

10. October 2022

A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
The Asceticism of Thoughts
(Part III)

Meditation on the Gospel of the day (Lk 11:29-32):
<http://en.elijamission.net/the-sign-of-the-lord-and-his-church-2/>

The rejection of useless thoughts

Yesterday we focused on showing the importance of the asceticism of thoughts in order to gain mastery over them and to be the ones who decide what kind of attention we give or don't give each thought. We had focused especially on the fight against bad thoughts, which we must fight decisively so that they do not gain ground inside us.

But it is not only bad thoughts that besiege us, wanting to rob us of our freedom. Even more so are those useless thoughts, those thoughts that entertain us too much in the superficial aspects of life; the insignificant news, the fleeting reports of everything that the world offers us, particularly in today's dictatorship of noise with all the demands that the media bombards our senses with.

On the path of following the Lord, it is also necessary to avoid - or at least limit - voluntary useless thoughts, because they draw our attention away from what is essential.

Here our decision to strive for purity of heart must become even more profound. In the light of the Gospel, evil and destructive thoughts are relatively easy to detect, and it is obvious that they must be combated. On the other hand, to distance oneself from unnecessary thoughts requires a deeper decision on the path of perfection. Moreover, one must learn to perceive the delicate voice of the Holy Spirit within and to recognize the state in which the soul finds itself. The following phrase of St. Paul gives us a guideline for this more subtle dimension of the asceticism of thoughts: "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up" (1 Cor 10:23).

Therefore, the purpose of the asceticism of thoughts is not only to avoid thoughts that are sinful; it also calls the person to refrain from thoughts that, although lawful, are not really edifying, so that our attention may be more and more focused on God and the soul may acquire greater freedom. Here, too, it is essential to make a clear inner decision. This could initially provoke a crisis in us, because we are accustomed to distract ourselves with harmless thoughts, without being aware of the spiritual consequences they have.

After having made the decision of wanting to embark on the path of perfection, suggestions may appear that want to persuade you that, with such a decision, you will lose the joy of life or a certain spontaneity. The term "suggestion" is used by the Desert Fathers to refer, for example, to all kinds of fears that, in the form of intense thoughts and feelings, try to influence our decision. Their goal is to prevent our resolute decision from being put into practice or, at least, to weaken its realization. St. John of the Cross warns us that a firm decision to advance on the path of perfection is often followed by massive attacks from the Devil.

These suggestions are misleading, because the goal of the asceticism of the thoughts is not an obstinate and forced repression of oneself; but that of being able to open oneself more deeply to the love of God. In this process, our relationship with the Lord intensifies, so that over time we acquire an inner restraint, which becomes our guide and prevents us from allowing ourselves to be carried away simply by the distractions of our thoughts. It is worth noting that, in taking this step, it could happen that initially we go through a kind of interior desert, and then comes the temptation to return to our accustomed way of thinking.

A great help for the asceticism of thoughts is the so-called "prayer of the heart". It is a practice that seeks to lead us to constant prayer. Thus, also in the various chores that do not demand our full concentration, we could continue with interior prayer, so that the heart and the mind become accustomed to it. One fruit of this practice is that we find more pleasure in prayer, and in this way the Spirit of the Lord can restrain us so that we do not allow ourselves to be carried away by unnecessary distractions and do not lose our recollection in God. This "prayer of the heart" is like repeating certain ejaculatory prayers, but not only from time to time, at certain moments, but systematically.

If we exercise ourselves in the virtue of temperance and in the asceticism of our thoughts, we enter a phase in which we actively cooperate in the path of sanctification. And it is here that the virtue of prudence comes into play, about which we will speak tomorrow...