

Maronite Monks of Adoration

March 2009

“Be Transformed by the Renewal of your Minds” RM.12.2

In the Maronite Rite, the Gospel readings on the Sundays of Lent often recount an episode of one of Our Lord’s miraculous healings. On different Sundays we hear of the healing of the man with leprosy, of the woman with the issue of blood, of the paralytic and of a blind man. This theme of healing fits very well with the liturgical season of Lent in which the healing graces of Christ’s redemption are more abundantly offered to us.

In many of the instances in which Our Lord is offering healing to the sick, he is not curing them of diseases that are life-threatening, but they are sicknesses that cause either a constant loss of vitality and strength or a serious diminishment of a normal human life.

These sicknesses that cause a loss of vitality and strength for the body are an image of certain kinds of sicknesses of our souls. In this newsletter I would like to consider a certain phenomenon in the spiritual realm, in the realm our interior lives, that corresponds to this kind of sickness, that is, a condition that is not great enough to kill the soul, but one that is constantly sapping the strength and vitality of the soul. And the theme that I would like to touch upon is one that was very dear to the Fathers of the Desert and the early monks, something that you see them speaking about frequently: the question of the inner life of our minds — the life of our minds in the sense of the daily thoughts that are constantly running through our heads all day long. From the time we get up in the morning till the time we fall asleep at night there is this constant inner conversation that is going on in our heads. We’ll find ourselves talking to different people or just to ourselves — but no matter who we are addressing, the conversation is constant throughout the day. The Desert Fathers and the early monks recommended that we pay attention to these thoughts and examine them. And when we do, we quickly discover that they are often linked to our feelings, our emotions and our wills; and so the thoughts often reflect and reveal the state of our hearts — where your treasure is, there will

your heart (and your mind) be also. What we find when we start to tune into this continuous conversation in our heads is that there are certain constantly recurring patterns. We have *habits* of thoughts and feelings — some of them good, others indifferent and many of them that are not good.

Usually when we think of the bad habits that we have, we think in terms of external behavior: I have a bad habit of coming late to Mass, or I have a bad habit of eating too much or spending too much time in bed or something of that sort. But we also have *internal habits* of thoughts and feelings. So to take some examples: it’s common to have habits of thoughts of anger and resentment, thoughts of harsh criticism and judgment of others, thoughts of illicit desires and lust, thoughts of self-pity and thoughts of discouragement and despair, and very prevalent are our thoughts of fear and anxiety which can be very deep: a fear of rejection, of being deficient or not being good enough, and, of course, the list runs on. And it’s not very often that these thoughts will rise to the level of mortal sin — and many of them may not even be venial sins, depending on their nature and our degree of willfully entertaining them. But these habitual patterns of thought can sap the spiritual vitality of our souls; it’s as if our souls were constantly hemorrhaging, and the loss of vigor can be a major obstacle to our goal as Christians — a life of habitual union with God.

One author refers to these habitual patterns of negative thoughts as “mind traps.” This is a good image, because it is frequently the case that these habits of thought hold us hostage almost against our own will, they bind our souls so that they are not really free to do what they should do and what they were made and designed to do: to be instruments of the love of God and neighbor.

Since these mind traps are almost always linked to our disordered passions, we can use them to help us get to the heart of the problem which is our disordered loves. We have a tendency to tenaciously hold on to certain things that we think will make us happy, or that we simply assume *must be so* in order

for us to be happy and we refuse to let go and it is these false loves and false desires that are at the root of our mind traps. We basically say to ourselves: until I have such a thing or until such and such a problem is solved or until such a such a person corrects himself *I will not* be happy, because *I cannot be* happy.

The author I was referring to earlier uses a good analogy for these disordered loves and desires that we have. She tells about a technique that the natives in South East Asia use to capture monkeys. They take a large pumpkin and cut a hole in it just large enough for a banana to fit into, and then they hollow out the inside of the pumpkin and push a banana through. A monkey will come around and stick his hand into the hole and grab the banana, but he can't get his hand out as long as he is hanging on to the banana. And of course, he won't let go of the banana. We all have our bananas.

So now the question is: how should we deal with these mind traps? Following, more or less, the monks of old, I would propose 3 steps that we can take to try to free ourselves from these bad internal habits:

1) The first step is simply to become aware of them and to put a name on them; to simply become more attentive to the inner dialogue. Ah yes, there goes my anger and resentment dialogue or there goes my self-pity and whining conversation. Depending on our temperaments and our education in the family and our past sins these things will be different for different people. And when it comes to naming these thoughts, it's not just a matter of giving them names for our own sakes, but also calling them by name in the confessional or speaking about them to one's spiritual father. This was one of the standard practices among the Desert Fathers: to reveal their evil thoughts and inclinations so as to weaken and disarm them.

2) The second step is to search for the cause, to try to get to the root of the thoughts: what kind of creature, what kind of "banana" am I holding on to that causes me to constantly have these thoughts. It's an exercise that takes a fair amount of courage and this kind of deep self-knowledge is not easy to acquire — it can take us a lifetime to get to know what's going on inside.

3) The third and most important step is to step outside of these thoughts as it were and to try to see them as a kind of detached, third party observer and to judge them in the light of faith and to try to reframe our thinking in the light of our faith. Because of the way our minds and wills are made, we have this ability to detach ourselves from our thoughts and observe them from the outside and to reflect on them. And we can *choose* to detach ourselves from these negative, destructive patterns of thought and not let ourselves become engrossed in them and to identify ourselves with them. The real problem is when our *wills* become identified with these thoughts, when we *choose* to entertain them and foster them. That's when these kinds of thoughts will drag us down and contaminate our hearts.

And then once we have separated our minds and hearts from these thoughts we have to try to reframe them, we have to try to put them in the larger perspective of the life of faith. If you analyze the source of the thoughts you will usually find that it's our frame of reference, our way of habitually viewing the world that is causing us to think and judge the way we do. One finds in Jesuit spirituality that they emphasize this very kind of thing — in one's meditation one should always be striving to see things in the light of eternity, to take the long view of Christian faith and charity. This is all very much in harmony with the teaching of St. Paul. There are a number of places in the epistles of St. Paul where s about transforming our minds or renewing our minds. So for example, in Romans: "*Be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect*"; and in Ephesians he says: "*Be renewed in the spirit of your minds.*"

Our life can be likened to a journey in a hot air balloon. We're all sailing along, but we all have our share of ballast in the basket. If, by the grace of God, we can just manage to throw some of it overboard, then we can sail a little higher. May the Lord grant us the grace during this Lent to free ourselves from these habits of thought that can imprison and suffocate our interior life, so that we may experience the joy and freedom of the children of God! †