



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

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On Thoughts

*"It is, indeed, impossible for the mind not to be troubled by thoughts, but accepting them or rejecting them is possible for everyone who makes an effort. It is true that their origin does not in every respect depend on us, but it is equally true that their refusal or acceptance does depend on us."*¹

Abba Moses - The Conferences

My beloved brethren, our minds can be a source of great joy or great sorrow depending on one's ability to control their thoughts. In order to understand more about our thoughts and how to purify them, let us turn to the Conferences of St. John Cassian.

In the first conference with Abba Moses, Abba Germanus asked him the following question about our thoughts: "Why is it, then, that superfluous thoughts insinuate themselves into us so subtly and hiddenly when we do not even want them, and indeed do not even know of them, that it is very difficult not only to cast them out but even to understand them and to catch hold of them? Can the mind, then, sometimes be found free of these, and is it ever able to avoid being invaded by illusions of this sort?"²

Abba Moses responded to him saying, "It is, indeed, impossible for the mind not to be troubled by thoughts, but accepting them or rejecting them is possible for everyone who makes an effort. *It is true that their origin does not in every respect depend on us, but it is equally true that their refusal or acceptance does depend on us.* But it is, I say, largely up to us whether the character of our thoughts improves and whether either holy and spiritual thoughts or earthly and carnal ones increase in our hearts."

He then goes on to give several practical ways to help us to bring, "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."³ The first thing he says is that we should, "practice the frequent reading of and constant meditation on Scripture, so that we may be open to a spiritual point of view." He also goes on to say, "If, as we have said, we constantly return to meditating on Holy Scripture and raise our awareness to the recollection of spiritual realities and to the desire for perfection and the hope of

¹ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 24.

² John Cassian, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 56.

³ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 2 Co 10:5.

future blessedness, it is inevitable that the spiritual thoughts which have arisen from this will cause the mind to dwell on the things that we have been meditating on.”⁴ In order for our thoughts to become spiritual, it is essential that we spend as much time as possible every day reading and meditating upon the Holy Scriptures. In the Paradise we are told that “whensoever a man readeth the Divine Books, the devils are afraid.”⁵ At times we may not understand what we are reading, but the devil understands and he will flee from you! It is important to read commentaries by the early Church Fathers, as well as contemporary Fathers, on the Holy Scriptures to help you understand what may be difficult to comprehend.

The second thing he says is that, “For this reason we frequently chant the psalms, so that we may continually grow in compunction.” In the Paradise of the Holy Fathers we read, “A little work and a little meditation, and a little singing of the Psalms, and a little prayer; *I have cleansed my thoughts according to my power, and I resist as far as I can the thoughts which rush upon me.*”⁶ It is also said that they, “they applied all the Psalms to their own lives and works, and to their passions, and to their spiritual life, and to the wars which the devils waged against them.”⁷ From this we see the importance of the spiritual canon of praying from the Agpeya because we use the words of David the Prophet to strive against the thoughts which come to us throughout the day.

The third thing he says is, “For this reason we are diligent in vigils, fasting, and praying, so that the mind which has been stretched to its limits may not taste earthly things but contemplate heavenly ones.” In the Paradise of the Holy Fathers we read that, “Fasting is the subjugation of the body, prayer is converse with God, vigil is a war against Satan”⁸ We also read in the Paradise that Abba Pachomius used to hear the devils speaking and he, “heard one of them saying, “I have strife with a man who constantly defieth me, for *whensoever I approach to sow thoughts in his mind, immediately he turneth to prayer, and I depart from him being consumed with fire.*”⁹ Through this saying we learn that when troubling thoughts come to us we must turn to God immediately through prayer and the devil will flee from us. In another story from the Paradise we learn how to deal with the thoughts that can arise in us from things we see. We are told that “Abba Agathon used to say to himself, whensoever he saw any act or anything which his thought wished to judge or condemn, “Do not commit the thing thyself,” and in this manner he quieted his mind, and held his peace.”¹⁰

⁴ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 57.

⁵ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 24.

⁶ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 273–278.

⁷ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 306.

⁸ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 263.

⁹ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 81.

¹⁰ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 80.

Lastly, Abba Moses gives us a warning saying, “When these things cease because negligence has crept in again, then, it is inevitable that the mind, by the accumulated filth of the vices, will soon turn in a carnal direction and fall.”¹¹

He then goes on to briefly explain the sources of our thoughts: “Above all we should know what the three sources of our thoughts are: *They come from God, from the devil, and from ourselves*. They are from God when he deigns to visit us by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, which raises us up to a higher level of progress; and when we have made little gain or have acted lazily and been overcome and he chastens us with a most salutary compunction; and when he opens to us the heavenly sacraments and changes our chosen orientation to better acts and to a better will... And from the devil a whole series of thoughts is born, when he attempts to subvert us both by delight in wickedness and by hidden snares, fraudulently passing off evil things for good with the most subtle finesse and transforming himself for us into an angel of light... They also come from us, however, when we spontaneously remember things that we are doing or have done or have heard. Concerning such things the blessed David says: ‘I thought of ancient days, and I kept the eternal years in mind, and I meditated. At night I was exercised in my heart, and I examined my spirit.’ And again: ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of men are vain.’ And: ‘The thoughts of the righteous are judgments.’ Also in the Gospel the Lord says to the Pharisees: ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’ *We should, then, be continually aware of this threefold distinction and with a wise discretion examine all the thoughts that emerge in our heart, first tracing their origins and causes and their authors, so that, in accordance with the status of whoever is suggesting them, we may be able to consider how we should approach them.*”¹²

In the Ladder of Divine Ascent, St John Climacus shares something he learned about how to deal with our thoughts when observing a brother: “I also paid special attention to the brother in charge of the refectory. I noticed that he had a small book hanging in his belt, and I learned that every day he noted down his thoughts in it and showed them to the shepherd. I found out that many of the brothers did this also as well as he, and I was told that this was on the instructions of the superior.”¹³ He also says that, “Unconfessed evil thoughts hatch evil actions,”¹⁴ which shows the importance of revealing the thoughts to our Father of Confession.

May the Lord grant us to purify our thoughts and minds through the reading of the Holy Scriptures, praying the Psalms, through vigils, fasting, prayers, and confession. Amen.

¹¹ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 56–57.

¹² John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 59.

¹³ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 105.

¹⁴ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 257.