24 November 2026
ASPECTS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
Part VIII
"The Asceticism of Thoughts (2)"

Dealing with Evil Thoughts

At the end of yesterday's reflection, I spoke about how to deal with evil thoughts, those through which the devil attacks us directly or those that arise in our hearts. It should be added here that, through the two methods of "ascetic struggle" against these false thoughts, we can emerge victorious only if we do not in the slightest consent to them. We must neither argue with them nor negotiate with them, nor expose ourselves to their possible allure. Neither should we think that they have any justification whatsoever. Only with such clear resolve do we have the strength to master and overcome these thoughts, with their destructive effect, in the Lord. Otherwise, we are weakened from within. In the worst case, there remains a secret acquiescence that makes it impossible for us to distance ourselves decisively enough and to take the appropriate spiritual measures.

We must be aware that truly difficult battles can arise. God's grace, however, strengthens us in this struggle. It empowers our will to tear ourselves away from these unwholesome thoughts and turn toward God. In doing so, we must not lose heart, even if we do not always emerge victorious. We will, however, recognize where the mistake lay in a defeat and resolve to be even more vigilant the next time. Under no circumstances should we give up. If God subjects us to such struggles, it is a sign that He has begun to lead us deeper along the path. In this context, it should be noted that every spiritual struggle serves not only the personal purification and strengthening of the soul but also has a broader significance. However, these dimensions of spiritual struggle will be addressed in later reflections.

Let us now turn to a second aspect of mental asceticism.

Dealing with Unnecessary Thoughts

All voluntary, unnecessary thoughts must also be avoided, as they distract our attention from what is essential. Avoiding them is a far-reaching decision intended to lead us to a greater "purity of heart." While evil and destructive thoughts are relatively easy to identify in the light of the Gospel, and avoiding them is reasonable, distancing oneself from unnecessary thoughts requires a deeper commitment to the path of perfection. This goes hand in hand with a more refined perception of the Holy Spirit's promptings within the soul and of the soul's condition.

A statement of St. Paul points the way to this more refined form of mental asceticism: *"'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful"* (1 Cor 6:12).

Here we must recall that mental asceticism is not only meant to combat sinful thoughts. It also calls upon the person to curtail even permissible thoughts. In this way, inner attention to God may grow and the soul may attain greater freedom. In this case as well, a clear inner decision is of great importance. At first, it may lead us into a crisis, for we are accustomed to indulging in harmless mental distractions without being aware of the spiritual consequences.

After resolving to embark on the path toward greater perfection, "objections" may arise, for example, the fear that such a far-reaching decision might cause one to lose one's natural joy in life or a certain lightness of being. The concept of "objections" also stems from the ascetic school of the Eastern Church tradition. They can arise especially when one wishes to pursue the spiritual path more resolutely. All manner of fears take shape. They appear as persistent thoughts and seek to influence our decision. Their aim is to prevent us from carrying out our resolution, or at least to weaken it. In the Western tradition of spiritual formation, St. John of the Cross points out that it is precisely the firm resolve to advance on the path to perfection that is subject to massive attacks from the devil. If we decide to curtail even our useless thoughts, which is, in fact, an important element for an even greater surrender to God, then various objections can easily arise. They are a diversionary tactic.

The goal of such a path of mental asceticism is not a dogged and rigid self-isolation, but a deeper openness to God's love. Our relationship with God becomes more intense. Over time, an inner standard develops that serves as a guide. It no longer allows us simply to give in to mental distractions. However, abandoning familiar patterns of behavior can initially mean entering a kind of "inner desert," where our habitual

patterns of thought seek to reclaim us. Naturally, such a path requires a necessary reduction in the flood of information that pours in on people every day.

Reflection on the Daily Reading in the Novus Ordo:
https://en.elijamission.net/14395-2/