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The Mind, the Heart and the Way of Salvation (Archimandrite Meletios Webber)

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St. Theophan the Recluse

You've got to get out of your head and into your heart. Right now your thoughts are in your head, and God seems to be outside you. Your prayer and all your spiritual exercises also remain exterior. As long as you are in your head, you will never

master your thoughts, which continue to whirl around your head like snow in a winter's storm or like mosquitoes in the summer's heat.

If you descend into your heart, you will have no more difficulty. Your mind will empty out and your thoughts will dissipate. Thoughts are always in your mind chasing one another about, and you will never manage to get them under control. But if you enter into your heart and can remain there, then every time your thoughts invade, you will only have to descend into your heart and your thoughts will vanish into thin air. This will be your safe haven. Don't be lazy. Descend. You will find life in your heart. There you must live.

*St. Theophan the Recluse*¹

I admit that I have a problem.

Since I was very little, I have been told that I have a soul. Obviously, a soul is not something you can observe or touch, like hands or feet, but that fact never worried me very much since it is also true that I have a heart and a stomach, even though I cannot be absolutely certain where they are, unless I look them up in a book. Unfortunately, there is no book I can look at to tell me where my soul is.

The same is true with regard to the spirit.

If I have a soul and a spirit, how are they different from each other? I am not obviously aware of either one, and I am less aware of the difference between the two.

What I am aware of, within myself, is a mind, with its constant stream of comments and instructions, and a body through which emotions are felt. Physically, I can almost feel thought taking place in my head (apparently a faulty notion, but one that actually helps in the long run by setting a limit to the area of the mind's activity), and I can certainly feel strong emotion, most often in the upper chest, sometimes lower, and sometimes as a constriction in the throat.

Since I started the process of becoming Orthodox more than thirty years ago, I have slowly become aware that my entire view of the human person needs some revision if I am to get the most out of my participation in the life of the Church. One of the less obvious, more important contributions of the Orthodox Church is that it places in focus a view of the human personality—the human spirit, perhaps—which is distinct and quite different from that which is presented or assumed to exist in almost all Western thought.

Many years ago, I remember hearing that, from an Orthodox point of view, a Baptist is simply an odd sort of Roman Catholic. Later, I discovered that if you share this information with Roman Catholics or Baptists, they get very uncomfortable rather quickly. From the point of view of the Christian East, however, the theology of the one is largely a reaction against the theology of the other, and both are based on an understanding of God and of the human person that differs radically from the experience of the Christian East.

A part of this difference lies in the attitude to “mystery.” In general terms, Western civilization is dominated by the human mind, and “knowing” seems to take precedence over “being.” In the East, experience is valued over thought, and the “nous” of man—described by Saint Makarios as the “eye of the heart” and identified by St Diadochos as the “innermost aspect of the heart”—is considered the most important element by which a person communicates with God and, indeed, with the rest of the universe. In the West, a mystery is a problem to be solved, as can be seen daily on television. In the East, a mystery is an area where the human mind cannot go, and where the heart alone makes sense, not by “knowing” but by “being.”

The theology of the Christian West, for both Roman Catholics and Protestants, has a natural tendency to become a system. Definitions are valued and, in the long term, theology tends to become a matter for scholars. On the other hand, the theology of the Christian East sometimes lacks system, and often lacks clear definition. Theology is preeminently the Church’s experience of God, something to be entered into by saints rather than understood by the intelligent.

The writings of some of the Fathers of the Church indicate that far from being the answer to all problems, the mind of man is the place where most of our trouble starts. For them, the path towards sanctity entails recovering the sense of intellect not in the head but in the heart, since there, at the center of the life of the individual, is the point where he or she meets with and communes with God.

For Orthodox Christians, receiving the sacraments (or rather, “participating in the Mysteries of the Church”) is not a mental exercise, nor are the emotions of any particular significance. Rather, participation in the Mysteries is an encounter with God in a very intimate and direct way. It effects not the thinking of the individual, nor the feeling of the individual, but the very Being of the individual, the fathomless state of awareness that exists and yet is dormant in almost all human beings. The experience of the individual indicates that this profound awareness often lies hidden behind a barrage of thoughts and ideas. Thoughts not only clutter

a person's awareness, but they encourage that person to identify with those thoughts (the mind) rather than with being (the heart).

Let me summarize this crucial point. According to Orthodox theology, the fall of man is exhibited through the failure of his "nous" (his "heart") to function soundly or even to function at all, together with a general confusion of the "nous" with the functions of the brain and of the body in general. This confusion goes so far as to imply that the mind, together with its thoughts, is all that really exists, and that the real center of being, the "nous" or heart, is of minimal importance (if it exists at all). Thus, most human lives are completely dominated by the tyranny of the mind (together with its properties: fear and desire, depression and anxiety) and the real center of being, with its natural state of serenity and communion, is ignored.

The entire basis of Western experience, summed up definitively by Descartes as "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think therefore I am") is, in Orthodox terms, the greatest of deceits. Far from being true, it is actually an expression that perpetuates the very factor that causes the ongoing fragmentation of the human person.

This important and fundamental difference between East and West is perhaps seen most clearly in the way that each approaches the dilemma of the human situation. The fundamental area of interest for most current Western psychotherapy is that of thoughts and feelings: It is the arena of thoughts and feelings that provides the backdrop for most perceived psychological problems, and in which healing is seen to take place. In the East, by contrast, spiritual therapy is the reintegration of the mind and the heart.

The Fathers of the Orthodox Church do not, as a rule, concern themselves with human emotions in the same way as we do. What the Fathers do talk about are the *logismoi* (which, here, will be translated as "thoughts") and the passions.

These two concepts, thoughts and passions, are closely connected. The classical expression of their relationship and effect upon one another is as follows: first of all, a thought comes to exist in the mind of a person, seeking that person's attention and awareness. There follows a period of interaction, during which the person dabbles in the possibilities which the thought brings. The third stage is consent, in which the person voluntarily consents to the thought—sometimes hoping to stop the process immediately thereafter, only to discover that once embarked upon, this is very difficult. The fourth stage is captivity, in which the person is dragged further and further from the way of righteousness towards spiritual destruction as a result of the thought. The fifth stage, the goal of the thought, is labeled *passion*. Here the person is entrapped and sinful action is

inevitable.

The ascetic authors often seem to talk about thoughts as if they arrive one at a time. In my experience, however, while there is an awareness that some thoughts are separate and single-minded, there are also streams of thought which are undifferentiated most of the time, and which follow the progression noted above, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, and often with many competing or even contradictory thoughts happening at any given moment.²

The scheme outlined above, together with its progression, is logical and works well in providing a model for much of human behavior, whether looking at other individuals, at entire groups of people, or at ourselves. However, it has little in common with methods of modern psychotherapy, for which “sinful action” is rather less important than guilt, low self-esteem or depression—even if those conditions come into being as a result of a sinful action.

Where the two systems overlap, however, and provide us with a heightened awareness is as follows: the passions, moods and emotional states which most often dominate the human personality have their origin in thought, that is to say, in the mind.

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Like almost everyone alive, the great teachers of Orthodoxy saw that the world is not a perfect place. They attributed this situation to the narrative in the first few pages of the Bible, which tells of the story of our first parents, the man and the woman, Adam and Eve. Through a misuse of the freedom that God had given them, Adam and Eve fell from grace and were expelled from paradise. We, their descendants, are exiled with them, until our participation in the life of Christ within the Church, and the healing which results from this, lead us back to where we belong.

The way the Orthodox teachers look at this story, however, is quite different from the way in which it tended to be understood in the West. In the West, commentaries on these stories tended to emphasize the themes of guilt, sin, and remorse. Indeed they clearly hinted that the sin of our first parents was somehow sexual in nature—an attitude that would have enormous impact on the development of Western psychology several hundreds of years later.

For the East, by contrast, the story of Adam and Eve is, at its heart, a story of disintegration, fragmentation and estrangement. The man and the woman—and the world in which they live—are torn apart. Because of the disobedient behavior of

our first ancestors, barriers came to exist between God and man, between heaven and earth, between the one person and the other, between the genders, and even within the human personality itself. The person has become fragmented and isolated both externally—from the outside world—and internally—right down to the ultimate depths of his or her being.

Insofar as fragmentation is what is wrong with the human person, the reverse—unification³—is the path we are offered which leads to God's healing and salvation. Salvation is thus understood as being something therapeutic, not some form of legal loop-hole, nor even a reward for a good life.

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In the field of mental health, the diagnosis of “Multiple Personality Disorder” (or Dissociative Identity Disorder) is becoming ever more common. In this serious pathological condition, parts of the whole person seem to spark off, sometimes as the result of identifiable trauma, and, at other times, for no obvious and clear reason. These personality parts then lead separate lives in isolation from the main identity of the person concerned, —sometimes in complete isolation from other personality parts, to the point where they are unaware of the others' existence.

In less extreme cases (patients suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder are usually extremely disturbed), most ordinary people are able to exhibit signs of separate personality parts, although within a more normal range, and these parts do not generally work entirely alone, nor are they out of touch with each other.

This phenomenon is most easily demonstrated when someone gets very angry—a condition which affects almost all of us from time to time. On becoming very angry, one often feels a change occurring within oneself, and it is not uncommon for such a person to feel quite different, quite “other” than his normal self. On being asked “how old did you feel when you lost your temper?” many will admit to feeling much younger, even to feeling like a child. On closer examination, it seems that the person who loses his or her temper completely, actually experiences the world, and events within it, from a point-of-view which is quite different from that person's normal point-of-view.

Whenever this occurs (and it can occur quite frequently in different ways) we see more evidence of our internal fragmentation. Another example: A woman speaking to her mother is not exactly the same person as the one talking to her own child. I vividly remember seeing a television program about the present Queen of Great Britain, filmed at a horse-racing event. At one point the Queen turned to her

mother (who had, one imagines, just made some sort of parental, off-camera, comment) and reacted just like a little child (“Oh, Mummy!”), far removed from the regal dignity and bearing that she more often exhibits. If this is true for the Queen, it is probably true for many others as well.

There is one feature of this process which is of particular interest to those in the Church. It is not difficult to demonstrate that we are not quite the same people when standing in Church as we are when we are in the workplace. In fact, it is quite likely that we go through a number of changes as we enter a Church building, and that it is the task of the architecture to allow this to happen. In a traditional Orthodox building we are introduced into the sacred space in stages: the outer narthex, the inner narthex, the nave of the Church, and so on, and we go through a transformation at each stage. We are encouraged to be more and more “present” the more sacred the space is. Those entering the most sacred space around the holy altar are expected to be the most present of all. I have known bishops and priests who were able to be totally “present” while standing at the altar, and yet were very scattered and nervous when, for example, they were conducting a meeting or having a regular conversation.

Here too, then, is some evidence that we are fragmented, since we can go from one stage of awareness to another very frequently and very easily, depending on our circumstances. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that a person who changes his or her personality under any circumstances whatever is simply exhibiting signs of the sort of fragmentation which exists among us as a result of our fallen condition.

People suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder recover, albeit slowly, when the different parts of their personality are united. There is no question here of parts being excised or exorcized – these are personality parts (albeit sometimes very unpleasant ones) which are a part of the overall personality, and are required (at some level) to keep the people concerned safe and functioning so that they might be able to cope with their lives.

With the methods available in a clinical situation, it is not uncommon to find personality parts in normal people which are quite unpleasant, and sometimes (at least apparently) downright evil. However, there is a great deal of difference between a difficult or unpleasant personality part (which belongs to the person, and fulfills some role or purpose within that personality) and any form of demonic influence, which is by its very nature alien to the personality. It is important to make a distinction between the two. Malevolent personality parts are usually the result of unresolved inner conflict, and often turn out to be nothing more than the

exaggerated memory of parental control.

The teachers of Orthodoxy who write about such matters generally indicate that there is a fragmentation of the human personality as a result of the fall, that there is a definite and definable split between the body and the “person” (however that is experienced), and that there is also a vast abyss placed between the heart and the mind, with the mind appearing to be dominant, very often to the point of identifying itself as the entire person.

There is more. Psychotherapy aims at healing the fragmentation of the mind by encouraging the acquisition of insight, and the application of method and system and sometimes even common sense to achieve a change. The spiritual path of Orthodoxy does not stop there, since the next stage, the reintegration of heart and mind, is also necessary and indeed, often seen as the whole purpose of prayerful effort (or “ascetic labor”). The Orthodox picture of the person includes a part (the nous) which is of primary importance in the healing of the individual from the Orthodox point of view, and is ignored entirely in Western secular therapy.

The process of fragmentation consists in removing thoughts from the “mind-in-the-heart,” where they belong, and placing them in a state of semi-independence in the brain. The reversal of this situation is possible, but not by an act of determination of our minds. Indeed, anything determined by our minds usually ends up as some sort of power-play. Healing is available, but it can only be powered by the grace of God.

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Few people ever discuss what it “feels like” to be inside their own bodies. We seldom talk about how we feel “thoughts thinking” internally, or how we experience the various sensations which we call, collectively, life. Apart from pain, about which we can talk a great deal, little, if anything, is said about what it feels like to be alive.

Within the Church we might add other questions to supplement the process: How is it possible to internalize the experience of the Orthodox Church? What does it mean to participate in the process of salvation? What is the role of feelings, thoughts, dreams, anxieties and other sensations? To find answers to these questions, it is useful to have a pattern or framework which is both easily understood and easy to work with.

The framework which I propose may be entirely wrong, or it may be limited to my own experience. I have a feeling, though, that it might prove useful to many. What

I propose is the adoption of a very simple version of the teaching of the various Fathers of the Church – as a basis. There are three main ideas (outlined below), and I leave it to the reader to find their meaning or significance within his or her own experience.

First of all, the mind, the source of the *logismoi*, creates an awareness of a shallow (or sometimes false) sense of self. The story (or perhaps “drama” would be a better word) with which this shallow self concerns itself throughout life is, collected together, the “ego” of that particular person. As a result of the Fall, this “sense of self” is broken, and although it mimics reality, it is actually an invention of the individual person and not real at all. In this scheme, the “ego” is not a part of the personality; it is, rather, a story “told” by the mind.

Secondly, there is a deeper self—in many ways a more real self—which is to be found in what the Fathers variously call the heart, the “nous” or the soul. This key element is often hidden and almost always ignored in the Western world. However, it is through this “nous” that we have the ability for direct contact with God or, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, the possibility of finding the gate to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The third factor can only be tested against the experience of each individual. Modern psychotherapy demands that we also find a place for the emotions. In the West, we have come to adopt a rather un-examined notion that these somehow belong to the heart, but this is not the way the Orthodox Fathers understood the situation at all. Instead of associating emotion with the heart, it seems more straightforward if we were to treat emotions as the reactions of the physical body to the thoughts emanating from the mind.

Having said so much in three short paragraphs, it is beneficial to take a gentle journey through the implications which these statements leave in their wake.⁴

Many people experience the mind as an almost constant commentary going on in the head, while others are simply aware that making the mind quiet is a very difficult task. Trying to count from one to ten without having an intervening thought (including those inevitable ones like “Gosh, I’m able to count without having a thought”) is extremely difficult. However, it is not until we learn to quiet thoughts that there is even the possibility of learning to use our hearts. Apart from anything else, the mind uses noise constantly to reassure itself of its own existence. The language of the heart, on the other hand, is silence. Here I am not referring to an empty silence, where one is simply waiting for something to happen. Rather, I refer to the overflowing silence, the silence which is the heart’s means of

communication, a full and profound experience of being, and a deep awareness of God.

What is the nature of thought?

Some thinking is necessary and beneficial. For example, when we are driving, it is essential to have the ability to think, since we must constantly be making comparisons: measuring distances, judging how much gasoline to use, deciding when we need to apply the brakes in order to stop at a certain point and so on. Analysis, from the most simple to the most complex, is achieved by the mind.

Thinking, when it is necessary and useful, is one of the highest capabilities of man. However, what we understand from the teaching of the Fathers is that, since the Fall, this thinking has got out of hand.

Our thinking has been distanced from our hearts and has suffered as a result. Unfortunately, as a result of the Fall, there is dysfunction of the heart also. One powerful image which describes this is that of a mirror. If we see the soul as a mirror, we have a beautiful example of what it means to be fully human: when healthy, we mirror the grace of God. The cleaner the mirror, the more polished it is, the more clearly it reflects the glory of God. However, as a result of the Fall, this mirror has been covered in dust. Sometimes the dust is so thick that it is not possible to see that there is, in fact, a mirror beneath the dust: it simply looks like a dusty pile. However, once we start to clean the mirror (which is, essentially, the work of prayer) then the mirror slowly comes into view once more, and the dust is gently swept away from its surface, and the light can shine once more.

The mind and the heart have been alienated from each other, and the result is that the mind has started to function on its own, separately from the heart. The heart, meanwhile, has been almost entirely hidden from view, or at least obscured.

The mind does more than this, however. It actually has the audacity to set up shop on its own, and it starts behaving as if it had a life of its own. This is where the problems start. The mind is a very good and a valuable tool, but it does not have the strength of character to be independent. It is as if a person had a computer—a personal computer which he uses for all his work: appointments, contacts, finances and other matters—but one day the computer went on the internet and started to communicate with others as if it were the person who owned it—as if a computer of mine were able to get on the internet and converse with other people, calling itself “Father Mel.” This is almost exactly what the human mind has done. Estranged from the heart, the mind has set up an independent operation, and it begins to act

with a sense of independence which, if unchecked, brings ruin and destruction to everything it touches.

Why is this process so destructive? The answer lies mainly in the way in which the mind is set up to operate. The mind is the great defense system needed to process all the information which we receive. However, in so doing, the mind is very self-centered, judgmental and fearful of attack. It expects and assumes the worst from the world, from other people, and ultimately from God.

It is as if the mind had the task of writing one's life history, and the title of this history were always "Yes, but what about me?"

Every little detail in the universe is measured by the mind against its usefulness to the mind's story of the self, the "ego." In so doing, the mind attempts to replace the real center of being (the heart) with a center of its own creation. The needs and desires of the mind are limitless. So are its fears. The mind is the guardian of memories and fantasies, the past and the future respectively. Memories and fantasies come in two (and only two) varieties: good ones and bad ones. This means that all desires (related to keeping good memories and creating good fantasies), and all fears (related to avoiding bad memories and bad fantasies), come within the jurisdiction of the mind.

The mind is judgmental in everything it does. To demonstrate this point, I recommend an exercise in which a person goes somewhere (like a railroad depot, or an airline terminal) where there are a lot of people. The point of the exercise is to notice people (although not in such a way as to make them feel uncomfortable) but to do so without mentally labeling them. It is actually quite a difficult thing to do. As we walk down a crowded street, the people we notice (the ones we ignore are labeled as unworthy of a label) are labeled one by one, and often not in the most flattering of manners.

The labeling of people and things may not seem too serious, but it has a dark side. What starts as giving labels to people, places, situations and ideas (an activity entrusted to Adam before the Fall), ends in our fallen world with a deep and disturbing need to be right. This is one of the main ways in which the mind seeks immortality. However, in order to be right about anything, the mind has the need to find someone or something which is wrong. In a sense, the mind is always looking for an enemy (the person who is "wrong") since without having an enemy, the mind is not quite sure of its own identity. When it has an enemy, it is able to be more and more sure about itself. Since the mind also continuously seeks for certainty, (which is a by-product of the desire to be "right") the process of finding

and defining enemies is an on-going struggle for survival. Declaring enemies is, for the mind, not an unfortunate character flaw, but an essential and necessary task.

Another useful exercise, which tests both the strength of our honesty and the degree of our willingness, is to read the words of Jesus in the Gospels slowly and to listen first with the mind, and then with the heart. Much of what Jesus says (for example “Love your enemies” or “Blessed are the pure in heart”) is found to be nonsense by the mind, and yet is received with joy by the heart. This gives us an awareness of the difference between the two, and encourages us to begin to use the heart more and to brush aside the influence of the mind.

When the mind looks at the present moment, it sees nothing, or at least nothing worth considering. The mind is much happier working in the past or future, since they are both actually constructs of the mind’s own workings, and so the mind feels it can control them. The present moment, however, is completely outside its control, and therefore ignored.

Unfortunately for the mind, the present moment is the only moment which is, in any sense, real. Moreover, in spiritual terms, the present moment is the only possible occasion in which we can meet God (or anyone else). The mind is almost completely absent from the present moment, as can be experienced by anyone who has had the misfortune to lie awake in bed for any length of time. All anxiety, all fear, all disturbance comes from memory or from anticipation, from the past or from the future, but not from the present. The present rarely (perhaps never) poses a problem, just presents a situation.

The workings of the mind are further clouded by the movement of emotion. Emotions tend to be rather vapid, easily manipulated, quickly changing. If this were not so, the cinema industry would go out of business very quickly. We watch movies in order to have our emotions engaged, and then manipulated. This is experienced by us as entertainment, but it cannot be said to be very profound. The same is true of literature and of music (of all sorts, from classical to hard rock) – even “serious” entertainment is fairly shallow compared with the workings of the heart.

In particular, emotion is of little importance in establishing our contact with God, and yet almost everyone is tempted to do just that. However, if our concept of worship is simply one of distraction – if our conscious contact with God is not radically different from our experience in a theater or an auditorium – then the mind has won a decisive battle, and God is exiled to the past or the future where he is totally powerless, since He is at the mercy of the human mind which places

Him there.

We might also say that all forms of distraction are aimed at entertaining the mind, and that the mind has an almost unquenchable thirst for distraction. Primarily, this is because the mind hates the present moment, as we have seen, and will do almost anything to escape its influence. Distraction is a sure method of escaping the reality of the present moment. If there is one element which is growing exponentially in modern life, it is the ability to provide constant distraction. As soon as children are born we encourage them to be distracted. It is possible for a child to be born, to grow to adulthood and eventually to die without once having been free of distraction. In this state, the heart (covered in dust), is never exercised, and is most likely completely ignored.

Since the mind concerns itself with the future and the past, it follows that the mind is also dependent upon time. This “fourth dimension” is something of a mystery in itself, and cannot yet be described in ways which are altogether satisfactory. However, within time one thing is certain: everything that exists now has come into being at some point in the past, and everything that exists now is going to cease to exist at some point in the future. This places the mind in a very uncomfortable position: within the dimension in which it chooses to operate, its own destruction is inevitable. For the mind, fear of death, of total destruction, is a constant companion.

Today we have more time to dwell on our problems than our ancestors ever did. Our free-time, whether in old age (now greatly extended) or simply between tasks, is dominated by a hundred and one distractions, often organized to take place one after the other. Thus, when we do get a free moment, the thoughts in our heads think that nothing is happening, and want to move on quickly to something more pressing. This leaves us with a feeling of “lack of fulfillment” which some people actually mistake for life itself, when in fact it is simply the detritus of the mind, and is no more life itself than the exhaust of a bus is the bus itself.

Finally, there is one more aspect of the mind which is commonly experienced, and which has a tremendous effect upon a person’s spiritual development. The mind lives in a realm in which everything that is known has to have an opposite. “Up” must have a “down,” “good” must have a “bad.” The energy of the mind consists in comparison: “I” with “not-I”, this experience with that experience, this word with that word. The mind sees everything in contrast, valuing differences and ignoring identity.

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When it comes to describing the heart, words begin to fail. Suffice it to say that the heart is capable of constant awareness of God, and we can see that awareness, albeit in a weakened state, whenever we quiet the mind long enough to hear the silence. The heart (or “nous”) functions at an altogether more profound level than the mind, achieving states of awareness and experience which are far removed from the tyranny of the logismoi, or the vanity of emotion.

The heart experiences the Kingdom of heaven, although at this time in shadow rather than in light. Within the Kingdom there is no time, simply eternity ... or more plainly, only now. Within the Kingdom identity is treasured, not difference. The very atmosphere of the Kingdom is Love and Life and Peace, and these have no opposites: they are absolute. They are the Love of God, eternal Life and the Peace of God which is beyond understanding.

Like the Prophet Elias (Elijah), part of our spiritual path is to come to an awareness that God is not in the earthquake, the wind or the fire (where we expect Him to be) but He is in the sound of silence. We listen to this silence by becoming intensely aware, intensely present (the Fathers use the word “nepsis”) – a sense of being completely ready, or being completely alert, totally conscious. When we are lost in thought (so often mistaken for a deeply prayerful state) we are not alert, present or aware. We cannot be any of those things until we go beyond the mind, seeking a deeper and yet deeper silence which is indicative of the presence of God.

At the beginning of this path, we feel very unsure of our new surroundings, since we have always depended upon the mind to guide us through life. Now, we are learning to put the mind aside (or at least, only to use it when we need to use it), and to come to a level of awareness which we have rarely (if ever) experienced before. However, this is the path. This is the work of our salvation.

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The purpose and aim of the spiritual life is to allow God to heal us. This opportunity presents itself in many forms, and for many reasons. The major rift between the body and the person is healed, by God’s grace, through participation in the holy sacraments of the Church. The rift between the heart and the mind is healed through “ascetic labor” – prayerful effort – which begins with making the mind quiet, and ends with wrapping the mind (and the emotions) in prayer and placing them in the heart where they rightfully belong, and where their final integration takes place.

Viewed in another light, our spiritual path leads us towards a state which the

Fathers called *apatheia*, “passionlessness.” This state is the goal of prayer, and is experienced as something spontaneous, innocent and simple. It does not mean “apathetic” (which would be the interpretation of the mind), but free and giving and loving (attributes which find resonance in the heart).

Finally, it is worth remembering that it is the act of “seeking the place of the heart” which is our goal, our highest aspiration, not the actual finding. It is the journey, not the destination, which is of utmost importance. Of course, some saints may (and do) actually find the destination, but that is (as it were) another story, for another day.

Notes

1As quoted in Being Still : Reflections on an Ancient Mystical Tradition, Jean-Yves Leloup, Paulist Press, New York, 2003, p. 124

2Another puzzle which concerns me a great deal is the concept of “addiction”. It is possible that this word represents a more devastating and pernicious form of passion than was ever envisaged by the Fathers?

3With the advent of computer technology, we now have access to a new word for this process – “defragmentation,” which is probably more descriptive.

4There is an immediate problem here. The desire to label and the ability to define things is expressly an activity of the mind. The heart is largely unconcerned with this sort of definition. Just as the mind demands knowledge, so the heart is content with awareness. Seemingly related, these two words, “knowledge” and “awareness” do much to sum up the huge gulf which exists within our own personalities. In our condition, we have to use the tools of the mind to talk at all, even when we are talking about things “beyond” the mind. Perhaps as we progress spiritually, it will become less necessary to share words, and become more possible to share awareness in a direct manner instead.

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