



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

September 2021

On Anger

A brother asked Abba Isidore the priest, "Why are the demons so frightened of you?" The old man said to him, "Because, ever since the day I became a monk, I have striven to prevent anger from reaching my lips." The fathers used to say that to become angry or to be irritated with people should be alien to the monk. And again, "The man who masters anger is able to master the devil, but the man who is overcome by this passion is a stranger to the monastic life. What should we then say about ourselves who allow for violent anger and even bear hatred to the point of hostility toward each other? May we control ourselves, brothers, and with the help of God come to each other's aid so that we might be saved from the hardness of this harmful passion. There are times when with seeming sincerity a man asks for forgiveness from his brother after some disagreement between them or on account of some fight. And yet after the reconciliation he still continues to be disturbed and has bad thoughts about this brother. he should not dwell on such thoughts but remove them immediately because this is recalling evil. It needs great self-control not to extend such thoughts and fall into danger. Asking forgiveness in the way of the commandments should heal the former anger and fight against thoughts of revenge, and yet on account of this disagreement there remains a certain irritation with the brother. Now remembrance of evil or animosity is one thing, losing a temper or rage is another, irritation another, and troubling of the mind yet another. I will provide you with an example so that you fully understand this point. Someone who is kindling a fire first puts a spark to the tinder. This is a remark of a brother. At this point the fire starts. What is the reason for the brother's remark? If you endure it, the spark goes out. But if you persist to think, "Why did he say that to me and what should I say in return?" And, "If he did not want to bother me he would not have said that, and he must think that I also would like to bother him." So you add a small quantity of wood to the flame, or some small amount of fuel, and you make some smoke, which is the troubling of the mind. This troubling, floods the mind with thoughts and feelings which provoke the heart and encourage it to attack. And this brazenness encourages us to vengeance on the one who has irritated us and this becomes the rashness which the St. Mark speaks of. The heart is moved to recklessness when one's thoughts are purposed toward malice, but malice is taken away by prayer and hope which brings peace to the heart. If then you return a sharp rebuke from your brother, the small flame is quenched, as I said, before it brings about any further trouble. Even if you are disturbed and you want to be quickly rid of it yourself, because it is still small, you can do so by staying quiet with a prayer on your lips and by one good warmhearted deed of humility. But if you dwell on the issue and kindle your heart and torture yourself with thoughts about why he said this to me, and what I should say to him, you are blowing on

the embers and heaping on fuel and bringing about smoke. From this inflow of thoughts and confused emotions the heart is kindled into a fire, and you are stuck with that passion. St. Basil calls this passion a boiling up of the blood surrounding your heart. This makes you, what is known as, irritable. But even this disturbance can, if you desire it, be extinguished before it becomes wrath. If you permit yourself to continue to be troubled, you will start to give free rein to it with the others, and you will be like someone heaping logs on a blazing flame and fanning the flames and so making more flames. In this way you become a wrathful person. This is precisely what Abbot Zosimos was talking about when he was asked to expound on the saying, "Where there is no hot temper, quarreling dies out." "If at the start of an argument," he said, "when there is first smoke and a few sparks, he stops it by blaming himself and humiliating himself before he is pulled into the fight and gets into a bad mood, he will do well. But if rather than staying peaceful, he fights, and becoming rash, he behaves like a man who is piling wood on a fire which is getting hotter and hotter until it becomes a great blaze. For in the same way that burning logs are reduced to embers and they become covered with ash but do not go out for a long time, even if water is cast on them, so also a temper that abides for a long time becomes malice. And for the rest, unless one sweats blood he will never be at liberty from it." See? He demonstrates to us the difference. Keep this in mind. Here you have heard what the first irritation was, what temper is, what becoming wrathful is, and what animosity is. See how from one utterance a terrible evil is attained? If from the start, you blame yourself when are you rebuked, without attempting to justify yourself or talking back and so repaying evil for evil, you will be saved from all these problems. This is why, I always tell you, when a passion comes about, when it is small and weak, cut it off, for fear it becomes stiff and cause you much trouble. It is one thing to pull out a small weed and quite another to uproot a massive tree.¹

The true function of anger according to the Creator's plan was supposed to be to allow man to fight against the Temptations and the Tempter and to avoid sin and evil: thus was the definition if it's normal use and natural end-goal in the beginning. Anger appears as a passion anytime it takes one's neighbor as its object. Consequently, no grounds of any kind can justify it. It is fitting to become angry against the evil one, but not against the man who falls victim to him, for, as the Apostle says: "We or not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." One must fight against sin, and not against him who commits it: "Hate the illness, but not him who is ill" recommends St. Syncletica

Judging from what the fathers have said it is certain, that vainglory and pride are the most fundamental causes of anger. St. Basil notes: "it is not words that hurt us, but rather our pride which rebels against us and the high opinion we have of ourselves." The main therapy of anger is gentleness and patience through prayer. Gentleness and patience is a remedy not only for anger, but also for all the illnesses of the soul according to the teacher of Proverbs: "A gentle man is the physician of the heart."

Evagrius notes that anger is cured by kindness, compassion, Love, and mercy. Dorotheos of Gaza teaches: "wherever compassion and love are found, anger and rancor cannot prevail" likewise, whoever wishes to find quick healing must not only accept humiliations, but also even seek them and strive to endure them. The antidote to vainglory

¹ Discourses of Dorotheos of Gaza , On Rancor Or Animosity.

and pride, as we shall see, is formed by humility. In order to be healed of anger, then, one must consequently acquire humility. But since anger is a sign of every kind of presumption, as St. John Climacus observes “its conversion requires great humility.” Since humility leads us to banish from ourselves irritation and anger. “as with the appearance of light, darkness retreats; so at the fragrance of humility, all anger and bitterness vanishes.” St. Gregory of Nyssa, for his part, writes: “humility is the mother of gentleness of heart. If you close the door to pride, anger will find no entrance.” Another remedy teaches us St. Nilus is that “prayer is the seed of the absence of anger.” Of all forms of prayer, psalmody has the greatest strength to calm the irascible part of the soul, when the latter has been agitated by anger. St. Basil observes: “Psalmody makes the soul serene, procures peace, and calms the tumult and swell of thoughts.”

At the start of this conference we were discussing the man who apologizes to someone else but holds some animosity toward his brother, and we were saying that by his apology the animosity was healed, but he had not, as of yet, overcome anger in general. Another man, if someone should by chance bother him, and then apologize and they then be reconciled, he is then at peace with that person. Then he no longer holds in his heart any remembrance of it, but if it happens that the same brother, a few days later, says something to another, he starts to recall the initial insult, and starts to be hurt not just about the second, but also about the first. This one is like someone who has an injury and applies a bandage. After a time, by means of the bandage, the cut heals and forms a scar, but it is still a tender spot and if someone casts a stone at him, this spot is more easily damaged compared to the rest of the body and it starts to bleed. This is what happened to him. He had a cut and he applied a bandage, which is an apology and reconciliation. The injury is quickly healed like in the example, that is, the anger is healed. He starts to control his resentment by being eager not to hold on to the remembrance of evil in his heart, and this is the scar of the wound that is healed. But he was not completely cured. He still had some animosity. This is the scar which has skin that can readily be removed and the entire wound opened up again by a slight strike. He has to put forward great labor so that the scab is fully healed and the hairs grow again and no blemish is left, so that the spot where the wound was, will not be easily seen. How then can this be corrected? By prayer straight from the heart for the one who had troubled him. An example would be, "O God, help my brother, and help me by his prayers." In this he is interceding for his brother. This is a true mark of compassion and love, and he is humbling himself by entreating for help through his brother's prayers. Where there is compassion and love, and a humble nature, how can anger and the other passions develop? As Abbot Zosimos states, "Even if the devil and all his wicked spirits employ all their wily schemes to further evil, all his work would be in vain and be brought to naught through by that humility which Christ commanded us." Another of the elders used to say, "The one who prays for his foes is man without animosity. Labor at this and know clearly what you hear, because unless you work you will not absorb it through word alone. Because what man, who is earnest to learn a skill can master it through verbal instructions alone? No, always he has to start by doing, and doing it incorrectly, doing and undoing, until, bit by bit working patiently and persevering he learns the craft while God looks upon his work and his humble nature, and works with him. And do we want to master the craft of all crafts by word only, without any practical experience of the labor? How is that possible? May we guard ourselves and labor with enthusiasm while we have time. May God grant us to remember and preserve what we have heard, and not let the sun go down on our wrath.