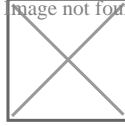


Variations in the Spiritual Life (Teachings from Athos) (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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Even though we're in the season of winter, we had a fine day yesterday, with lots of sunshine. We felt the weather had taken a turn for the better, and then today it changed again and we've got turbulence. We can't get out to do our work. We have to dig in until this situation passes, since we all know it's temporary. This phenomenon of variations in the weather also occurs in our spiritual life. Changes

and variations are a postlapsarian phenomenon. After the fall, people unfortunately lost their personality and are now subject to alterations. Before the fall, they had the Grace of the Holy Spirit living with them. They lived in accordance with nature, they lived without needs and “being lords of all”, held sway over time, manner, place and means and were not subject to variations of any kind, since they had a comprehensive personality. But, as the late Justin Popović observes, when they wanted to become God, through the devil, not only did they not do so, but became a particular kind of devil themselves. Something happened which cannot be rooted out and they now had no authority over anything in their personality. And they waited to see what they would find. All that was left to them was the power of reason and with this they thought up ways of freeing themselves from dangers, which had arisen because of the changes they had undergone. This is an important piece of thinking which will especially help us monks to succeed, since our life is the exact study of the conscience. We don’t monitor only the results of an action, in order to refrain from it; we also monitor the causes which gave rise to it.

In the period of Grace, Jesus has taught us to root out evil. In the period of the Law of Moses, the result, the fruit, the action had been punished. We live in the period of Grace. We don’t wait for the time for evil to happen in order to stop it or to pray not to implement it. We monks are on the watch from the conception of the thought, the “provocation” in the language of the Fathers, so that we can pull up by the roots the very plants that bear evil fruit, which is sin in action. To succeed in this we have to have great finesse in the handling of the variations. As we’ve already said, these variations are like weather conditions. They’re not permanent, but passing. They shouldn’t frighten people into changing the pattern of their lives. We have sailors as examples. They don’t renounce the call of the sea just because it becomes like hell when there’s a storm. What do they do? They tie up in a harbour and wait it out. Then they get back on course and the matter of the storm doesn’t concern them any more. So we aren’t frightened either, when we have the skill of dealing with variations. Through the variations, Satan tries to scare us, to block our path. But since we know in advance that the variations are intrusive and transient features, then we’re not bothered by them. Like the sailors, we tie up the ship and wait, knowing that the tempest will pass and we’ll continue. You see in the readings we listen to in the refectory that the Fathers place little store by the matter of troubling thoughts, or provocations, as they’re called, particularly that great teacher of discrimination Abba Pimin, who interprets precisely this detail for us. For us who are a long way from the causes, the variations really are laughable, because they achieve nothing. In practice, we’re living in reality. What reality? When we heard the call. Jesus called us with the prophetic words of Isaiah:

“Therefore come out from them and be separate. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you,

and you will be my sons and daughters”. And we heard the call; each one at the age and in the circumstances decided by the dispensation of divine grace, we “came out from them”. What? The causes, not people. Never let it be said. With people we’re brothers. People don’t harm us. We have relations with people. We came out, to be exact, from the root cause of mammon, in the language of Jesus, by which He meant the law of abnormality, the law of desire. We came out from there, and now don’t touch such kinds of “unclean things”, which make up the body of mammon... Anything to do with abuse and desire is no concern of ours. And we didn’t wait for a moment at a distance from the causes of evil, but built a dwelling and a hut in the deserts, like wild goats, and here we persevere, awaiting God’s mercy, convinced that He Who called us is faithful to His promises. So there’s not much the devil can get out of us, if we’re just a little bit careful. Because in the language of the Fathers, who interpret in detail the practical facet of our lives, most of the bad that we can suffer is due to the root causes of evil. Our backsliding starts where the senses and the natural resources and laws, with unspeakable pretexts, are all jumbled up by Satan. Now that we’re out of all that, Satan’s been stripped of his power. Divine Grace, with the Cross of Christ, has denuded him, because “the swords of the enemy have failed utterly”. And Jesus tells us that “the Lord of world is coming and in me he will find nothing” and “take courage, I have defeated the world”, including, naturally the devil himself. Not being able any longer to provoke us directly from the essence of things, which are the root causes and which excite us, he tries through the variations to bring back old memories, in order to trouble us, to spoil our peace and take our minds off our aim. Which is what? To forget the past and concentrate on the future. To forget the old life, the old person of sin and abuse and to embrace the “new life”. To imitate Jesus and our Holy Fathers, whose followers we are.

The crown of the monastic hypostasis is virginity. We had virginity and purity as our goal, which is why we fled the root causes that provoked us. Intertwined with virginity are obedience and the renunciation of our own will, which is subordination, and then there follow physical service, humility, sobriety, silence, prayer and everything else the Fathers gave us and with which we occupy ourselves. By the Grace of Christ, each of us observes all these, more or less, with the strength he possesses and abstains in practice from the root causes. This is as far as human strength and effort will take us, there’s nothing we can do. Whether the roots of evil will be pulled up from within us and in their place the roots of good will strike, bringing as their fruit good memories and virtues, doesn’t depend on us. We long

for it, we await it, we hope for it, we believe in it, but it's not ours to hold. Only divine Grace will give it, and that's what we wait for. It's out of our control. All that's within our control is to abstain, in practice, from anything which is called- and really is- sin. And, with as much strength as we have, to remain within the margins of the good and of virtue.

By the Grace of Christ, this is what we do, more or less. It's as far as our strength will take us. The rest we await with faith, and if Grace comes, it grants it. So the devil can't do us down, unless he troubles the waters and draws the monk away from his standards. What are these standards? Purity, subordination and obedience. Now if the monk hangs on to these unswervingly, the devil can't do him any harm.

He can't harm him in purity, because there aren't any root causes. A monk would have to be really stupid to be deceived into entering into evil tastes you have to acquire and to think up ways of finding pleasure in that sort of filth and compliance, which are too disgusting even to think about. One of the most significant causes that blocks the road for us who want to observe virginity precisely, is the opposite sex. Because, in the presence of this cause, our purity is impugned. Anything at all that moves us to the remembrance of this kind of pleasure is entirely alien to us. In a real monk, the effect of Grace is so great that thoughts like that just make him laugh. If ever God allows a war to burst upon us, there must be some reason. Either because we've abandoned our duty and have resigned ourselves to negligence and sloth, and so are asking Grace to give us a wake-up call, or because it's the time for it to give us the crown of purity, the comprehensive seal of virginity, which is why it allows Satan to trouble us: so that we can prove, in practice, our real appetite for purity. And in this battle, God will give us the appropriate strength. "And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it".

Now we come to our second duty, subordination and obedience. As you know, the fall of logical beings, both angels and people, occurred through rebellion. When Christ came to bring back into balance that which had fallen, he did not deign, nor provide nor attempt nor decide to make that return by any other gate but that of obedience. Because if He chosen any other way, He would have given the impression that He had made a mistake at the creation. But God made everything "very good". In one of his discourses, Saint Neofytos the Enclosed interprets "very good" by saying: "And how was it possible, Our Good Lord, for You to make something wrong, something not "very good". Since You're the centre of all

kindness. You're the supreme good, so was it possible for You to make a mistake and make something that wasn't good like You?".

So what was made "very good" by God can't be altered by the devil, by people or by any other factor. When Christ came, He had the power, as Lord of all to alter even the law of creation, because "He spoke and they were born, He commanded and they were made". He is the craftsman. And yet, to prove the perfection of His Godly magnificence, He indicated that there should be a return to where the fall occurred. He was forced, therefore, to take on our own nature, to undergo a kind of selflessness that's inconceivable for the thought process of logical beings and to persuade us, in practice, that our restitution could only succeed in this way. We monks, who keep the Gospel perfection in its highest form, are total imitators of Christ. This is why, after purity, we promised subservience and obedience. So long as a monk remains subservient and obedient, the devil can't ever do him any harm, neither with variations, nor illnesses, nor dangers nor fears nor any logical or absurd pretext. Precisely because the obedient monk doesn't accept his own thinking. Satan can never appear directly and speak face to face nor even make shapes for us that will deceive us. He certainly does something, but in what way? Deviously, through thoughts. From where the faculty of direct knowledge casts up its own thoughts and projects them onto the screen of the intellect and chooses them and decides, that's where Satan goes and, through the same projector, beams the evil thought onto the same screen. This faculty of direct knowledge is guileless and doesn't understand; it sees the image and doesn't realize who put it there. It takes it for its own thought. Because the thought's deceitful when it comes. It doesn't say: "Eat, sleep, be idle, steal, lie, laugh". If it did, people wouldn't heed it. By nature, people are good and don't go directly towards evil; unless they're depraved. Then the thought comes with the reasonable pretext and says: "I don't feel too good, I'll just have sleep", and many other unspeakable pretexts. Now when these come, the real person who's really under obedience immediately thinks: "Any thought that comes to me, good or bad, I'll tell the Elder about it". Then they're within the framework of subordination and obedience. Once the devil sees that the disciple behaves like that, he loses all his power. Try it and see. If there's a subtle thought that won't go away, say "I'll go to the Elder and he'll tell me what to do" and it'll disappear straight away.

Unfortunately, variations exist and alter our disposition. People can be cheerful, enterprising, "fervent in the spirit", and all of a sudden they're arid, listless and lose all their vigour. Then comes the perfectly reasonable thought that they should be accommodating. If they're not feeling well, they can eat a little more, maybe something better, go and have a rest before the usual time, not bother with their

rule. But a monk says: "That's not for me. And if necessary, I'll ask the Elder". So he's in no danger. Because, if you allow yourself dispensations, they're followed by a host of temptations and you'll never hear the end of it. You're seized with despair, discouragement, your conscience bothers you and doesn't leave you in peace, so that you're encouraged bodily to abandon your rule and spiritually to stop remembering God. This will shake up your whole world, body and soul. But if you're careful, you'll take whatever's bothering you, whatever's pressing upon you, to the Elder. Then you're sheltered by the grace of obedience and dependence and, because of that, you're not held in thrall to the various traps that Satan's laid. Wherever Satan can't get in, everything's normal and peaceful, because we Christians have the peace of Jesus as a possession: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you" (*Jn. 14, 27*) and "Behold, I am with you always" (*Matth. 28, 20*). These are positions; they're not just words.

By staying within the bounds of obedience and duty, we enjoy the continuation of the presence of the Grace of Jesus and we become peaceful. All of this increases within us the experience of how we should fight. Once we learn that, the problem's solved. Nobody can do anything to us, because we've continued along our chosen path intelligently and wisely, because, to put it simply they don't have the right to, because "the one who is within you is greater than the one who is in the world" (*1 Jn. 4, 4*).

Question: Elder, apart from what you've told us, what else should we do when these variations come?

Answer: As I said before, people have to learn the art of war. Central to this, as Jesus told us, is patience. "Who shows patience to the end will be saved" and "in your patience you will possess your souls. Since it's patience that'll show reality. Because the variations, which are up and down states, are not real. Neither the state of being up is real not that of being down. The wave of Grace which sweeps people, cools them and gives them comfort isn't permanent, but then neither are despair and dryness. What they really are we'll discover only with patient endurance. If you're in the habit of being patient, you await the mercy of God, which will come and satisfy you.

The variations are caused by lots of reasons. Whether they're from the right or the left the underlying causes have one aim. Whatever is in the interest, for the benefit of people. If the Lord of life and death allows anything to happen to people, He must have weighed it with His own Godly justice, which is certainly for people's benefit. The matter of the great goodness and providence of God is Godly and perfect- as are all the divine perfections. God doesn't change, so that evil can come

out of one of His decisions. Only kindness, only love, only goodness, only caring, only charity- that's what God is. So those whom He loves and those whom He chastises, He does so in accordance with His attributes- with love.

If God allows a variation, a temptation- especially to people, whom He loved so much that "He did not spare His own Son"- it means that He does so out of love, in our interest.

Source: Elder Iosif, *Διδαχές από τον Άθωνα, Ψυχωφελή Βατοπαιδινά 8*, 3rd ed. Publications of the Holy Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, Holy Mountain, 1999.