

upon indecency by means of the eyes. Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to receive slander and calumnies ... For what does it profit if we abstain from birds and fishes; and yet bite and devour our brothers and sisters?"⁴⁹⁷

787 Fasting is inextricably linked with almsgiving:

In the day on which you fast you will taste nothing but bread and water; and having reckoned up the price of the dishes of that day which you intended to have eaten, you will give it to a widow, or an orphan, or to some person in want, and thus you will exhibit humility of mind, so that he who has received benefit from your humility may fill his own soul, and pray for you to the Lord.⁴⁹⁸

Almsgiving as a manifestation of love for one's neighbour is an imitation of God himself. It was God who first revealed his mercy towards us.

2. Evil thoughts

788 We are constantly under the influence of various thoughts, ideas, and views, and we choose from among them those that we consider important. These thoughts can be either good or evil, and so they affect our spiritual life in different ways.

789 In the book of Genesis, we read how the serpent deceived the human race, saying that they will become like God if they reject his commandment. Temptation is a "nudge" or incitement to sin. Confronted by such instigation, humanity can either succumb or resist it. Adam and Eve succumb to the sinful temptation (evil thought) and become, therefore, personally responsible for the sin.

790 The same occurs in our lives. If we give our assent to evil thoughts, then we sin. The beginning of every sin is the acceptance of an evil thought coupled with the desire to bring it to life. If a person does not take possession of an evil thought, this thought is not a sin but only a temptation. Saint John of Damascus distinguishes various stages in the process by which evil thoughts penetrate the heart.⁴⁹⁹ Among these are: suggestion internal conversation, struggle, assent, and passion (captivity).

791 Temptation begins with a suggestion. Suggestion can manifest itself in various images, fantasies, or recollections; it can come through material things and circumstances, making evil appear attractive. Such thoughts accompany a person throughout life. Christ had a similar experience

⁴⁹⁷ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Statues*, 3, 4-5: PG 49, 53.

⁴⁹⁸ HERMAS, *The Shepherd. Similitudes*, 5, 3: PG 2, 960.

⁴⁹⁹ See JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *On Virtues and Vices*: PG 95, 93.

while being tempted in the desert. If a suggestion is not dismissed, the evil thought will continue to penetrate a person's heart.

- 792 The second stage is the conversation, as it were, with the suggested thought. A person considers and weighs arguments for and against the suggestion. We know about the danger of this conversation with the Evil One from the book of Genesis: the conversation between Eve and the serpent was the first step of our ancestors toward sin. Christ, on the other hand, while being tempted in the desert refused to engage the tempter in conversation, and decisively rejected his suggestions with quotations from Holy Scripture (see Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13).
- 793 The third stage is struggle. A thought that has penetrated the heart through conversation is difficult to dismiss. A person cannot be rid of it without struggle and effort. The Word of God and prayer assure victory in this battle.
- 794 The fourth stage is assent, that is, acceptance of an evil thought, which is equivalent to defeat in battle. By making an evil thought one's own and deciding to make it a reality, a person has already sinned, even if the evil intention is not be acted upon.
- 795 The final stage is the actual passion. This is a state of captivity that results from sinful activity. A person given over to passion experiences a constant inclination towards evil. The inclination can become so powerful that a person loses the strength to resist, becomes addicted to evil, and a slave to passion.

3. Conquering Passions

- 796 The battle against evil thoughts and passions, and the acquiring of virtues, is the essence of Christian ascesis. The effects of passions are so ruinous that they are often compared to a debilitating illness.

If the Christian is aroused to defection and is done in by evil, he becomes like a city without walls which robbers invade from any part they wish, for there is absolutely no resisting force and they plunder it and set it on fire. Thus, while you are neglecting yourself and hardly taking stock of yourself, the evil spirits enter into you and destroy and lay barren your mind, dissipating your thoughts on things of this world.⁵⁰⁰

Therefore, a Christian should strive with the utmost diligence to conquer passions and free himself or herself from them.

⁵⁰⁰ PSEUDO-MACARIUS, *Spiritual Homilies*, 15, 47: PG 34, 608.