

ANSWERS IN THE FORM OF QUESTIONS, AND MORE:

***2015 LENTEN DAILY READER
ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS
MEDFORD, NEW JERSEY***

by Fr. John

“The important answers must all be in the form of a question.” (Alex Trebek, host of the television show, *Jeopardy*)

As part of our preparation for the remembrance of Christ’s death and the celebration of his Resurrection, we are encouraged to spend some time in considering our lives, how we think, and how we act. We are also urged to consider our responses, our answers to both the “Ultimate Questions” and how they get worked out in the questions and answers we have to make each day.

This Lenten period, we are going to incorporate several resources into our ***Lenten Daily Reader***, which will prepare us first in determining the right questions. The point of Alex Trebek’s quote from above is that: answers alone, without the right questions will not lead to success either on *Jeopardy* or in life. So, we will first root our answers on passages assigned for daily reading during Great Lent. To this will be added questions and reflections provided by the Athonite monk, Fr. Alexis Trader, from his writings and blog, particularly his book: *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Therapy* (his blog,

<http://ancientchristianwisdom.com>

is highly recommended—you can receive email updates for free).

Here are the essential questions:

- Who am I?
- Where am I?
- What is the problem?
- What is the cure?

Fr. Alexis will guide us in setting an Orthodox and Biblical foundation for these questions and their answers. But he will also outline how this is worked out in daily experiences and decisions, particularly in how we interpret and respond to our thoughts. He is unique among Orthodox monastics in having both the knowledge and sensitivity to respect and critique many modern psychological approaches, particularly those utilized within cognitive therapy. He states that, “Cognitive therapy is based on the common-sense notion that thoughts come in between events and feelings...The way a person behaves in a situation and emotionally responds to it depends on how he interprets and assigns meaning to that situation” (49-50).

Fr. Alexis identifies both the early Christian and later psychological understanding of this “common-sense notion” as coming from the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, who stated: “It is not things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things” (51). He goes on to show how this is understood by many Orthodox spiritual writers. Elder Paisios said: “Everyone interprets events in a way that is consistent with his own thoughts. Everything can be viewed from its good or bad side.” Also, “one’s conclusions are based on the spiritual content of his soul...on the dictionary that the individual soul tends to use” (52). Fr. Alexis summarizes it in this way: “Viewing the soul’s contents in terms of having or not having good thoughts indicates that a good dictionary—meaning an interpretative framework with constructive beliefs or schemata—needs to be in place for good thoughts to arise spontaneously” (52-53). During Great Lent, we will be working on establishing or strengthening this “interpretative framework,” maybe even re-editing our “dictionary.”

This spiritual framework will be the basis for considering the questions and answers that we daily encounter. I came across an article recently in *The New York Times* by Tara Parker-Pope entitled, “Creating a New Mission Statement” that raises the kinds of questions that are no doubt common to all of us:

- How do you want to be remembered?
- How do you want people to describe you?
- Who do you want to be?
- Who or what matters most to you?
- What are your deepest values?
- How would you define success in your life?
- What makes your life really worth living?

Finally, we’ll add the contributions of Carol Rickard who has begun offering our “*Healthy Choices*” sessions. The next ones will be on **Sunday March 8 and April 26**. You can see a video of her first presentation at:

<http://www.wellyouuniversity.com/Healthy-Choices>

Much of the material will come from her book: *Life Tools/ How to manage Life Instead of Life Managing You*, which will be available at her next presentation.

There are 40 passages, offered for each day of Great Lent (which will begin on February 23 and end on Friday April 3, the eve before Lazarus Saturday. Holy Week represents a separate time period). Each passage includes a reading from the assigned Scriptures for that day (**S**), passages from Patristic and other authors — **P**— taken from, “*The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, edited by Joanna Manley, the writings of Fr. Alexis Trader (**FR**), and Carol Rickard (**C**).

As usual, our Reader will be available as hard copies, a digital version, and in daily doses that I will send by email. Thanks to Diana Pasca for her contributions.

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READING 1: MONDAY FEBRUARY 23

S: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1).

P: If then the world has a beginning, and if it has been created, inquire who gave it this beginning, and who was the Creator; or rather, in the fear that human reasoning may make you wander from the truth, Moses has anticipated inquiry by engraving in our hearts, as a seal and a safeguard, the awesome name of God. *St. Basil the Great-The Hexaemeron*, Manley, 735).

FR: The World in the Beginning—**Who am I? Where am I? What is the problem? and What is the cure?** An Orthodox Christian conception of the world provides answers to these questions through the testimony of scripture and tradition about the Triune God and his relationship to the human race...we can **choose** to listen prayerfully to a narrative about creation, the image of God in man, the fall, and salvation in Christ that makes up the worldview that informs the Christian's choices, thoughts, and action (24).

C: You don't get to choose what card you get! This applies so wonderfully to life, where we are faced with many situations that we don't get to choose. Instead we must work with what we're dealt, and we are responsible for making choices (5).

READING 2: TUESDAY FEBRUARY 24

S: And God said, "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures" (Genesis 1:20).

P: Then for the first time is made, a being with life and feeling. Each kind has been naturally assigned its own home...It is not so with us. Why? Because we incessantly move the ancient landmarks which our fathers have set (*St. Basil the Great. The Hexaemeron*, Manley, 739).

FR: “According to Genesis 1, humanity is theologically fashioned in the image and likeness of the Creator. What distinguishes man from beast is not the presence of reason...but the stewardship with which his Maker entrusted him” (26).

C: “We are responsible for making choices.
“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.” Epictetus (7)

READING 3: WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 25:

S: Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...so God created man in His own image; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26).

P: “Having been made in the image of God, man has a theological structure. When he denies God, he denies and destroys himself...by making himself his own goal and objective, he ‘becomes his own idol’ according to St. Andrew of Crete. *Panayiotis Nellas-Deification in Christ*, Manley, 742).

FR: “The image of God can be seen as an inner wellspring watering human activity and life with motivation, purpose, and meaning beyond this transitory world” (26).

C: “While we don’t get to control the events in our lives, we do get to control our response to them or it gets made for us.
Choice= controlling how our intentions create experiences. (8)

READING 4: THURSDAY FEBRUARY 26:

S: The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9-17).

P: He planted the tree of knowledge as a sort of trial, test and exercise of man’s obedience and disobedience. (*St. John of Damascus-The Orthodox Faith, Book Two*, Manley, 745).

FR: The wrong choice of the ancestral sin was not just a detour from the journey toward perfection. It was a dead-end characterized by a deluded state of irrationality and pride in which man disregarded the very boundaries separating the created from the uncreated realm (28).

C: You are the one who must decide if what you’re doing in life is working or not. The gate of change can only be opened from the inside (22).

READING 5: FRIDAY FEBRUARY 27:

- S:** And God said, “Where are you?” and “Who told you that you were naked?” (Genesis 3:9).
- P:** Many of the things that befall us, befall us for our training, either to do away with past sins, or to correct present neglect, or to check future sinful deeds. (*St. Maximos the Confessor-The Ascetic Life*, Manley, 749).
- FR:** Although the divine image was not erased by the fall, it was darkened, thereby permitting human reason to grow indolent and lose its ability to clearly see the things of God (28).
- C:** We don’t know what we don’t know. Sometimes we need help from an objective party, outside our family and friends to help guide us in the discovery to learn about ourselves (17).

READING 6: SATURDAY FEBRUARY 28:

- S:** For behold the Lord, the Lord of hosts, takes away from Jerusalem God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoke to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through also He made the world; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:1-3).
- P:** Truly, “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20). This, at least the blessed Apostle intimates here also, in the very beginning of his Epistle to the Hebrews. For since it was likely that afflicted, worn out by evils, and judging of things thereby, they would think themselves worse off than all other men, he shows that herein they had rather been made partakers of greater, even very exceeding grace (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily I on Hebrews 1*, Manley, 752).
- FR:** What distinguishes man from beast is not the presence of reason, but his creation in the image of God and the stewardship with which his Maker entrusted him... What it means to be made in God’s image can be understood only by looking at Christ, the image of the invisible God. Man is in fact “an image of the Image” who is Christ (26,27).
- C:** I am where I am today because [the] early [and old] **SURVIVAL TOOLS** were a part of my life. Instead of looking at them with guilt and shame, I see them for what they were: **some things I ‘grabbed at’ to help get me through the VERY difficult times in my life**. Simply put—they are tools that I no longer choose because I have healthier ones I can use (23).

READING 7: SUNDAY MARCH 1

- S:** Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).
- P:** At all times, indeed, but specially then, when I reflect upon the achievements of the saints, it comes over me to feel despondency concerning my own condition, because we have not even in dreams experienced the things among which those men spent their whole lives, not paying the penalty of sins, but always doing rightly and yet always afflicted (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily XXVIII on Hebrews*, Manley, 755).
- FR:** At its root, the fall is a sundering of a connection inherent in man's creation in the image of God: namely the relationship between the created and the uncreated realm. Given that humanity was created ex nihilo, the very core of human life necessarily changes with an alteration in man's relationship to the fount of all being, the uncreated God. Instead of following the natural, positive, and dynamic path of the remembrance of their Maker, obedience to their Lord, friendship with their Provider, and development into the likeness of God with the support of the healing and life-giving divine energies, Adam and Eve chose the unnatural, negative, and destructive path of forgetfulness, disobedience, enmity, alienation, emptiness, and death by separating themselves from the Giver of life (28).
- C:** We must **DO** what we **DON'T FEEL LIKE DOING!** (24)

READING 8: MONDAY MARCH 2

- S:** Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them (Genesis 3:21).
- P:** Let me ponder on Adam and Eve's fall into sin:
1. How they covered their nakedness with fig-leaves when they saw they were naked.
 2. How to this day, all unrepentant sinners, when they have lost virtue, feel exposed and cover their nakedness with some sort of lie or fantasy (St. Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prolog*, 3 December, Manley, 757-58).
- FR:** Although the divine image was not erased by the fall, it was darkened, thereby permitting human reason to grow indolent and lose its ability to clearly see the things of God. Instead of being directed toward the Giver of Light, human reason turned with blind selfishness toward creation and fell under the shadowy influence of the imagination that encouraged all manner of illusion, prejudice, superstition, and idolatry to grow freely. As a result of separation from God, human beings became more vulnerable to the devil's

influence as they became intimately acquainted with corruption, sickness, and death, foes that human freedom and reason could not overcome. When Adam and Eve were girt with garments of skin, human nature was clothed with dead matter, altering life into a struggle for survival in which instincts and passions would displace God-implanted reason.

Notwithstanding, God in his providence continued to lovingly preserve the world as a whole and the human race in particular, wisely guiding all things to the goal he had assigned to them. He sent his prophets, revealed the law, and in the fullness of time became man in the cosmically immense person of Jesus Christ (28).

- C:** On of the greatest **challenges of change** is that we are **comfortable with what we know** (25).

READING 9: TUESDAY MARCH 3

- S:** Therefore my people have gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; their honorable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst...People shall be brought down, each man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled (Isaiah 5:13,15).
- P:** The proud man thinks he can comprehend everything with his mind. The Lord does not grant this...The Lord does not manifest Himself to the proud soul. Pride is difficult to detect in oneself, but the Lord leaves the proud to be tormented by their impotence until they humble themselves (St. Silouan, *Wisdom from Mt. Athos*, Manley, 760).
- FR:** Ever moved by love for fallen man, Christ's every word and deed were as the creed puts it, "for us men and for our salvation." Saint Gregory the Theologian refers to Christ's nativity, baptism, miracles, and crucifixion as a "sort of divine education for us." Blessed Augustine comments on these events being "so ordered that the Christian might model his life on them, not merely in a mystical sense, but in reality." When Christ was baptized in the Jordan, human nature was ineffably made worthy of the bath of incorruption and the forgiveness of sins. When he arose from the waters, the Holy Spirit descended on our common nature by descending on him. And when the voice of the Father bore witness to the Son, the Holy Trinity was revealed to the world as the source of our Salvation. A similar epiphany occurred when Christ was transfigured on Tabor, transfiguring our human nature by his divine nature, so that the image of God in man might shine forth more gloriously than the sun. When Christ suffered and died on the Cross, he healed human nature wracked by sin, transforming death into an entrance to life eternal, and redirecting our human will toward the good through the power of love (29).
- C:** Words can be **powerful**. Put into **ACTION**, they become **LIFE CHANGING**.

READING 10: WEDNESDAY MARCH 4

- S:** Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light to darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight (Isaiah 5:20-21).
- P:** When a man outwardly praises someone, while accusing and disparaging him in his heart, it is hard for the simple to detect this. Similarly a person may be outwardly humble but inwardly arrogant. For a long time such men present falsehood as truth, but later they are exposed and condemned (St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, Manley, 762).
- FR:** Human restoration, transfiguration, purification, illumination, and deification are wrought through the grace of the Holy Spirit received on the one hand through baptism, chrismation, the Holy Eucharist, and all the other mysteries and liturgical services that make up the sacramental life; and on the other hand, through faith, repentance, noetic prayer, fasting, vigil, humility, love, and all the other virtues that constitute the life of ascetic struggle. Thus, through the indivisible union of the virtues and the mysteries, the believer's prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," becomes a reality: his will is aligned with the will of God, even as Christ's human will was in harmony with his divine will. In practical terms, this means that in the Church, a person's love of self [*philautia*] is transfigured into love of neighbor [*philadelphia*], which is the very source of the divine economy (30).
- C:** If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten. Because — if nothing changes...**NOTHING CHANGES!** (29)

READING 11: THURSDAY MARCH 5

- S:** So, do this, and deliver yourself; for you have come into the hand of your friend: go and humble yourself; plead with your friend (Proverbs 6:3).
- P:** He is a true friend who, when his brother is tempted, endures with him, without anxiety or consternation, his sorrows, privations, afflictions, and in tribulations as though they were his own (St. Maximos the Confessor, *Third Century of Love*, Manley, 768).
- FR:** When the Christian asks the question, "What is a human being?" divine revelation about creation tells him that man is a dynamic being subject to change, either growing toward or falling away from God...The account of the fall indicates that in terms of phenomenology, man is easily deceived and often forgetful of God. This forgetfulness can lead to a state of pride in which man no longer properly judges the boundaries separating the created and uncreated and in which his rationality becomes irrational under the joint influence of the imagination and the devil...Finally, the work of Christ reveals

that man is a being of great complexity and immense value. Above all, he is loved. For human beings, it is normal and natural to be united to God. Union with God implies that the image can be restored and the likeness can be attained. In the Church through the mysteries and the virtues, people can be purified, transfigured, shown to be victorious over sin, death, and the devil, be resurrected and ascend to the Father. The lives of the saints demonstrate that these are not empty words, but by the grace of God, achievable goals (31).

C: When we face a situation that cannot be changed, we are challenged to change ourselves.

READING 12: FRIDAY MARCH 6

S: Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

P: Evil is to be seen not in the nature of creatures, but in their wrongs and irrational movement. Evil is an erroneous judgment about things apprehended, accompanied by their wrong use (St. Maximos the Confessor, *Second and Fourth Century on Love*, Manley, 770).

FR: When a Christian asks, “What is the world?” Orthodox teaching on creation answers that the world was created by God out of love and goodness and saturated with a purpose infinitely greater than itself...The heart of reality is thus both good and meaningful. Notwithstanding, creation is utterly dependent on God and subject to change. To unpurified eyes, however, nature’s goodness and meaningfulness are no longer transparent, because fallen man’s reason has grown dark through pride, selfishness, fear, and a swollen imagination...Notwithstanding, for the Christian, all of creation has been purified by the coming of Christ. Sickness, corruption, sin and death after Christ’s victory are no longer the invincible fear-inspiring enemies that they once were (32).

C: Dealing with rising emotions: 1) **STOP** the level from rising any higher. 2) **RELEASE** so that the level will drop (67)

READING 13: SATURDAY MARCH 7

S: Beware, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13).

P: It is impossible for the soul to attain anything spiritual and pleasing to God, or to be free of inner sin, without guarding of the mind and purity of heart, in other words, without sobriety...If with God’s help we gain something daily through our sobriety, we should

take care not to enter into communication with other people without discrimination, lest we suffer loss through our converse with them and are led into temptation (St. Hesychius the Priest of Jerusalem, *Texts on Sobriety and Prayer*, Manley, 772).

FR: What is amiss in human affairs and life? According to the account of the fall and subsequent sacred history, human misery stems from forgetfulness, disobedience, and a broken relationship with God, accompanied by selfishness, pride, irrationality, delusion, a lack of self-control, movement toward non-being, and a fearful subjugation to corruption, sickness, death, and the devil (32).

C: **Stopping the Level of our emotions from rising—Some unhealthy ways:**
Eat / drink / sleep / shut down / isolate / avoidance / become numb / ignore things / self harming behaviors / use negative self talk (68)

READING 14: SUNDAY MARCH 8

S: Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him (Hebrews 2:1-3).

P: Who will give us back this present time if we waste it?...We are not yet perfect, but at least we desire to be so, and this is the beginning of our salvation...Someone wanting to acquire the spiritual craft must not interest himself in anything else but, day and night, attend to it...unless a man drives himself and fights against his evil inclinations he readily falls away and diverges from the path of virtues (St. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses X*, Manley, 776-777).

FR: What is the remedy for this situation? According to patristic interpretations of Genesis and the work of Christ, man's salvation is possible through remembrance of God, through unceasing prayer, and thanksgiving, a restored life of virtue, and filial obedience to God that are accompanied by love for one's brother, humility, clear-sighted reason, self-control, continuous movement toward Christ, and freedom from the fear of corruption, sickness, death, and the devil (32).

C: **Stopping the Level of our emotions from rising—Some healthy ways:**
take a time out / belly breathing / count to 10 / set limits / decline to talk about it anymore
consider the source / listen to music / use the Serenity Prayer / walk away
focus on something else / change your thought pattern / decline the invitation to fight (68)

READING 15: MONDAY MARCH 9

- S:** The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate (Proverbs 8:13).
- P:** By these signs then, that carnal pride is shown...He is utterly lacking in patience, and without charity: impudent in offering insults to others; faint hearted in bearing them himself; troublesome in the matter of obedience, except where his own wishes and likings correspond with his duty; unforgiving in receiving admonition; weak in giving up his own wishes; very stubborn in yielding to those of others; always trying to compass his own ends, and never ready to give them up for others; and thus the result is that though he is incapable of giving sound advice, yet in everything he prefers his own opinion that of others (St. John Cassian, *Institutes*, Book XII, Manley, 780).
- FR:** Christianity teaches that reason is woven into the fabric of creation and that man is logical because he is in the image of the *Logos* (the Word/Christ). When logical thought processes are put within their proper context, one can also learn to act in accord with divine wisdom. Techniques to clear up faulty inferences, to reduce egocentric biases, and irrational pessimism can then be used alongside of the tools and methods that the fathers have adopted in their own ascetic struggle. If the techniques and tools of cognitive therapy in conjunction with the sacramental life and struggle for virtue, both psychological healing that can enlarge a person's sense of freedom and agency as well as spiritual healing that enables the person to choose the good can be achieved (45).
- C:** The choices you make, MAKE YOU!

READING 16: TUESDAY MARCH 10

- S:** Then the Lord said to Noah, "Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation" (Genesis 7:1).
- P:** Three principles move us to good: the seeds in our nature, the holy powers, and our will for good. Seeds we have from nature when, for example, we treat others as we wish to be treated by them, or when we see a man in want and in trouble and naturally show compassion to him. Holy powers, when feeling an impulse to some good deed, we find blessed assistance, and are successful. Finally, will for good, when we distinguish good from evil and choose the good (St. Maximos the Confessor, *Second Century on Love*, Manley, 782).

FR: “It is not things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things...When, therefore, we are hindered or disturbed, or grieved, let us never blame anyone but ourselves, that means our own judgments” (Epictetus from: *The Encheiridion*, Trader, 510).

C: Can I Do Anything About it RIGHT NOW? (*Rules to Live By*)

READING 17: WEDNESDAY MARCH 11

S: If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer (Proverbs 9:12).

P: Nothing is more ruinous than talkativeness and more harmful than an uncontrolled tongue; and nothing is more destructive and disorganizing to the treasure of the soul. For whatever we succeed in building in ourselves every day is destroyed by much talking, and what we collect together with great labor our soul dissipates again through this disease of the tongue (St. Philotheus of Sinai, *Forty Texts on Sobriety*, Manley, 785).

FR: Saint Ambrose of Milan writes, “Anyone who examines more closely these matters will perceive what great assistance the wise man finds and what great obstacles the foolish encounter in the very same things...For we have both wars in peace and peace in war.” In other words, the interpretation of a situation determines the range of available strategies for responding to that situation. Wisdom involves adaptive and constructive interpretations that can lead a person to beneficial responses even in the worst and most destructive of conditions. Saint John Cassian notes, “The roots and causes of our offenses lie not in others, but in ourselves” (52).

C: Whether you think you can or think you can’t—YOU’RE RIGHT! (*Rules to Live By*)

READING 18: THURSDAY MARCH 12

S: The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom (Proverbs 10:21).

P: He who has lost sensibility is...a self-contradictory windbag, a blind man who teaches others to see. He talks about healing a wound, and does not stop irritating it. He complains of sickness, and does not stop eating what is harmful. He prays against it, and immediately goes and does it. And when he has done it, he is angry with himself; and the wretched man is not ashamed of his own words. “I am doing wrong,” he cries and eagerly continues to do so. He moths prays against his passion, and his body struggles for it. He philosophizes about death, but he behaves as if he were immortal...He talks of temperance and self-control, but he lives for gluttony...He reads about vainglory, and is vainglorious while actually reading. He repeats what he has learnt about vigil, and drops

asleep on the spot. He praises prayer, but runs from it as from the plague. He blesses obedience, but he is the first to disobey. He praises detachment, but he is not ashamed to be spiteful and to fight for a rag. When angered, he gets bitter...He teaches meekness, and during the actual teaching frequently gets angry...He looks people in the face with passion, and talks about chastity...All the time he is his own accuser, and he does not want to come to his senses—I will not say cannot. (St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 18, Manley, 789).

FR: Abba Dorotheus told the following story: “For everyone is benefited or harmed by his own state, for no one can harm another.” He gives the example of three different people who saw the same gentleman standing on a street-corner, but who had quite dissimilar interpretations of his behavior. One person assumed that he was waiting for a prostitute; another suspected that he was preparing for a robbery; and a third thought that he was going to a friend’s house for prayer. One event with three radically divergent interpretations demonstrates that what one sees depends on how one interprets. In cognitive terms, one could say that meaning assignment determines perception. The fathers, however, stress that how one interprets an event also depends on one’s spiritual state (52).

C: *Autobiography in Five Short Chapters*

by Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk I fall in. I am lost ... I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place but, it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in ... it's a habit. My eyes are open I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

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READING 19: FRIDAY MARCH 13

- S:** When a wicked man dies, his expectation will perish, and the hope of the unjust perishes (Proverbs 11:7).
- P:** A man's life, as He says, is not from his possessions, by reason of its excess. And this is plainly true: for the duration of a man's life is not extended in proportion to his wealth, nor does the sum of his life run parallel with that of his wicked gains (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, Homily 89, Manley, 791).
- FR:** Elder Paisios stated that, "Everyone interprets events in a way that is consistent with his own thoughts. Everything can be viewed from its good or bad side." The elder then mentions the case of someone hearing thuds from the apartment above. A pious individual with good thoughts will think, "He's making prostrations," whereas a religious person lacking such thoughts might think, "He's dancing all night long" (52).
- C:** Do not let, "I don't know how..." become your excuse (#15, *The Power of Words*)

READING 20: SATURDAY MARCH 14

- S:** As Jesus passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and said to him, "Follow me." And he arose and followed Him (Mark 2:14).
- P:** Discipleship begins with silence and listening...If we are satisfied with simply listening in interest, without ever doing what we are told, quite soon we shall hear nothing any more. God does not speak to our mind or to our heart if He does not receive allegiance and obedience from us. God speaks once and He speaks twice...and then...He withdraws sadly until we are hungry for God, hungry for the truth (Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *Meditations*, Manley, 793).
- FR:** Elder Paisios observed that a person's conclusions about an incident are dependent on "the spiritual content of his soul," or as he puts it elsewhere, on the "dictionary" that the individual tends to use. Viewing the soul's contents in terms of having or not having good thoughts indicates that a good dictionary—meaning an interpretative framework with constructive beliefs or schemata—needs to be in place for good thoughts to arise spontaneously (52-53).
- C:** Today is a gift, treat it as such (#13, *The Power of Words*).

READING 21: SUNDAY MARCH 15

- S:** Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me (Mark 8:34).
- P:** And you see how He also makes his discourse unexceptionable: not saying at all, “whether you will or not you must do this,” but how? “If any will come after me...” I do not force, I do not compel, but each one I make lord of his own choice (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LV on Matthew*, Manley, 795).
- FR:** The monastic fathers make a noteworthy addition to the initial Stoic idea that reactions depend on interpretations. Whereas cognitive therapists strive to make their patients’ interpretations veridical and objective, the fathers believe that it is more important to spontaneously fulfill Christ’s commandments to “love one’s neighbor” and “to judge not” than to accurately perceive a situation. Given that cognitive psychologists admit that initial interpretations are often inaccurate and egocentrically biased, the patristic advice about non-condemnatory and loving initial reactions to events is not as naïve and unrealistic as it may first seem. In other words, the patristic stance can also correct initial biases and lead to more accurate assessments (53).
- C:** Comfortable is a dangerous place to be (#11, *The Power of Words*).

READING 22: MONDAY MARCH 16

- S:** Those who are blameless in their ways are His delight (Proverbs 11:20).
- P:** The believing mind is a temple of God, which it is proper for a man to adorn daily and to burn incense therein, inasmuch as it is God who dwells there (Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis, *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Manley, 798).
- FR:** Saint John Chrysostom recounts for the faithful two graphic hypothetical examples to teach them about the importance of how they interpret their station in life and the situations that they encounter. First, he has them consider the case of a poor junk collector who is disturbed, because he does not have more possessions. If that person were to receive those desired good, but continued to interpret his world through the lens of what he does not have, he would still be upset. Saint John has this person progressively ascend the political, social, and economic ladder to an objectively and measurable improve status. The saint notes that even if this person were to be crowned king, he would still be distraught, because other kings are greater than he is (53).
- C:** Stop being who you were and be who you are.

READING 23: TUESDAY MARCH 17

- S:** The root of the righteous yields fruit (Proverbs 12:12).
- P:** One of the fathers asked Abba Nastir...”What is the best work for me to do?” And he said to him, “Not all kinds of labor are the same. For the book says that Abraham was a lover of strangers, and that God was with him; and Elijah was a lover of silent contemplation, and God was with him; and David was a humble man, and God was with him; therefore whatsoever work your soul wishes to do, provided that it be of God, that do, and keep your heart from evil things” (Athanasius of Alexandria, Palladius of Helenopolis, *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Manley, 801).
- FR:** Saint John Chrysostom then has the faithful consider the diametrically opposite case of a king who is accustomed to finding solace in the positive aspects of his situation. If this ruler were to be removed from office, but still has his goods and chattels, remembering that fact will console him. If his possessions are taken away from him, but he still has food to eat, focusing on that blessing will comfort him. Inverting the former example, Saint Chrysostom has this figure descend the political, economic, and social ladder rung by rung until the former ruler finds himself in prison. Even there, this truly wise ruler of himself considers that he is alive and finds consolation therein. Thus, the saint concludes, “It is not then wealth that is the foundation of pleasure, nor poverty of sadness, but our own judgment and the fact that the eyes of our mind neither see clearly nor remain fixed in one place, but flutter abroad” (53).
- C:** It’s *knowing* that it doesn’t matter what plans you make for tomorrow – you must LIVE your life fully PRESENT in TODAY!

READING 24: WEDNESDAY MARCH 18

- S:** Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit (Isaiah 27:6).
- P:** It is fruit, fruit, and fruit alone that the Lord seeks from man, that living tree. Good fruit is a God-loving heart, but bad fruit is a heart filled with self-love. All other things that a man has and enjoys—status, power, honor, health, wealth, learning—these are no more than the leaves of the tree. “Every tree which does not bring forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). Even non-Christian people rate good works above fine words. So much more must it be the rule among the followers of Christ (St. Nicholai Velimirovic, *Prolog*, January 5, Manley, 802).
- FR:** *On Making Excuses and Justifying them with “Cognitive Strategies”*: Part I

Below is a list to help us see if we excuse any of our sins using various “cognitive strategies.” Let’s consider them in such ways, so that we can instead of an excuse, offer repentance and receive the sweet balm of forgiveness.

Here are the first 8 of 17 on the excuse list. Many others are possible:

- 1) It's not sinful, if most Christian denominations encourage it.
- 2) It's not sinful, if I can't find it in the Church Canons or local bylaws.
- 3) It's not really sinful, if it's not illegal.
- 4) It's not all that sinful, if I can name other people who do the same thing.
- 5) It's not sinful as long as I didn't mean to hurt anyone.
- 6) It's not sinful even if my acts have caused harm as long as the person I harmed had it coming, provoked me, deserved it, was really asking for it, or practically forced me to do it—or, failing that, has not behaved perfectly, is in some way unlikable, or is acting unreasonably.
- 7) It's not all that sinful if I could not (or did not) anticipate the unintended consequences of our acts.
- 8) It's not sinful if it was simply an error in judgment, completely inconsistent with the virtue manifest in every other part of my life and insignificant in the context of the unbelievable good that I do (*Blog*, September 23, 2012).

C: No one can take away our self respect, if we do not give it to them.

READING 25: THURSDAY MARCH 19

S: Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation” (Isaiah 28:16).

P: The Lord Christ within us is the tried stone which binds and joins together our various spiritual capabilities into unity and wholeness, so that all act in phase, in God's direction and God's Kingdom. The Lord Christ within human history is the tried story that binds and joins together Judaism and paganism in one House of God, in the Church of God. “For no other foundation can a person lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11), says the apostle of the New Testament in accordance with the prophet of the Old (St. Nicholai Velimirovic, *Prolog*, August 21, Manley, 805).

FR: *On Making Excuses and Justifying them with “Cognitive Strategies”: Part II*

9) It's not sinful if I can say any of the following about it:

“What else could I do?”

“Anyone else would've done the same thing.”

“It came from the heart.”

“I listened to my soul.”

“I went with my gut.”

“It was the smart thing to do.”

“It was just common sense.”

“Look, I was just stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

“I’d do the same thing again if I had it to do over.”

“I’m only human, you know!” “What’s the big deal?”

It’s not that sinful as long as I was under a lot of stress. No fair-minded person would hold me accountable when it is clear that it was the stress I was under—along with all sorts of other powerful factors—that must be held responsible.

11) It’s not sinful as long as no one ever complained about it.

12) It’s not sinful as long as I know that people higher up in the hierarchy are dishonest, stupid, and destructive (This excuse is ironically also a sin).

13) It’s not sinful as long as it was for a worthy cause.

14) It’s not sinful, since I’m the real victim in the situation.

15) It’s not sinful as long as it would be almost impossible to do things another way.

16) It’s not sinful as long as there are books, articles, or blog posts claiming that such behavior is the right thing to do.

17) It’s not sinful as long as I can find some other member of the congregation, or better yet member of the clergy, who says its OK. (*Blog*, September 23, 2012).

C: The way to failure is to try and please everybody.

READING 26: FRIDAY MARCH 20

S: The simple believes every word, but the prudent man considers well his steps (Proverbs 14:15).

P: Solomon, advising the wise hearer, says: “And let your eyes anticipate your footsteps” (Proverbs 4:25), which is to declare clearly that in all our actions we should take care to foresee with earnest intent what outcome awaits us, we should examine skillfully what is done according to the will of God (Bede the Venerable, *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, Manley, 810).

FR: The fathers were quite mindful of the overall importance and etiological significance of meaning assignment for successful human functioning and virtuous life. They recognized that our perceptions are channeled through our interpretations of our situation, interpretations that are often influenced more by our imagination than by objectively measurable external reality. Interpretations in the form of thoughts and images shape our views of others and ourselves. Good thoughts bring us joy, increased insight, and wisdom, whereas bad thoughts can throw us into a state of melancholy, confusion, or even folly. According to the fathers, thoughts not only give rise to emotional reactions, but also coalesce over time into character traits. If we alter our way of interpreting, we can bring about changes in mood and character. The patristic consensus also views our soul’s orientation to God and things eternal as decisive in the way we interpret reality. Finally, the commandments to love our neighbor and not to judge our brother act as

filters through which a Christian should first assign meaning to whatever he or she sees or hears (55).

C: Accept people where they are, not where you want them to be.

READING 27: SATURDAY MARCH 21

S: But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister (Hebrews 6:9-10).

P: Hearing these things, let us, I beseech you, “minister to the saints.” For every believer is a saint in that he is a believer. Though he be a person living in the world, he is a saint. “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife by the husband” (1 Cor. 7:14). You see how the faith makes the saintship. If then we see even a secular person in misfortune, let us stretch out a hand...What then (you say) if he is unclean and polluted? Listen to Christ saying, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). Act then for God’s sake. (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily X on Hebrews*, Manley, 810-11).

FR: The first step in cognitive therapy is for patients to become aware of their automatic thoughts. In like manner, the first step in Christian spiritual warfare is for believers to become mindful of their sinful thoughts. According to St. John Cassian, as long as wrong thoughts remain hidden, they hold sway over a person; but once they are discovered, they immediately are weakened even before one begins the task of discerning whether they are good or bad. Cognitive therapists would wholeheartedly agree. This parallel between the two essentially therapeutic approaches to the thoughts suggests that each approach may offer material of interest to the other (58).

C: The road to freedom is through the tunnel of forgiveness.

READING 28: SUNDAY MARCH 22

S: We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19-20).

P: And you see how very suitable an image he has discovered: for he did not say “foundation,” but “anchor.” For that which is in the tossing sea, and seems not to be very firmly fixed, stands on the water as upon land, and is shaken and yet is not shaken (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily XI on Hebrews*, Manley, 812).

FR: Patristic texts distinguish among thoughts that are angelic, demonic, and human...Elaborating on the threefold division among the thoughts, Saint John Cassian observes that the believer conceives of angelic thoughts when he is illumined by the Holy Spirit. This illumination sets the soul aflame with spiritual zeal, moves her to compunction, or reveals to her heavenly mysteries. These godly thoughts strengthen the will and lead the believer to God-pleasing behavior. Demonic thoughts are hatched from musings about sensual pleasures or about an illusory good that is in fact evil. These thoughts weaken the will and lead to sinful conduct. Angelic thoughts are thus divine gifts guiding the soul to a safe harbor, whereas demonic thoughts are temptations casting her into an open and raging sea. Human thoughts involve ideas automatically arising “from ourselves, when in the course of nature we recollect what we are in the process of doing or have done or have heard” (59).

C: Until I leave what was behind me, I will keep reliving it.

READING 29: MONDAY MARCH 23

S: The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good (Proverbs 15:3).

P: Evil does exist, and its activity shows it diffused throughout the whole of life. How then does it come to be...if it is neither independent nor created?...The soul deteriorated when it was perverted from its natural state. What was the soul’s supreme good? Attachment to God and conjunction with Him through love. When it failed in this, the soul deteriorated because of weaknesses of many various kinds. But why was it at all capable of evil? Because of its self-determining life, because made in God’s image, it had the conception of the good, and experienced the enjoyment of the good (St. Basil the Great, *The Condition of Man*, Manley, 816).

FR: The threefold distinction among the thoughts implies that human thoughts as simple conceptions stemming from the senses are a given, but angelic and demonic thoughts as gifts or temptations from the outside involve some degree of free choice. While it is not in a person’s power to decide whether a demonic or angelic thought will pass through one’s mind, people can choose to act on it or to ignore it. Upon determining the origin of a given thought, a person is quite free to reject the thought or admit it by lingering on it. No matter how enticing a demonic thought may be, it can only urge, not coerce...In fact, Saint Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, writes, “God bestowed on our will so much freedom and power, that even if every kind of sensual provocation, every kind of demon, and the entire world united to take arms against our will and vehemently to make war against it, despite all that, our will remains entirely free to despise that attack and will what it chooses to will or not will what it does not choose to will (60).

C: Holding on to the past will keep us from moving forward.

READING 30: TUESDAY MARCH 24

- S:** To whom then will you liken God? (Isaiah 40:18).
- P:** The divine nature cannot be apprehended by human reason... We cannot even represent to ourselves all its greatness... In my opinion it will be discovered when that within us which is godlike and divine—I mean our mind and reason—will have mingled with its like and the image will have ascended to the archetype... Abraham, great patriarch though he was, was justified by faith, and offered a strange victim, the type of the great sacrifice. Yet he did not see God as God, but gave Him good as a man (cf. Gen 15:6, 22:13, 18:8). He was approved because he worshipped as far as he comprehended (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Second Theological Oration*, Manley, 817).
- Fr:** According to Saint John Climacus, there are three basic approaches to the thoughts that correspond to the three stages of spiritual maturity: *purification* in which the believer prays for deliverance from bad thoughts by entreating God, *illumination* in which he contradicts them with passages from Holy Scripture, and *deification* in which he utterly prevails over them because his spiritual eyes are riveted on divine *theoria/vision* (199).
- C:** If we don't make the choices, they'll get made for us.

READING 31: WEDNESDAY MARCH 25—ANNUNCIATION

- S:** Then Mary said, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).
- P:** Now the health of the soul is the accomplishment of the Divine Will, just as, on the other hand, the disease of the soul that ends in death is the falling away from this good will. We fell ill when we forsook the wholesome way of life in Paradise and filled ourselves with the poison of disobedience, through which our nature was conquered by this evil and deadly disease... The words of the [Lord's] Prayer bring the cure of the disease which is in the soul. For He prays as if His soul were immersed in pain, saying, "Your will be done." Now the will of God is the salvation of men. If therefore we prepare to say to God: Your will be done also in me, it is absolutely necessary first to renounce what was contrary to the Divine Will and to give a full account of it in confession... When Your will is done in me, every foul and wicked movement of my free will is brought to nought (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer*, Manley, 1001).
- FR:** For the holy fathers, prayer is always an appropriate intervention regardless of whether a problem is cognitive, emotional or behavioral. After all, prayer enables believers to entrust their human difficulties to God's care with the sure knowledge that "where God wills, the order of nature is overcome." With respect to temptation in the mind, prayer

can repel thoughts that provoke sorrow, faintheartedness, rancor, anger, vainglory, and pride. It can also focus a wandering mind. In fact, Saint Gregory Palamas affirms that prayer and the reading of psalms not only weaken the intensity of bad thoughts, but also transform them and redirect them. For this reason, the texts of the Church's liturgical services encourage the believer to turn to Christ and to entreat him to calm the thoughts when they rage like a storm, to bolster them when they waver in uncertainty, and to grant him reflections that inspire compunction, repentance, and renewed dedication to God (199-200).

C: Hope is not a plan.

READING 32: THURSDAY MARCH 26

S: The highway of the upright turns aside from evil; he who guards his way preserves his life (Proverbs 16:17).

P: “Christ became man, calling to repentance thieves and harlots. Repent my soul: the door of the Kingdom is already open and Pharisees and publicans and adulterers pass through it before you, changing their lives” (St. Andrew of Crete, Canon, Canticle 9). And suddenly he takes the believer, prepared by all that has gone before, and thrusts him into the choir of the great suppliants of the Lord, making him cry out too, joining his voice with theirs...In this way the recollections of sacred history come to life. The events of salvation become current events in the lives of the faithful who are being saved today. And the contemporary within which the events of salvation are relived is enlarged; it contains the uncontainable, and the barriers of space and time are shattered, broadened and deepened to infinity (Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, Manley, 827).

FR: Summarizing patristic tradition, Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite enumerates three reasons why taking refuge in God through prayer is preferable to disputing bad thoughts: 1) believers are not always strong enough to fight their bad thoughts; 2) those who attempt to dispute them will still have to contend with impure images lingering in the mind, thereby further defiling it; and 3) those who admit their own weakness and inability to fight bad thoughts make their souls humble (200).

C: In every situation there is a seed of growth.

READING 33: FRIDAY MARCH 27

- S:** Israel shall be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation (Isaiah 45:17).
- P:** In one day, my brother, you can gain all eternity. And in one day you can lose it all. You are given thousands of days on earth to determine for yourself whether to pursue salvation or damnation. But blessed a hundredfold be that day on which you repent of all your unclean works, your unclean words, and thoughts, and turn to God with a cry for mercy. That day is worth more to you than a thousand other days... Take firm hold on yourself the first day that it comes to meet you, and say: "You are the blessed day on which I shall purchase life eternal" (St. Nikolai Velimirovic, Prolog, May 26, Manley, 828-29).
- FR:** In the case of dubious thought, the ancient fathers advocate fleeing to God through prayer, fasting, tears, and vigil, rather than risking ensnarement by sinfully taking pleasure in the thought under the pretext of examining it in order to determine whether it is good or bad. Saint Peter of Damascus proposed "saying to every thought that comes to us: I do not know who you are; God knows if you are good or not; for I have cast myself into his hands, as I shall continue to do so, and he looks after me." For the pious, the appearance of an ambiguous thought becomes an opportunity for renewed trust in God. Abba Dorotheos counseled a sorely tempted brother to call out, "'Lord, provide for this matter as thou desirest and as thou knowest,' for the providence of God arranges many things differently than what we suppose or anticipate (200-201).
- C:** The way out of problems is going in.

READING 34: SATURDAY MARCH 28

- S:** As it was appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation (Hebrews 9:27-28).
- P:** What then? Do we no longer die that death? We do indeed die, but we do not continue in it: which is not to die at all. For the tyranny of death is when he who dies is never more allowed to return to life. But when after dying is living—and that a better life—this is not death, but sleep. Since death was to have possession of all, He therefore died so He might deliver us (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily XVII on Hebrews*, Manley, 831).
- FR:** Since unconfessed thoughts are much like hen's eggs warmed by the dung of the passions and ready to hatch out with a noisy brood, ancient ascetics sometimes advise the believer to expose them and not to let them nest in the mind undisturbed. This can be done

mentally, orally, or in writing. The simple act of confessing the thoughts “to the Lord as to a human being” can neutralize them and strengthen the believer in his efforts to observe his heart more closely. Sometimes, however, the believer should also confess them to his spiritual father, so that “they would be destroyed by the shame felt in confessing them and by the hardship of the penance imposed.” Abba Dorotheos would write down his thoughts on a board in order to show them to his elder. And by simply doing so, he would experience relief and spiritual growth. In like manner, Saint Anthony counseled his fellow monks to jot down the impulses of their souls as though they were going to show them to someone else, for that action would make them feel too ashamed do continue to harbor any bad thoughts. In all these examples, the believer extracts the thought from his murky subjective world, so that he can examine it objectively in the clear light of Christ. Often, the extraction alone is sufficient to weaken the thought and decrease its hold over the believer (202-203).

C: Are you complaining about something you can change?

READING 35: SUNDAY MARCH 29

S: “Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:44-45).

P: Let us then become lowly, so we may be high. For most utterly does arrogance abase... Abraham says, “I am dust and ashes” and prevailed over countless barbarians... bearing a trophy more glorious than the former, and cleaving to his virtue, grew ever more high (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXV on Matthew*, Manley, 834).

FR: The ancient fathers also recommend that believers in thrall to the passions disdain their bad thoughts by courageously closing off their senses and utterly rejecting impassioned images and memories... The desert fathers explain that when someone disdains bad thoughts instead of ruminating on them, they die like scorpions sealed in a jar.

In patristic tradition, disdaining the thoughts encompasses diverse tactics ranging from vehement refusal to a knowing indifference. For example, Saint Dorotheos of Gaza suggested that the believer disdain bad thoughts as though they were merely barking dogs. This disinterest in them, however, is founded on the knowledge that the believer has God as his ally and that the devil’s power was stripped at the crucifixion of Christ. Elder Paisios viewed this tactic as better than rebuttal when dealing with unseemly or blasphemous thoughts. This also happens to coincide with the advice of cognitive therapists for coping with obsessions. Elder Paisios illustrated this approach when he counseled those troubled by thoughts of pride to step back and look at their own thoughts

in the manner that one would look at someone else being ridiculously prideful, that is, with a good sense of humor and a hearty laugh (202).

C: Make your problems be your only ones.

READING 36: MONDAY MARCH 30

S: He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord (Proverbs 19:17).

P: Both the poor man who begs and the rich man who gives, place the Lord under an obligation: not only when the poor man begs in the name of the Lord and with humility, but also when the rich man gives in the name of the Lord and with compassion. Everyone who receives must realize that he receives that which is God's; and, when a man gives, he must realize that he gives that which is God's. The giving as much as the receiving both have a value (St. Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prolog*, June 19, Manley, 838).

FR: Another method for disdaining bad thoughts (ie: for feeling a strong dislike or disapproval) is to keep the mind occupied with other matters. This could entail studying scripture and the writings of the holy fathers. Those with spiritual vision note that as long as the monk is studying sacred books, he is not bothered by bad thoughts. Abba Macarius advised an even more focused approach to fight the thoughts: the memorization of passages from the gospels and other parts of scripture. Regardless of the level of cognitive intensity, the study and memorization of spiritual writings not only distract the mind from bad thoughts, but also provide material for rebuttal. Some fathers even engaged in purely intellectual pursuits such as language learning as a distraction technique in the struggle with the thoughts. For example, Saint Jerome admits that he studied Hebrew not only in order to learn how to read the Old Testament in the original, but also in order to keep his mind busy and to distract himself from the provocations of improper thoughts (203).

C: The first and best victory is conquering self.

READING 37: TUESDAY MARCH 31

S: Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to Him whom man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers..."In an acceptable time I have heard You, and in the day of salvation I have helped you" (Isaiah 49:7-8).

P: The Son of God assumed human nature, and in it He endured all that belongs to the human condition. This is the remedy for mankind of a power beyond our imagining. Could any pride be cured, if the humility of God's Son does not cure it? Could any greed be cured, if the poverty of God's son does not cure it? Or any anger, if the patience of

God's Son does not cure it? Or any coldness, if the love of God's Son does not cure it? Lastly, what fearfulness can be cured, if it is not cured by the resurrection of the body of Christ the Lord? Let mankind raise its hopes, and recognize its own nature: let us observe how high a place it has in the works of God (St. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Christian Struggle*, Manley, 840-41).

FR: According to Saint John Cassian, it is God who provides the believer with the strength to reject tempting thoughts as well as the freedom to yield to them. Thus, the saint advises the believer, who is assaulted by bad thoughts, to reject and refute them in line with the scripture that says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Even though God alone can release a person from the struggle of wrestling with the thoughts, anyone can learn to rebut them, not take pleasure in them, and not allow them to linger in the mind, regardless of whether the thoughts are impassioned or dispassionate. This assertion both encourages the faithful and empowers them in their struggle with the thoughts (203).

C: Words can be powerful.

READING 38: WEDNESDAY APRIL 1

S: Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles (Proverbs 21:23).

P: Silence of the lips is better and more wonderful than any edifying conversation. Our fathers embraced it with reverence and were glorified through it (SS. Barsanuphius and John, *Directions*, Manley, 846).

FR: When the church fathers elaborate on the art of rebuttal, they often mention Psalm 137:8-9: "O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be that takes and dashes your little ones against the rock." For ancient ascetics, rebuttal entails destroying those nasty little thoughts or desires by striking them against the Rock who is Christ. This means placing those bad thoughts in the presence of the Lord Jesus, who as Almighty God can calm the sea and cast out the evil spirit. Other fathers suggest striking thoughts "against the firm and solid strength of reason and truth that Christ reveals (203-204).

C: We've been where we were.

READING 39: THURSDAY APRIL 2

S: Then Jacob arose from Beersheba; and the sons of Israel carried their father Jacob, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him. They also took their cattle and their goods...and all his offspring he brought with him into Egypt (Genesis 46:5-7).

- P:** Paphnutius said: “All the various things taking place in the world must be divided into two categories, for some happen through the direct will of God, and the others by His permission only; the things done to the praise of God especially happen by the direct desire of God, but all those which pertain to loss (or injury), danger, and to matters which produce a tribulation take place by the permission of God (Palladius, *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Manley, 848).
- FR:** A final analytical approach to the thoughts that is suitable for beginners and advanced alike consists of examining the behavioral and situational factors that contribute to the appearance and persistence of malignant thoughts. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, the faithful can gain much benefit by learning where they first had a bad thought, how they became aware of it, with whom they were interacting, and under what conditions. This analysis requires believers to actively gather information about a specific thought that harms them, as well as to determine successful ways of expelling it. Once they verify the causes, they are obliged to distance themselves from them (207).
- C:** Suffer pains of discipline or pains of regret.

READING 40: FRIDAY APRIL 3

- S:** Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her, rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her (Isaiah 66:10).
- P:** Indeed, we have here no continuing city, and therefore we seek one to come. This is the city built of spirit, life, and truth. This is the city whose one and only Builder is the Lord Jesus Christ. This city is called the Kingdom of heaven and life immortal, the court of the angels, the haven of the saints, the refuge of martyrs. In this city there is no duality of good and evil, but only good. All that is build in this city is built for ever (St. Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prolog*, April 13, Manley, 850-51).
- FR:** In summation, under the heading of *theoria*/vision, watchfulness, and hesychasm (the practice of stillness), ancient fathers supply the faithful with a series of “cognitive techniques” that are useful for coping with harmful thoughts. These methods are tailored to the believers’ spiritual maturity and intellectual capabilities as well as to the kind of thoughts troubling them. All the faculties of the soul are marshaled to action in the struggle for purity of the thoughts: desire in prayer, anger in rebuttal, and reason in analysis. And as always the grace of God is present, healing, strengthening, and illumining those who strive to be vigilant over their thoughts (207).
- C:** While circumstances may be limiting, life itself is not.

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