

The Struggle With Passions

by I.M. Kontzevich

The struggle with passions requires understanding their interconnected nature and the importance of cutting them off at the start through unceasing prayer.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 10:5, Galatians 5:16, Ephesians 6:12

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Virtue Development"

Description

I.M. Kontzevich delves into the interconnected nature of passions, likening them to virtues as links of a single chain, with eight main ones including gluttony, lust, and pride. The focus of patristic asceticism is on addressing the root cause of sin - the vices and passions within the soul. The struggle with thoughts is central to asceticism, with various moments in the development of passions identified by the Holy Fathers, from provocation to captivity.

Transcript

PASSIONS, LIKE VIRTUES, are also interconnected, just as "links of a single chain" (St. Isaac of Nitria), one being an offshoot of another. There are eight of them; in the order of birth they are as follows 1) gluttony, 2) lust, 3) avarice, 4) anger, 5) despondency, 6) despair, 7) vainglory, and 8) pride.

The main concern of patristic asceticism is not with external manifestations of sin, nor individual instances of sin, but rather with their cause, i.e., the vices and passions rooted in the soul, or diseases of the soul and hidden inner states of sin. Using contemporary terms and concepts, Professor Zarin expounds the teaching of the Holy Fathers about the psychology of passion and the struggle with it. Here is a brief resume of this exposition.

A thought is the initial moment in the emergence of a passion; it is a moment of hesitation and an essential central element of this psychological state.[1] The essence of asceticism amounts to the struggle with thoughts. The Holy Fathers, ascetics, discern as many as [six or] seven moments in the development and growth of passions.

1. PROVOCATION (SUGGESTION)

The first impetus to the emergence of the psychological phenomenon which may end as passion is known as a "provocation" or "suggestion" (prilog).

It is a conception of an object or an action corresponding to one of the stained inclinations within a person. Under the influence of external impressions, or in connection with the psychological working of the memory or imagination according to the laws of association, this provocation enters the sphere of man's consciousness. This first moment takes place independently of man's free will, against his wish, without his participation, in accordance with the laws of psychological inevitability--"spontaneity"--and is, therefore, considered "innocent" or dispassionate. It does not incriminate man in sin if it is not caused by his "wandering" thoughts, if it is not invited consciously and voluntarily, and if a person is not negligent about it. This is the touchstone for testing our will, to see whether it will be inclined towards virtue or vice. It is in this choice that the free will of man manifests itself. [2]

2. CONJUNCTION

Provocation evokes the response of the feeling, which reacts to the impression or image intruding upon the consciousness by either "love" or "hate" (sympathy or antipathy). This is the most important moment, for it decides the fate of the provoking thought: will it stay, or will it flee? It is only the emergence of this thought in the consciousness that occurs regardless of the will of man. If it is not immediately rejected and lingers on, this means that in the nature of a given person it finds compatible ground, which is expressed in his sympathetic reaction to the provocation. Sympathetic inclination attracts attention, allowing the suggested thought to grow and turn into an image of fantasy pervading the entire sphere of consciousness and ousting all other impressions and thoughts. Attention lingers at the thought because man delights in it. This second moment is called conversation or conjunction (sochetanie). St. Ephraim the Syrian defines it as a "free acceptance of the thought, its entertainment, as it were, and a conversation with it accompanied by delight." In the contemporary language of psychology this means that the second moment in the development of the thought lies in the following man's attention is directed exclusively to the newly arisen impression or notion, which serves as an impetus or cause for the development of a whole series of associated notions. These notions give man the feeling of pleasure while anticipating the enjoyment of the object of the impression or notion obtained. In order to cut off the sequence of notions, to remove it from his consciousness, and to terminate the feeling of delight, man needs to distract his attention. He must actively and firmly resolve to rebut the images of sin assailing him and not return to them again.

3. JOINING

Otherwise, with the absence of willful rejection of the intruding images, the third moment is induced, when the will itself becomes increasingly attracted to the thought, and as a result man becomes inclined to act upon what the thought tells him and to get the satisfaction of partaking of it. At this time the equilibrium of his spiritual life is totally destroyed, the soul wholly surrenders itself to the thought and strives to realize it with the purpose of experiencing an even more intense delight. Thus, the third moment is characterized by the inclination of will towards the object of the thought, by its agreement and resolve to realize pleasurable fantasies. Consequently, in the third moment the whole will surrenders to the thought and now acts according to its directives in order to realize its fantastic plans. This moment, called joining (slozhenie), is the cooperation of the will, which is a declaration of agreement with the passion whispered by the thought (St. Ephraim the Syrian), or consent of the soul to what has been presented to it by the thought, accompanied by delight (St. John of the Ladder). This state is already "approaching the act of sin and is akin to it" (St. Ephraim the Syrian). There comes the willful resolve to attain the realization of the object of the passionate thought by all means available to man. In principle, the decision has already been made to satisfy the passion. Sin has already been committed in intention. It now remains to satisfy the sinful desire, turning it into a concrete act.

4. STRUGGLE

Sometimes, however, before man's final decision to proceed to this last moment, or even after such a decision, he experiences a struggle between the sinful desire and the opposite inclination of his nature.

5. HABIT

However, the last psychological moment of an unstable vacillation of the will between opposing inclinations takes place only when the habit has not yet been formed within the soul, namely, the "bad habit" of responding to the evil thought. It takes place when a sinful inclination has not yet deeply penetrated man's nature and become a constant feature of his character, a familiar element of his disposition, when his mind is constantly preoccupied with the object of the passionate urge, when the passion itself has not yet been completely formed.

6. CAPTIVITY

When in the power of passion, man gladly and violently rushes to satisfy this passion, either without any struggle at all, or almost without a struggle. He is losing the dominant, guiding and controlling power of his volitional faculty over individual inclinations and demands of volitional nature. It is no longer the will that rules over sinful inclinations, but the latter rule over the will, forcibly and wholly enticing the soul, compelling its entire rational and active energy to concentrate on the object of passion. This state is called captivity (plenenie). This is the moment of the complete development of a passion, of the fully established state of the soul, which now manifests all of its energy to the utmost. [3]

"The best and the most successful struggle takes place when the thought is cut off by means of an unceasing prayer at the very start. For, as the Fathers have said, whoever opposes the initial thought, i.e., the provocation, will stop its subsequent disposition at once. A wise ascetic destroys the mother of wicked fiends, i.e., the cunning provocation (first thoughts). At the time of prayer, above all else, one's intellect should be rendered deaf and mute (St. Nilus of Sinai), and one's heart emptied of any thoughts, even a seemingly good thought (St. Hesychius of Jerusalem). Experience has shown that the admission of a dispassionate thought, i.e., a distraction, is followed by an impassioned (wicked) one, and that the entry of the first opens the door to the latter." [4]

This inner struggle is vividly portrayed to us by St. Hesychius of Jerusalem (5th century), a disciple of St. Gregory the Theologian:

No. 145. Our mind, being something of light appearance and innocent, easily gives itself over to daydreaming and is unrestrainedly subject to evil thoughts, if it does not have in itself such a concept which, like a monarch over the passions, holds it constantly under control and bridles it.

No. 168. A ship does not move without water; and there is no progress whatsoever in the guarding of the mind without sobriety with humility and prayer to Jesus Christ.

No. 169. Stones are used for the foundation of a house; but for this virtue (the guarding of the mind) both the foundation and the root are the holy and venerable name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Quickly and easily can a foolish captain wreck his ship during a storm, dismissing the sailors, throwing the sails and oars into the sea, and going to sleep himself; but much more quickly can the soul be drowned by the demons if, when the thoughts begin to emerge, it does not guard sobriety, and invoke the name of Jesus Christ.

No. 94. Sobriety and the Jesus Prayer mutually reinforce one another; for extreme watchfulness goes with the content of constant prayer, while prayer goes with extreme sobriety and watchfulness of intellect.

No. 88. Many of our thoughts come from demonic suggestions, and from these derive our evil outward actions. If with the help of Jesus we instantly quell the thought, we will avoid its corresponding outward action. We will enrich ourselves with the sweetness of divine knowledge and so will find God, Who is everywhere. Holding the mirror of the intellect firmly towards God, we will be illumined constantly as pure glass is by the sun. Then finally the intellect, having reached the limit of its desires, will in Him cease from all other contemplation. [5]

Endnotes

1. There are three main moments 1) the appearance of a concept, 2) the adding to it of the feeling, and 3) the adding to it of the will. (Mind, feeling, will: a concept, in conjunction with feeling and with the addition of the will.)
2. There are two causes for the occurrence of "provocation," natural causes and evil spirits.
3. Zarin, Asceticism, Vol. 1, Book 2, pp. 248-258.
4. St. Nilus of Sora (Moscow, 1869), p. 19.
5. St. Hesychius of Jerusalem, Exhortations on Watchfulness and Prayer (Moscow, 1890). [English translation in The Philokalia (G.E.H. Palmer, et. al.), Vol. I.]

From The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit in Ancient Russia, by I.M. Kontzevich (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1988), Ch. 2, pp. 39-43. It is a modern classic, and basically a "textbook on ascetism."

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