

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE - letter 31

Wandering Thoughts St. Theophan Letter 31

What can be done about thoughts running about every which way during reading and prayer? No one is free from this. There is no sin in this, but it is out of place. It is a sin when someone willfully develops within himself alien thoughts, but when they run off involuntarily, is there any fault? The fault comes about when somebody who has noticed straying thoughts continues to stray in them. It is necessary to do this: As soon as you notice Your thought wandering off, immediately put it back In its place.

For diminishing the straying of thought during prayer, it is necessary to make an effort to pray with warm feeling. To do this, it is necessary to warm the soul before prayer with meditation and with bows. Learn to pray with your own prayers. For example, the essence of evening prayer is to thank God for the day and for everything that one has met in the course of it, both good and bad. For the wrong which has been done, one must repent and ask forgiveness, promising to make amends the following day; then one prays to God for protection during sleep. Say all of this to God from your mind and from your heart. The essence of morning prayer is to thank God for sleep and revitalizing, and to ask Him to help to do things throughout the day for His glory. Again, say this to Him with all your heart and mind. While you are at it, both in the morning and the evening, make known your vital needs to the Lord, both inner needs and outer ones, speaking to Him like a child: "See, Lord, my illness and weakness! Help me and heal me!" All this and similar things you may say to God in your own words, without using your prayerbook. Maybe this will be better. Try this, and if it works, you may put aside your prayerbook altogether; if it does not work, however, then you should pray with your prayerbook, or else you may be left entirely without prayer.

So that the words of the prayers in the prayerbook take on meaning and warm the heart, you should sit down in your free time, other than the time when you are at prayer, and think out thoroughly the content of the prayers, and become keenly aware of them. Then when you read the prayers during prayer-time, whether in the morning or evening, all those thoughts and feelings which came to you during meditation will be renewed, and they will collect your attention and warm your heart. Never read a prayer hurriedly. Another thing: Try to learn the prayers by heart. This greatly aids undistracted prayer. A prayer must be learned Just like anything else.

Learn to think of God not only when you are standing at prayer, but also at every hour and at every minute, for He is everywhere. From this peace will pour into your heart, giving strength for daily business and a regulating of affairs. Your present desire of drawing closer to God will be completely realized in this way. Just as someone standing in the sunshine is warm, so too is the person who always remembers God.

Add to remembrance of God the remembrance of death and of eternal bliss or damnation. These two remembrances will divert us from everything evil, even in thought, and direct us to everything good, not just for show, but in truth. Some think mistakenly that remembrance of death poisons life. It does not poison life, but instead teaches us to be careful and to abstain from everything that does poison life. If we were to remember death a little more, there would be less confusion in our lives, both personal and collective.

You reproach yourself for pride. Good, very good. Be on the lookout for its appearance and immediately cut it off. Pride likes to do everything for itself, but you are to do everything for the glory of God and the good of others, not thinking of yourself, not having pity for yourself. Indeed, the proud outwardly do most of the very same things that those who are not proud do, except that they have a different direction and different intentions in everything. Our Job is to redirect these intentions from pride to self-reproach, and then direct our actions in line with this. This must be learned. Learn, learn. Lord give the blessing!

You want me to scold you without mercy. Nothing would come of this. To me, you have been chaste and pure so far. It remains for me to wish that the Lord always keep you the way you have seemed to me; if you are not like that in actual fact, may He vouchsafe to make you so.

From *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 146-149.