

Maronite Monks of Adoration

Most Holy Trinity Monastery ❖ Petersham MA 01366-9725

On Anger

“If you desire to attain perfection and rightly to pursue the spiritual way, you should make yourself a stranger to all sinful anger and wrath.”

This sound advice comes from one of the early monastic fathers, St. John Cassian, whose spiritual counsels were so greatly appreciated by St. Benedict, the Father of western monasticism, that his writings were required reading in the daily life of Benedictine monks.

In the course of treating each of the vices, St. John writes: “Our fourth struggle is against the demon of anger. We must, with God’s help, eradicate his deadly poison from the depths of our souls. So long as he dwells in our hearts and blinds the eyes of the heart with his sombre disorders, we can neither discriminate what is for our good, nor achieve spiritual knowledge, nor fulfil our good intentions, nor participate in true life; and our intellect will remain impervious to the contemplation of the true, divine light; for it is written, ‘For my eye is troubled because of anger’ (Ps vi 7)”.

It seems to me that the devil has great sway over souls by means of this vice. Being the father of lies, he most readily deceives us when we become angry over some real injustice. No doubt, injustice abounds in our fallen world. But can reasonable anger enslave us, too?

The saints teach us how to purify our minds and hearts so that we might prepare a suitable dwelling place for the divinity. The injustices and culpable negligence of others do not supply us an excuse for indulging angry thoughts, words or deeds. We will be judged on our own merits, not in comparison with others. According to our Lord’s norm: “... I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable

to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt v 21-22).

St. John continues:

“Listen to what St Paul enjoins: ‘Rid yourselves of all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking and all malice’ (Eph iv 31). In saying ‘all’ he leaves no excuse for regarding any anger as necessary or reasonable. If you want to correct your brother when he is doing wrong or to punish him, you must try to keep yourself calm; otherwise you yourself may catch the sickness you are seeking to cure and you may find that the words of the Gospel now apply to you: ‘Physician, heal yourself (Lk iv 23), or ‘Why do you look at the speck of dust in your brother’s eye, and not notice the rafter in your own eye?’ (Mt vii 3).”

Another spiritual writer observes: “A man who fails to discern the devil’s wiles



Illustration by Maronite Monks

annoyed at everything, permitting anger to master him, and so he 'gives place to the devil' (cf. Eph iv 27). Anger 'gives place to the devil,' as soon as it is regarded as something just and its satisfaction is felt to be lawful. Then the enemy immediately enters the soul and begins to suggest thoughts, each more irritating than the last. The man starts to be aflame with anger as though he were on fire. This is the fire of hell; but the poor man thinks that he is burning with zeal for righteousness, whereas, there is never any righteousness in wrath, as St. James says: 'the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God' (Jas i 20)."

"Deep in the heart we cling to our right to judge and punish others for their sins, instead of ourselves. That is all there is to it. If a man saw himself as a sinner, being vividly conscious of all the consequences of sin, anger would be far from him."

We must, then, learn to overcome anger with patience and meekness. This will prove that we love virtue, if we suffer injustice as Christ did. St. Isaac the Syrian said: "The man who loves virtue is not the one who strives valiantly to do good. The man who loves virtue is the one who accepts with joy all the evil that attends the practice of virtue."

With this in mind, St. John Cassian points to the goal: "the end and aim of patience consists, not in being angry with a good reason, but in not being angry at all."

"The final cure for this sickness is to realize that we must not become angry for any reason whatsoever, whether just or unjust. When the demon of anger has darkened our mind, we are left with neither the light of discrimination, nor the assurance of true judgment,

nor the guidance of righteousness, and our soul cannot become the temple of the Holy Spirit."

The most secure means to mortify our angry thoughts before they find expression in speech or action is to remember the presence of God and that we are sinners in His presence.

A holy monk wrote: "Imprint this, I beg you, on your memory. From the moment of awakening to the moment of closing our eyes in sleep, we should behave in such a way that the whole day becomes an unbroken chain of acts of self-denial, undertaken always for the sake of the Lord, before His face and to His glory. Examine yourself to see whether you have within you a strong sense of your own importance, or whether you have failed to realize that you are nothing. This feeling of self-importance is deeply hidden, but it controls the whole of our life. Its first demand is that everything should be as we wish it, and as soon as this is not so we complain to God and are annoyed with people."

Again, St. John Cassian writes: "Our incensive power can be used in a way that is according to nature only when turned against our own impassioned or self-indulgent thoughts. This is what the Prophet teaches us when he says: 'Be angry, and do not sin' (Ps iv 4) — that is, be angry with your own passions and with your malicious thoughts, and do not sin by carrying out their suggestions." This is the way to reform yourself—even to reform the Church—since it will banish the smoke of Satan from your soul and make you a fitting tabernacle for the Blessed Trinity. ✠
