, without fighting nor arguing with them, then commits the act of sin". Our thoughts corrupt us and crush us, thus creating problems within our personal relationships.

Thoughts pollute and contaminate our soul, poisoning it and mortifying it. "This is the battle of the cunning demon. And with these arrows he poisons all souls", as St. Hysichios the Elder tells us.

With the acceptance of thoughts, the devil obtains authority and can drive a person even to suicide, since that person cannot withstand the devil's strength. The thought makes the soul under handed. That is, it ties the human soul to the earthly things. The person who senses the continuous harassments of corrupt thoughts and feels the underbelly of the body on fire, reveals that he is distanced from the sweet fragrance of The Holy Spirit.

One then loses his outspokenness with God. When the mind begins to converse with shameful and indecent thoughts, then "it is discredited in its frankness towards God". It is not

possible for God to have communion, that is communication, with a person whose mind is continually being polluted with indecent and cunning thoughts. Just as it is detestable for an earthly lord when he observes someone denouncing him in order to converse with his enemies, so it is with God.

"Impure thoughts separate God from man". God does not reveal His mysteries to a person who is possessed by defiled thoughts.

Since thoughts separate man from God, consequently, for this reason, a number of bodily abnormalities then arise. Anxiety, insecurity, and fear, on top of many other bodily illnesses, are caused by thoughts. These causes are apparent even to medical doctors. For this reason, they order their patients not to think of various things which would cause them distress. One thought is enough to cause a person to lose his sleep all night long. It is for this reason can even break his nerves. The holy father, the Abbot Theodore, used to say: "The thought comes in order to disturb me".

These, in brief, are the results of cunning and corrupt thoughts. We should, however, also see the manners in which one must confront these types of thoughts, which mostly originate from the devil.

### **13. The confrontation of thoughts**

How can someone become liberated from shameful thoughts?

The Saints and Holy Fathers of our Church have made evident to us, the various ways of confronting such thoughts.

St. John Chrysostome advises us not to declare or express them, but to choke them with silence. It is just as the beasts and reptiles when they fall into the pit. If then find some outlet upwards, they climb up and out and usually become more ferocious. If, however, they continuously remain enclosed therein, they are easily lost and disappear.

The same happens with the polluting thoughts. If they find some outlet by way of a person's mouth to be verbally expressed, they then light up the internal flame. If, however, they are blockaded with silence, they become weak. They dissolve hunger and quickly disappear.

The passage, "How could I do anything so wicked, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) is appropriate. When any type of illogical thought comes to agitate us, let us think of how the most minuscule and illogical thoughts cannot be hidden from God.

The study of God's Laws, the remembrance of things which are to take place in the future, as well as all that God has done just for us, decreases the corrupt thoughts. They, therefore, cannot take root within us.

Their redemption. Just as a snake coming out of its nest runs in order to hide elsewhere, so it is with loathsome thoughts. When they are redeemed, they then depart from the person. We should know that nothing makes the demons un-happier than the concealment of shameful thoughts.

The exhaustion of the soul and the bodily trials "on all occasions, places and things" can a person in not having indecent thoughts.

"Tend to rid yourself from the passions and you will immediately expel these thoughts from your mind stresses St. Maximus the Confessor. That is, in order for someone to rid himself from fornication, he should weary himself bodily and fast. In order to dismiss rage and sadness, he should despise fame and glory, dishonesty and disgrace. In order to dispel revenge, he should pray for the person who caused him harm.

We cannot hinder thoughts from coming to us. We can, however, not accept them. It is the same as with crows. Just as we cannot stop them from flying overhead of us, we can however, prevent them from building their nests on our heads.

Let us follow what St. Basil has to say concerning this topic and the war that is involved.

"We should confront these attacks with intensive care and attentiveness, just as an athlete when he evades his opponent's blows with the accurate precaution necessary, together with the flexibility of his body. We should entrust the ending of the war and the avoidance of the arrows, to prayer and assistance from above.

And even if the tricky enemy, during the hour of prayer, subjects us to cunning fantasies, the soul should not interrupt its prayer. The soul should also know that it is not responsible for the cunning attacks undertaken by the enemy, in addition to the fantasies emanating from the "paradoxical miracle maker". On the contrary, he should think of the fact that these thoughts are due to the impertinence of the inventor of evil. That person should then intensify his kneeling to The Lord and should plead to God to dissolve the cunning partition caused by irrational and absurd thoughts, so that, unhindered, he can approach God.

If, however, the harmful attack of the thought becomes more intense due to the impudence of the enemy, we should not turn to cowardice nor quit the battle in its duration, but instead, we should endure up to the point when God will notice our perseverance. He will then enlighten us with the Grace of The Holy Spirit, which will on one hand cause the enemy to flee, and on the other hand flood our mind with Holy Light, in order for the thought to adore God with uninterrupted tranquillity and joy".

In general, the Holy Fathers have these methods of confronting corrupt thoughts: a) Prayer, b) Objection, and c) Contempt.



a) Prayer, It is not possible for the beginner to rid himself of these thoughts on his own. It is only those perfected in prayer who know how to do this.

The prayer of the mind, the monologistic prayer of "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner", is the strongest weapon which someone can use in order to win over cunning thoughts. "The name of Jesus scourges the enemies. There is truly no stronger weapon on earth nor in heaven", stresses St. John of the Climacus.

"The ever sweet Name of Jesus, continuously meditated on with fervent passion and faith in the depths of the heart, lulls to sleep all the evil thoughts, while awakening all the pure and spiritual. And wherever there originated impure thoughts from the heart such as murder, adultery (Matthew 15:19), as the Lord said, it is from there that follow thoughts filled with purity, and speech of wisdom and Grace.

b) The Objection. Prayer is for the beginners and the weak. Those who are able to combat should then use objection, which usually muzzles the demons to silence. Our Lord used this method in order to win the three great wars which were begun in the desert mountain by the devil. Sensuality with "Man shall not live by bread lone", Ambition with "You shall not tempt The Lord Your God", Avarice with "You shall worship "he Lord Your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Matthew 4:10)".

The Holy Martyr Peter of Damascus relates he following to us: "When the demons inflict us with a thought of pride, then you should remember he shameful thoughts which they flung at to you, and thus you should humble yourself. Then again, when you are subjected to corrupt thoughts, remember those thoughts of pride and be victorious over them by the use of this method so that you either lose hope because of the impure thoughts, or become proud because of the good ones".

This is just what one elder said when he would find himself subjected to thoughts of laughtiness: "Old man, take a strong look at your fornication", and the war would then come to an end.

There are instances when one musters up all his spiritual strength, all the pure thoughts, and yet still is unable to dispel one evil thought. What is the cause of this? "It is due to the fact that we begin by accepting the thought of judging our brethren". By judging our brothers our thoughts lose the strength which they previously had. There are many times when we are nonsensical and, for this reason, we are overpowered by thoughts. Many times, however, we do not have the power to withstand these thoughts. As a result, we receive spiritual wounds so deep that they cannot recover, even with the passage of a great period of time.

For this reason, it is best for one to resort to the power of prayer and tears, because:

1) The soul does not always have the same strength, 2) the devil has thousands of years of experience, whereas ours is very limited, with the result of us quitting the battle defeated and wounded, since our nous is yet again polluted with corrupt fantasies, and 3) one dispels haughtiness and shows humility when one takes refuge in God at the time of the war of thoughts, and confesses weakness in the fight, while declaring Jesus Christ the only One who withstands the war, since it is He who said: "Take courage, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). That is, the passions, the thoughts and the devil.

c) Contempt. If we occupy ourselves with the thoughts that are imposed on us by the devil, we will never be able to do any good.

To dislike, to disregard and not to be occupied with the thoughts imposed by the enemy are the greatest weapons. These are the strongest blows one can throw to the devil. We must regard his thoughts as being vermin, as the barks of puppies, as mosquitoes, and in the worst instance, as the noise of an airplane and nothing else, since: 1) we believe in the power of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and 2) we believe that after the Crucifixion and the Death of Our Lord, the devil has no power whatsoever over us, but remains powerless and weak, as is written: "O enemy, destructions are finished forever"! (Psalm 9:6).

There exists no greater victory and humiliation for the demon than this contempt and scorn, since the person who has arrived at this point in the battle, is armed with the Grace of God and remains unapprehended by the thoughts imposed by demons.

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These are the three methods of combating corrupt thoughts which originally arise from the devil.

In addition, we could say that the memory of death is a very powerful method for the contempt of these thoughts. The memory of this creates heartfelt pain for our sins and prevents our mind from accepting such thoughts. Whosoever considers the passing day as being the last in his life, will curb the shameful thoughts to a very great extent. Do you sit down at a table in order to have your meal? You should then think of death in order for gluttony not to tempt you.

We should paint a picture in our mind of our tombstone, in order to erase the inconsideration and heartlessness we have. Abba Silouanos, the latest formally declared saint of the Mount Athos, said: "You should have your mind continually thinking of Hell, and do not despair". By these means no thought will ever take root in you.

Which method should we use in order to escape the ongoing and tortuous suffering, (as St. Theodore Stouditis aptly characterizes the thoughts)?

Let us follow the tactics of St. John of Kolovos, who had tested all the methods available. The great spiritual fighter advises us to do the following:

"I resemble a person who sits under a great tree and who suddenly sees a great herd of beasts and reptiles coming to attack him. Then, since he cannot easily withstand, runs up the tree and saves himself. This is exactly what I do. I sit in my cell and watch the cunning thoughts coming to confront me. That is when I climb "The Tree of Life", to my God with prayer and in by this way I am saved from the enemy".