

Testimony from Mount Athos, On temptations (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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The whole

combat and struggle which the recruited members of the Church have to fight against has only one meaning and one purpose: to win over the organised evil, which is none other than the denial of God's will. All the resisting powers which are provoking and coercing us to become traitors and apostates, are called 'temptations' and have many causes. Their name 'pirasmos' (πειρασμός-temptation) also reveals part of their features, since it is only through combat and struggle that we acquire "pira", (πέιρα- experience) and perceive the mysteries of divine justice, which is the "spiritual law", through which our Lord governs His creation.

The types of temptations are various, but they have only one purpose: To prove that we are cowards and unfaithful in the face of the Lord and prevent us from accessing the goods promised to the faithful: "ressurrection and life". Each temptation is neither pointless nor accidental as some people believe. But it is also neither just the malicious product of the subject who has provoked it, be it the devil or another person. Those who provoke or carry the temptations are usually numerous and varied. However, temptations are not deeds falling under their

assailant's own authority, but have been ceded by God who governs and manages everything. If it is said: "*All the hairs on your head are numbered*"(Matthew 10,30) and "*It does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy*"(Romans 9,16) then truly "*now Lord what wait I for my hope is in thee*"(Psalm 39,7).

We have earlier cited the views of our Fathers regarding these issues as well as of the fact that whatever happens to man is caused by his own thoughts or deeds. The spirit-bearing (πνευματοφόροι) Fathers have cited five main reasons why our Lord gives permission to our enemies to launch a fight against us. The first reason is that by fighting, we learn to discriminate virtue from evil. The second reason is to enable us to establish a firm and unweaving ownership of that which is achieved through pain and combat. The third reason is to help us remain humble and not think highly of ourselves, while we are advancing in virtue and justice. The fourth reason is to learn to absolutely hate vice. The fifth and final reason is to remind us not to forget our own infirmity, nor the Lord who has been helping us in everything "*in order to become impassioned with the grace of God*".

God is by nature good, or rather He is Goodness and All Good (αὐτοαγαθότης καὶ ὑπεράγαθος). There is no hardship or tribulation in His will in accordance with His own good pleasure (κατ' εὐδοκίαν θέλημα) for his own creatures and especially man. The accumulated hardships which befall our nature are not the result of God's will in accordance with His own good pleasure, but the result of the dispensation of His providence (οικονομία) and concession (παραχώρηση). If man remained steadfast in the first will of God, which is in accordance with His own good pleasure, none of the other wills would have been revealed since they would not be needed in correcting our insolent behaviour. Man's disobedience and fall has corrupted the harmonious performance of the created beings. Therefore, the other attributes of God's will presented themselves, causing the hitherto rebellious nature to return to equilibrium. From this point onwards all temptations which cause our continuous fight are tolerated by God's dispensation of his providence in order to recall us to order since what is inside, outside and around us, which constitutes our world, is rebelling both towards its own nature as well as towards the Creator. The cunning and insidious enemy and avenger devil has assumed authority over us ever since the first man had willingly submitted to him. Human nature became diseased ever since. Therefore, after the fall our good judgement has been corrupted, our "*every inclination of our heart is evil from childhood*"(Genesis 8,21) and has become the carrier of everything that is irrational and wicked. Our intentions in principle agree with the meaning of repentance given by God. But in practice, the above factors resist repentance and therefore we needed someone to intervene and assist if we were to secure our salvation. This subsidiary assistance which was

granted to us by God's mercy, takes the form of assaults (επιφοράι), permitted by the divine providence in order to wake us up and contribute to our improvement, since all the elements of our existence act negatively. *"When we are judged by the Lord we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world"* (1 Corinthians 11,32). According to Saint Maximus the Confessor *"Just as the nights follow the days and the winters follow the summers, sorrow and pain follows pride and pleasure"*.(Saint Maximus the Confessor, Four Hundred Chapters on Love, Second hundred , paragraph 65)

Hardship and sorrow have been permitted so that we pay for the trespasses of our sinful lives while still alive, otherwise the disease of our crimes would continue unto the future and our salvation will be lost. *"It is not possible for one who has sinned to avoid the future judgement unless he perseveres in either willing hardship or unwilling tribulation in this life"*(As above, paragraph 66). Elsewhere he says: *"Let no one deceive you, monk, that you may be saved, if you are a slave of pleasure and pride"*(as above, paragraph 63) *"When an unexpected temptation afflicts you, do not blame the one who caused it, but examine why it has afflicted you, and you will be able to correct yourself. Since no matter where it came from, you had to drink this bitter drink of God's judgement"* (As above, paragraph 42). One more verse offering an overview of temptations is the following: *"Temptations are sent to some people from God to wipe out the transgressions already committed; to others for sins which are currently being committed and to others to prevent them from committing the sins which they were about to commit in the future. Of course there are the exceptions, like the temptations sent to someone to test him, similar to those sent to Job"* (as above, paragraph 45).

Let us mention one simple example from our daily lives. We are trying to fulfill our duties as Christians, but no matter how hard we try somehow we slip, since there is no such thing as infallibility. We are certainly able to correct our mistakes through repentance according to our judgement, but usually our regret is not as it should be if it was to erase our guilt. Hence our dues remain unpaid. Such dues increase with the passing of time because of the complications posed by causes and occasions and by our own weakness. The 'amount' outstanding becomes tens, hundreds, and thousands and is unknown to us but is accurately accounted for by the divine justice. What ought we to do now? Either we firmly repent in accordance with the gravity of the trespass or we are going to be condemned after our death and lose out on our salvation. In this case, God's dispensation of His providence sends a discipline, a conventional assault" («συμβατική επιφορά»)- some reluctantly received painful warning- which is appropriate to the 'volume' of the trespasses. This settles our outstanding dues otherwise our salvation would be questionable.

Generally speaking, all the hardships which affect our lives are of this kind. On our part, we do not understand the purpose of divine providence and we get annoyed against people or things who have caused the events.

Sometimes these events are not caused by our own mistakes but by our own negligence or ingenuousness. In this case, the All Goodness allows us to be tempted in order to obstruct the progress of our intentions before any damage, possibly huge, occurs. These kind of temptations are called “preventive” (προλαμβάνοντες πειρασμοί). There are also acquired temptations which are caused by our communication with others of ‘the ascending or descending’ type. One is communicating with the temptations afflicting others. For example, the unjust communicates with the temptations afflicting the one who has suffered the injustice, the critic with those of the criticised, the slanderer with those of the slandered and generally speaking, the tempter communicates with the temptations of the person tempted. This is the descending type of communicating with temptations. The ascending type takes place when the spiritual fathers via prayer, remove the temptations of their spiritual children or of those they are praying for. Of course, we also have the great temptations suffered by Christ’s saints, who have taken upon themselves the world’s sin and founded the Church. This is why one should never feel burdened by anyone and moan against him; he is only paying for his dues because of his own negligence or bad judgment.

We have been trying to describe the nature of temptations and their attributes but we cannot hide the fact that we have become frightened even by their depiction. When Saint Mary of Egypt was confessing to Abbot Zosima and was accounting for the bitter hardships she had suffered, caused by temptations, she responded in his questions thus: *“Father, please do not force me to describe them in detail since I am scared in case they return”*. The same thing happens to everyone when they refer to temptations. May the Lord rescue us from their force and manic power. However, how can this be done if our salvation becomes impossible without them? *“The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father punishes the son he delights in”* (Proverbs 3,12) And again: *“Blessed is the man you discipline O Lord, the man you teach from your law”* (Psalms 94,12). And also: *“If you are not disciplined, and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons”* (Hebrews 12,8).

The fight against tribulation is not so hard when the grace of God assists us. *“ I put to death and I bring to life. I have wounded I will heal, and no one can deliver from my hand”* (Deuteronomy 32, 39). When the motherly providence of grace secretly assists and sustains the fighter, everything becomes bearable since the

one who disciplines is at the same time the one who comforts. *“God disciplines us for our own good that we may share in his holiness”* (Hebrews 13,10) This is what happens in the face of natural temptations, which occur either because of our natural weakness or naivete or the devil’s envy or in order to contribute towards man’s spiritual advancement. All the above are regarded as natural obstacles which necessarily present themselves during the fighting stage, so that man accomplishes his confession. At this stage, the divine grace assists imperceptively and secretly comforts the fighters, who must always show courage for this reason. However, where unnatural temptations occur, the struggle is very harsh and hopeless and courage evaporates while desperation drowns and discourages the fighter to the extent that he curses the day he was born.

Lord Jesus Christ, You who are the constant consolation of those who place their hopes in You, rescue us from this darkness and fill us with Your hope. Amen.

The unnatural temptations are not only caused by enemy schemes because he does not have this authority, but are caused by our own sloth and pride, which we have fallen into. When one is negligent in carrying out his duties, this causes him to be forsaken since he is *“the one who knows but does not perform”*. The Lord permits his fall into the hands of his enemies to humiliate him, so that he recognises Who was that saved him and advanced him to the level of knowledge and grace and that those achievements are not his own *“since apart from Christ, you can do nothing”* (John 15,5), and from now on becomes humble and watchful and not contemptuous of the gift.

However, the temptations which befall the proud are harsher since God *“opposes the proud”* (James 4,6). If God opposes someone, who is able to assist him? It is during these tribulations that indeed courage is absent. Man feels completely alone and none of his prayers is answered. He feels discouraged and God seems to be merciless and hard. All previous methods which provoked the perception of God are of no help now and man tastes Hades and drinks from the bitter drinks of hell. The only thing which consoles him are tears, if he can manage to shed them, since they too dry up, as well as earnest humility, which descends through his cries and from his mind down *“to the deepest Hades”*.

A this point, man recognises the significance of “working and keeping” since if he works but does not keep, he learns by experience that it is “*a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Hebrews 10,31). Those who fall into this kind of temptations need spiritual assistance and the prayers of experienced spiritual fathers who “*are not unaware of Satan’s schemes*” (2 Corinthians 2,11) and have learnt by experience “*to assist the tempted*”.

Saint Maximus cites four ways in which man is being abandoned and through which the harshness of temptations is horrifying. The first way, “by a dispensation of providence”, is the one experienced by our Lord, Who even though had determinedly requested His release, was not heeded, but was abandoned, so that He would restore us, the abandoned, to our fatherly inheritance. The second way is the so-called “testing”, which affected Job and Joseph, so that the former was exposed as a pillar of patience and bravery throughout the generations and the latter as a pillar of purity and prudence. The third one is the “disciplinary” one, as it appeared to Paul so that he remains humble in the face of the extraordinary gifts. The Fourth and final one is the “repulsion”. This was imposed on the Jews so that they seek repentance, while in hell.

Each temptation is beneficial if it is received by the tempted. Acknowledging the scriptures which affirm that those who will be judged as having denied God’s will and those who do not persevere unto the end in the face of the tribulations of the Christian confession, will be “thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8,12) strengthens our resolution and reinforces us in exercising patience. The perils awaiting the traitors and apostates of the Lord’s faith are certainly not subject to challenge since our Lord’s declaratons are not schematic but solid. The most aching fact is that we have fallen from the Lord’s love because we have offended and totally denied our Saviour’s fatherly affection which was perfectly expressed in a divine way. I do not think there is anyone who can stand this: “*Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love*”(John 13,1) And those whom He loved turned against Him in the end!

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