

19. January 2024

In the school of the Fathers of the desert (III): The combat in what we look at

Let us meditate once more on these words of St. Anthony Abbot:

"He who sits in the desert and seeks to have a calm heart, has been spared from three combats: that of listening, that of speech and that of sight. He has only one battle left to fight: the battle against impurity".

The last two days, we had reflected on the fight against what we hear and what we speak. Today, we will devote ourselves to the struggle in relation to what we look at.

Sight:

We can also use the term "lust of the eyes", as we want to focus on those temptations that come to us through sight.

These wonderful God-given natural gifts of hearing, speech and sight can be misused and become a gateway to the Evil One or to the banal. We know well how many images bombard us day after day, and if we do not order them and limit them wisely, they will invade our whole inner being, penetrating into the unconscious and making our imagination active all the time.

We can see that more and more images are bombarding us. If we look at the development of cinematography, we see that the camera stays less and less time in the same scene. It brings us one image after another, which makes it more and more difficult to deepen the received impressions: as many images as possible in the shortest possible time! This is a reflection of the present time!

Let us remember the story of the fall into sin. Sacred Scripture says that after the woman had accepted that disastrous dialogue with the serpent, she saw that *"The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was enticing for the wisdom that it could give"* (Gen 3:6).

Through what the eyes see, appetite is easily aroused. The outer senses are activated, and the longer the gaze lingers on the forbidden, the more we are captivated. Recall what happened to King David, when he did not shrink from the provocative image of Uriah's

wife, who was naked. Not only did he fall into the sin of adultery, but he also had his faithful soldier killed because of his lust (2 Sam 11). It all started with the look, and then he gave in to his desire, instead of controlling the passion that had been inflamed.

How, then, are we to deal with the excess of provocations that bombard us, particularly the impure images, which are presented to us not only in the media, but also in large advertisements and publicity of all kinds? How can we flee from their provocation?

St. Charbel made a radical resolution: being aware of the lust of the eyes, he always looked only at the ground. Although most people would not be able to apply this solution in its radicality, it leaves us all with an important message.

Spiritually speaking, we must close our eyes to everything that could endanger our spiritual life. We may not be able to stop images bombarding us throughout our lives. But, with God's help, we can decide whether or not to allow them to penetrate us more deeply.

Something similar applies here to what we said about listening and speaking. We decide according to the criteria of Christian prudence. We must identify and determine the value we place on each image, and act according to that decision.

For example, we can look carefully at the Cross of the Lord or an icon of the Virgin Mary. Such images will awaken our love, and their incomparable value will make it easier for us to notice the superficiality and lack of love of other images. The more we focus our eyes on what is truly beautiful, the less we will allow our gaze to wander. Think, for example, of religious art, which can be an aid to internalising faith, but how empty we are left with those so-called works of art which are in reality a distortion, and which have unfortunately found a place in certain modern churches!

So we must consciously deal with the world of images. All of us will have to make decisions of this kind, if we want to live in the full freedom of the children of God.

I was once told the story of a priest whose gaze had fallen on a very beautiful woman. When he spoke to Jesus about this, the Lord said to him, "You looked at her once; don't look at her a second time". I don't know if this is a true story, but it does leave us with a lesson!

Now, looking back on the three meditations on guarding our ears, our tongue and our sight, we understand what St. Anthony Abbot meant when he said that, being in the

desert, he had been saved from these three combats in order to wage the great struggle against impurity. Indeed, if we learn to restrain our ears, our tongue and our eyes, the inner man is strengthened, so that the inner ears can be opened, the mouth can speak wise words and the eyes of the spirit can be activated.

Then the fight against impurity can be waged from another starting point, with an inner strength quite different from that which we have when we are captivated in the distraction of the senses.