

Concerning Thoughts (Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Just as so-called diagnostic physicians not only know how to treat external and visible wounds of the body, but also, by measuring the pulse, they learn the internal and invisible maladies of the heart, of the bowels, and the other unseen workings of the human body, and are therefore able to treat them. Likewise, Spiritual Father, it is not enough for you only to know how to treat the external passions of the soul, those acts and deeds and effects of sin, but it is also necessary to know through the confession of the penitent the internal wounds of his soul, which are the hidden passions in his heart and the passionate and evil thoughts, and so treat them with great scrutiny and care. For these reason we thought it good to inform you a little about some general and vital matters concerning thoughts.



1. How many types of thoughts there are

Know then, Spiritual Father, that in general, all thoughts are of three types: some thoughts are good, some thoughts are vain and idle, some thoughts are bad. Concerning good thoughts, it is not necessary to discuss here in detail how and from what aspects of soul they arise, for we are satisfied that these are good and therefore beneficial and salvific to the soul. We say this only, Spiritual Father, that if someone says to you during confession that he has good thoughts, you should counsel him to take care to be humble and to never trust in himself and become prideful: 1) because a person on his own is not able to do a good work or say a good word or even think a good thought without the power and help of God: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God (2 Cor. 3:5); 2) because the devil is so cunning and evil, that many times he brings evil from good and through good thoughts throws those who are not careful into self-esteem, and conceit, and haughtiness, from which is caused the destruction and death of the soul. So says Paul: "Sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good" (Rom. 7:13); 3) because man never remains in one state, but is so changing and so quickly alters that, with his thoughts, in one instant he is found in Paradise and in another instant he is in hell, as one Saint said. And St. Isaac says: "By the mind we improve, and by the mind we become unprofitable, hence the one who today has good thoughts may very well have evil ones tomorrow; and 4) tell him that the devil has greater envy and wages a fiercer battle against those who have good thoughts, so that he should have more fear and greater care over himself.

2. What vain thoughts are and how they are corrected

Those thoughts which are not profitable unto the purpose and aim of salvation, as much as to our own soul as to that of our neighbor, and do not look to the necessary requirements and constitution of our body, but to the superfluous and more-than-necessary things, even if they are good, I call vain and idle. According to the Shorter Rules of Basil the Great, vain and idle thoughts arise from the idleness of the intellect that is neither engaged in necessary things, nor believes that God is present and searches our hearts and thoughts: "Mental aberration comes from idleness of a mind not occupied in necessary things. For the mind is idle and careless from lack of belief in the presence of God Who tries the heart and reins...He who does this and what is like to it will never dare or have leisure to think of any of those things that do not conduce to the edification of faith, even if they seem to be good. Concerning these vain and idle thoughts, I say, advise the penitent not to allow his intellect to meditate upon or ponder over them: 1) because just as we have to give an account for idle words on the day of judgment, as the Lord said: "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak,

they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12: 36), so likewise we have to give an account on the day of judgment for idle and vain thoughts, and indeed, if we willfully left our intellect to go after them. And it is thence apparent, because the Lord reproaches and condemns those servants who remain idle: “Why stand ye here all the day idle?” (Mt. 20:6);2) because those vain thoughts deprive us from profitable and salvific thoughts, which we are able to have instead of them; and 3) because these idle thoughts are in themselves evil, as they are the cessation of good and become the beginning of evil, and as giving way and permission to the devil to sow in our idle intellect the tares of evil thoughts. Thus does Gregory the Theologian confirm this: “May evil and its original cause, the devil, be destroyed. For while we were idle, the evil one planted tares in us (cf. Mt. 13:25), in order that the neglect of good might become the beginning of evil, just as the beginning of darkness is the retreat of light.

3. The causes of bad thoughts

Know that, in general, bad thoughts derive from two causes, one external and the other internal. The external cause of bad thoughts is the sensible objects of the five senses, that is, those things seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, like bad and indecent and theatrical sights, obscene words and lewd songs, scents and cologne and perfumes, luscious foods and pleasurable drinks, fine and soft clothes and comfortable mattresses. All these things cause passionate and hedonistic thoughts in the soul, and then sinful and death-bearing thoughts. Thus, the Prophet Jeremiah on one hand says: “Death has come up into our windows” (Jer. 21:9), the windows meaning the five senses. On the other hand, Gregory the Theologian rather interpreted this saying in broader terms: “And it is kept until the fifth day (that is, the sacrificed Paschal Lamb), perhaps because the Victim, of Whom I am speaking, purifies the five senses, from which comes falling into sin, and around which the war rages, inasmuch as they are open to the incitements to sin.

4. The internal causes of bad thoughts

The internal causes of bad thoughts are four:

1. The imagination, which is like a second sense and receives and records all of the images and perceptions which enter through the five senses, that is, of those things touched, tasted, smelled and especially of those things heard and seen, is called an internal sense, because it portrays the things sensed so grossly and clearly, just as the external senses. It is a common sense, according to Aristotle, because it receives commonly the experiences of all the senses; and this naturally, because just as lines are disconnected at the perimeter of a circle but converge at its center, so also the five senses, which are disconnected on the outside, converge

in the imagination of the soul, but they converge without confusion. So then, from the imagination are born bad thoughts in the soul, making it sense them as really present and to noetically conceptualize through memory those things that it should not have outwardly seen or heard or smelled or tested or touched, even though it is sensibly far from these things and is settled peaceably in a deserted place. For this reason, in his tetrastich Iambic Poetry, the Theologian said:

“A vision caught me, but was checked.

I set up no idol of sin.

Was an idol set up? The experience was avoided.

These are the degrees of deceit of the adversary.

Do you hear? He says an idol of sin was set up and was not recorded in the imagination. The soul escaped the experience at once, that is, it escaped from consenting to the thoughts and from the committal of sin.

2. The passions are a cause of bad thoughts, which are generally two: love and hate, or pleasure and pain, for we are moved passionately either because we love something as pleasurable, or because we hate it as painful. Specifically, the passions are divided into the three aspects of the soul: the intelligent, the appetitive, and the incensive. The passions of the intelligent aspect, according to Gregory of Sinai, are unbelief, blasphemy, evilness, curiosity, double mindedness, gossip, love of applause, pretension, pride, and others. The passions of the appetitive aspect are fornication, adultery, debauchery, greed, unchastity, incontinence, love of pleasure, self-love, and others. The passions of the incensive aspect are anger, bitterness, shouting, audacity, revenge, and others. From these passions of the soul, then bad thoughts are generally and immediately born, these also being divided into three categories like the passions. From the passions of the intelligent aspect of the soul come bad thoughts, which are generally given the name blasphemous thoughts. From the passions of the appetitive aspect come the so-called obscene thoughts. From the passions of the incensive aspect come the so-called evil thoughts. For this reason the above-mentioned Gregory of Sinai said that: “The passions are the causes of thoughts, and Abba Isaac also calls the passions assaults, because they attack within the soul and stir up passionate thoughts.

3. An internal and initial cause of bad thoughts is the demons, for those accursed ones, being light spirits and found superficially around the heart, speak there through internal suggestion and whisper softly from inside all the blasphemous

thoughts, all the obscene thoughts, all the evil thoughts, and simply all the bad thoughts. They train the imagination with obscene and impure idols from the senses, as much as when a person is sleeping as when awake. From these the aforementioned passions in the three aspects of the soul are stirred up and make the wretched soul to be a cave of thieves and a slum of the passions. For this reason the abovementioned Gregory of Sinai said: "Occasions give rise to thoughts, thoughts to imaginations, imaginations to the passions, and the passions give entry to the demons...but no one thing in the sequence is self-operative: each is prompted and activated by the demons. The imagination is not wrought into an image, passion is not energized, without unperceived hidden demonic impulsion, and in another place he says: "Thoughts are the promptings of the demons and precursors of the passions. In agreement with this, St. Isaac says, "Thoughts are the promptings of the demons and precursors of the passions. In agreement with this, St. Isaac says, " I hold as a truth, nevertheless, that our intellect, without the mediation of the holy angels, is able of itself to be moved toward the good uninstructed; however, our senses (the interior ones, that is) cannot come to know evil or be incited by it without the mediation of the demons.

4. An internal cause of thoughts, however remote, is the passionate and corrupted condition of human nature which was brought about by the ancestral sin. This condition remains in our nature also after baptism, not as ancestral sin as such (for this is removed through baptism, according to Canon 120 of Carthage), but as a consequence of the ancestral sin, for the exertion and test of our free will, and in exchange for greater crowns and rewards, according to the theologians. For after the fall the intellect lost its innocent memory and thought which it had fixed formerly only on the good; but now when it wishes to remember and think upon the good, it is immediately dispersed and also thinks upon the bad. For this reason the divine Gregory of Sinai said: "The source and ground of our thoughts is the garmented state of our memory. The memory was originally simple and one-pointed, but as a result of the fall its natural powers have been perverted: it has lost its recollectedness in God and has become compound instead of simple diversified instead of one-pointed.

5. The treatments for bad thoughts

You have learned, Spiritual Father, from what causes come bad thoughts: learn now also how to treat them. Therefore, just as we said earlier how there are two general causes of bad thoughts, so also now we say that there are two general treatments for them, namely, the external and the internal. The external treatments are namely these: for you to advise the penitent not to let his eyes wander, nor to fix his eyes upon the beautiful faces of women, or of young men,

because “from looking, lusting is born”, according to the ancient proverb, and because the sting of pleasure enters into the soul through these sights, according to Basil, and then follows rising waves of obscene and improper thoughts in the heart which ultimately drown the intellect. you should advise him to guard his ears so as not to hear any bad word, indeed, those erotic and obscene songs, just as the Theologian exhorts, saying, “Block your ears with wax, and foolish words hear not, nor pleasant songs or thrilling melodies, because from hearing these things the soul is disturbed and begins to recall obscene idols in its imagination and to think immoral thoughts in its heart.

You should advise him to protect his sense of smell from pleasant scents and perfumes because these things are not proper to men but to women, and not modest or prudent women, but immodest and imprudent women. He should protect his sense of taste from the various and luscious foods and keep his tongue from speaking obscene, abusive, and improper words, because according to the Theologian, there is little difference between the word and the act: “He should protect the sense of touch and his hands from soft clothes and fine garments and should not touch something when there is no need to do so, not only other bodies but also his own body, just as St. Isaac exhorts. The more these are protected the more the bad thoughts diminish from the soul; just as contrarily, the less these are protected the more bad thoughts are engendered. For, if only plain natural, sensible objects engender neutral thoughts, according to the well-versed Gregory of Sinai: “The raw material of actions generates neutral thoughts,” how will passionate and hedonistic sensible objects not bring about hedonistic and passionate thoughts in the soul?

Advise those, then, Spiritual Father, who have blasphemous thoughts or obscene thoughts or evil thoughts to first treat the passions of the three aspects of their soul, from which arise those bad thoughts, as we have already said. For example, as many as are warred upon by blasphemous thoughts must purify the intelligent aspect of their soul through the sacred prayer, according to St. Maximos, by books, according to St. Isaac, through spiritual knowledge of the divine Scriptures, according to the divine Serapion, and especially through humility. Having healed the intelligent aspect of the soul through these things, it follows that thoughts of blasphemy and unbelief which arise from this intelligent aspect will also be healed. As many as are warred upon by obscene thoughts must wither the appetitive aspect of their soul (from which these types of thoughts arise) through the practice of threefold self-control with respect to sleep, the stomach, and bodily comfort, according to St. Maximos and Mark the Ascetic. As many as are warred upon by evil thoughts, with which they deliberate about how they will injure and take revenge upon their enemy, must calm the passions of the incensive aspect of the soul (from

which area these thoughts arise) by love, just as St. Maximos says, by supplicating God on behalf of their enemies, just as the Lord said: “Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Mt. 5:44), and by reconciling with their enemies if they are present, and by imagining mentally the face of their enemy when he is absent, sweetly and lovingly kissing it and embracing him, according to St. Diadochos.

By these things are the passions of the three aspects of the soul purified, quenched, and bridled. It then follows that the bad thoughts sprouting from these passions are also purified and withered, for it is obvious that when the causes are quenched the effects are always co-quenched. Testifying to these things is the Godbearing Maximos who says: “Bridle your soul’s incensive power with love, quench its desire with self-control, give wings to its intelligence with prayer, and the light of your intellect will never be darkened, and the diven Serapion who says verbatim: “The intellect drunk with spiritual knowledge is perfectly purified; love treats the inflamed parts of the incensive aspect of the soul; self-control stops the flow of the appetitive aspect of the soul.”

6. The internal treatments for bad thoughts

The internal treatments for bad thoughts are the following three: prayer, rebuttal, and disregard, just as St. John of the Ladder says: “It is one thing to pray for deliverance from bad thoughts, another to contradict them, another to despise and disregard them. The first is characteristic of those who are ill, the second is characteristic of the struggling, and the third is characteristic of contemplatives.

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