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ASPECTS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
Part VII
"The Asceticism of Thoughts (1)"

Following yesterday's reflection on the last things in the reading from the Tridentine Rite, I return to further aspects of the spiritual journey. This time, I address a specific form of spiritual formation on the path of following Christ: namely, how we deal with our thoughts. These are often the triggers for words and actions that we would have been better off considering and ordering beforehand. In this context, we must speak of an asceticism of the mind.

It seems particularly significant to me, especially since we are virtually overwhelmed by a flood of information. Just as we must manage this information so that it cannot exert a negative influence on us, so too must we manage our thoughts, and one might add, our emotions as well. We must remain vigilant in the face of our modern age, which is increasingly under anti-Christian influence, with its nearly countless opportunities for manipulation. Thus, a carefully practiced asceticism of the mind is part of wielding the shield of faith, as the Apostle Paul describes in Ephesians 6.

As with all ascetic practices, it is important to understand their deepest meaning. The asceticism of thoughts is about breaking free from great distraction and mental dependence on external influences and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, gaining extensive control over our thinking. Since our minds, out of love for God, desire to submit to His will, the fruit of a successful ascetic practice is growth in love for God, which also makes us more capable of loving others.

Even the monastic father Benedict teaches that evil thoughts should be dashed against the rock of Christ, and Sacred Scripture tells us: *"Perverse thoughts separate men from God"* (Wisdom 1:3)

An attentive "disciple of the Lord" will not surrender himself to evil thoughts, nor to thoughts that simply flow into his mind. Rather, he will discern which thoughts deserve his attention and which do not. He will learn which thoughts should be consciously developed and which are not worth his attention. He will also learn to determine the

right time to give space to certain thoughts. The more he puts the discipline of mental asceticism into practice, the more he will realize that even useless thoughts damage the vitality of his soul.

From a spiritual perspective, thoughts are particularly good and fruitful when they connect one more strongly and intimately with God, that is, when they deepen love for God and for others. Spirit-filled thinking is thus the concrete fulfillment of the First Commandment: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:5).

When the "disciple of the Lord" embarks on the path of mental asceticism, he will quickly realize how many false, harmful, illusory, self-centered, and vain thoughts seek to dominate him, manifest themselves in his daily thinking, and contribute to his disintegration. He will notice how many useless discussions and conversations he carries on within himself. The accumulation of such deceptive thoughts, to which a person is subject within himself, is referred to by the Fathers of the Eastern Church's ascetic tradition by the collective term "figments of the imagination."

Yet this flood of thoughts is often not voluntary; rather, it occupies a person involuntarily and particularly disrupts prayer and inner recollection, and is capable of weakening the overall state of the soul. This is the state of original sin, but also the consequence of a distracted life.

First, the following decision must be made:

All voluntary, that is, conscious, thoughts that contradict God and the good of others must be fundamentally and immediately combated.

Just as I avoid every deed in following Christ, and may even have to exercise self-discipline to avoid yielding to temptation, so it is with thoughts. These thoughts usually precede the evil deed. Therefore, my spirit is called to watch over my thoughts with inner vigilance. I must ward off every evil thought by invoking the name of Jesus or the Holy Spirit, or by using a similar appropriate spiritual means to dispel such thoughts. In this way, I deny the evil thought my willing consent, and this is crucial.

Here, a distinction must be made. On the one hand, there are intense evil thoughts that assail me unexpectedly and seek to exert a kind of dictatorial control over me. On the other hand, there are thoughts that arise more or less gradually within me and present themselves as temptations or distractions. In the former case, these are often direct attacks by satanic forces; in the latter, they are usually thoughts that arise from my own heart, though there can also be a combination of both elements.

In the first case, in addition to invoking the name of the Lord, it is also appropriate to recite a prayer of rejection directed at the powers of evil. Usually, with such a resolute attitude and readiness to fight, calm returns after some time, and the soul regains its peace. Through such trials, God teaches us great vigilance, and through the experience of such struggles, our firm trust in His strength and presence grows.

In the second case, the struggle usually lasts longer, for now it is not merely a matter of temporarily warding off these evil thoughts, but of maintaining a constant inner focus on God. Persistently invoking His name weakens the power of the evil thoughts, and at the same time, an opening for the Holy Spirit takes place within us. When these negative thoughts come into contact with the Holy Spirit, they are weakened, and thoughts that connect us to the Lord more easily take their place. God uses these struggles to purify our hearts and make us more capable of love.

We'll continue tomorrow...

Reflection on the Daily Reading in the Novus Ordo:
https://en.elijamission.net/the-flock-of-the-lamb-3/