
Wisdom!: Readings from the Fathers of the Church

The holy and life-giving Faith of the Church as expounded by Her Saints.

March 28, 2006

Unseen Warfare on Not Avoiding Affliction but Abandoning Oneself Wholly to God's Will

If you are enduring some affliction with thankfulness, pay good heed, lest your enemy succeeds in tempting you, or your self-love conceives a desire to be rid of it. For then you will suffer a double loss. The first is that, although the appearance of such a desire and your consenting to it does not immediately rob you of the virtue of patience, it does greatly undermine it. Therefore, when desire to be free of this affliction sent to you is not fulfilled, your patience gradually weakens and finally brings you to a state of impatience. The second is that from that moment your patience becomes forced, whereas God loves and rewards what is given freely . . . Therefore, from that moment, although you will still have to endure, for the mere desire to be rid of afflictions does not rid one of them, your endurance will be unrewarded. God will reward you for enduring your affliction for the time you have endured it with a good heart, not seeking deliverance. But from the moment this desire came to you, God will grant you no reward for your unwilling endurance. But if you stifle and repel the desire to be free from your affliction, as soon as it presents itself, and abandon yourself entirely to the benevolent will of God, proclaiming your readiness to suffer even a hundred times greater sorrows, should God wish to send them to you, then, even if your present suffering lasts only an hour or less, God will accept it as of the longest duration and will reward you correspondingly.

Do the same in all other cases--do not give way to your desires, but keep a tight rein on them, directing them exclusively to one chief aim--to remain within God's will and to proceed in accordance with God's will. For then your desires will all be good and righteous, and you will remain calm in every trial, finding peace in God's will. If you believe with all

sincerity that nothing can happen to you except by God's will, and if you have no other desire but to be actively doing God's will, it is self-evident that no matter what happens to you, you will always have only what you desire.

When I say that nothing can happen to you except by God's will I mean the afflictions and privations, which God sends to admonish and teach us or to punish us for our sins, but I do not mean your own or other people's sins themselves, since God does not wish sins. These trials are salutary for us and are rightly called a saving cross, which He often imposes on His best beloved and on those who strive to please Him, and the bearing of which is especially welcome to Him.

And when I said: do not wish to be rid of afflictions, it must be rightly understood in the sense of submission to God's will. We cannot help wishing to be free of sorrows, for God Himself placed in our nature the desire for well-being, and so included in the prayer He Himself gave us the request: 'Lead us not into temptation', which we repeat several times a day. If after this prayer, which God is sure to hear, He sends us sorrow, it is clearly His special will, to which we, His creatures, conscious of our duty to obey Him in everything, should submit with a good heart and endure our trial as something essential to your and my salvation. Also, in repeating the prayer: 'Lead us not into temptation', mean by it: 'Not as I will, but as thou wilt' (Matt. xxvi. 39), imitating our Saviour. In other words, say this prayer, not because you abhor temptations and want to avoid them at all costs, but only because the Lord commanded us to pray thus, keeping in the soul a complete readiness to accept with a good heart all that God pleases to send us, and refusing to pander to the self-loving desire for uninterrupted well-being, which is impossible on earth, since it belongs to the future eternal life.

--St. Theophan the Recluse and St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, ch 43, *Unseen Warfare* (SVS Press, 1987/2000), pp. 193-195

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March 22, 2006

Unseen Warfare on Delaying Repentance and Virtuous Acts

Those who have realised how dangerous and evil is the life they lead, the devil succeeds in keeping in his power, mainly by the following simple but all-powerful suggestion:

'Later, later; to-morrow, to-morrow.' And the poor sinner, deluded by the appearance of good intention accompanying this suggestion, decides: 'Indeed, to-morrow; to-day I shall finish what I have to do, and then, free of all care, will put myself in the hands of Divine grace and will follow unswervingly the path of spiritual life. To-day I shall do this and that; to-morrow I shall repent.' This is the net of the devil, my brother, with which he catches a great many, and holds the whole world in his hands. The reason why this net catches us so easily is our negligence and blindness. Nothing but negligence and blindness can explain why, when the whole of our salvation and all the glory of God are at stake, we fail to use immediately the most easy and simple and yet the most effective weapon, namely: to say to our selves, resolutely and energetically: 'This moment! I shall start spiritual life this moment, and not later; I shall repent now, instead of to-morrow. *Now, this moment* is in my hands, *to-morrow* and *after* is in the hands of God. Even if God will grant me *to-morrow* and *after*, can I be sure that I shall have to-morrow the same good thought urging me to mend my ways?' Moreover, how senseless it is when, for example, a sure remedy is offered for curing one's illness, to say: 'Wait, let me sick a little longer!' And a man who delays the work of salvation does exactly this.

So, if you wish to be free of the prelest [spiritual deception] of the enemy and to overcome him, take up at once this trusty weapon against him and obey immediately in actual deed the good thoughts and promptings coming from the Lord and calling you to repent. Do not allow the slightest delay, do not permit yourself to say: 'I have made a firm resolve to repent a little later and I shall not abandon this intention.' No, no, do not do this. Such resolutions have always proved deceptive and many many people, who relied on them, have for many reasons remained unrepentant to the end of their lives.

(a) The first of these reasons is that our own resolutions are not based on distrust of ourselves and a firm trust in God. Therefore we are not devoid of high opinion of ourselves, the inevitable consequence of which is always withdrawal from us of the blessed Divine help and our consequent inevitable downfall. This is why a man, who decides in himself: 'To-morrow I shall abandon the path of sin without fail,' always meets with the opposite

effect—that is, instead of rising up he falls down worse than before, which is followed by downfall after downfall. God sometimes allows this to happen deliberately, in order to bring the self-reliant to the realisation of his weakness and urge him to seek Divine help, renouncing and abandoning all trust in himself, since God's help alone can be trusted. Do you want to know, O man, when your own decisions will be firm and reliable? When you abandon all trust in yourself and when all your hopes are based on humility and a steadfast trust in God alone.

(b) The second reason is that in making such resolutions we mostly have in view the beauty and radiance of virtue, which attract our will, however weak and impotent it may be: and so naturally the difficult side of virtue escapes our attention. To-day this side escapes notice, because the beauty of virtue strongly attracts our will; but to-morrow, when the usual works and cares present themselves, this attraction will not be so strong, although the intention is still remembered. When desire weakens, the will also becomes weaker or relapses into its natural impotence, and at the same time the difficult side of virtue stands out and strikes the eye; for the path of virtue is by its nature hard, and is hardest of all at the first step. Now let us suppose that the man, who decided yesterday to enter upon this path, to-day does so: he no longer feels any support for carrying out his decision. The desire has lost its intensity, the will has weakened, nothing but obstacles are in sight—in himself, in the habitual course of his life, in the usual relationships with others. And so he decided: 'I shall wait a while and gather my strength.' Thus he goes on waiting from day to day, and it is no wonder if he waits all his life. And yet had he started work yesterday, when the inspiring desire to mend his ways came upon him, had he done one thing or another in obedience to this desire, had he introduced into his life something in this spirit—to-day his desire and will would not be so weak as to retreat in the face of obstacles. There must be obstacles, but if the man had something to lean on in himself, he would have overcome them, be it with difficulty. Had he been occupied all day with overcoming them, the next day he would have felt them far less; and on the third day still less. Thus going further and further he would have become established on the right path.

(c) The third reason is that if the good of awakening from sinful sleep is not translated into practice, such awakenings do not easily come again; and even if they do come, their effect

on the will is less strong than the first time. The will is no longer as quick in inclining towards following them and so, even if the resolve to do so is there, it is weak and lacks energy. Consequently, if a man was able to put off till to-morrow obedience to a stronger impulse and then lost it altogether, how much more easily will he do this a second time, and still more easily the third. And so it goes on: the more often obedience to good impulses is put off, the weaker their effect. After a time they lose their effect altogether, come and go without leaving a trace, and finally cease to come at all. The man surrenders himself to his downfall: his heart hardens and he begins to feel an aversion from good impulses. Thus delay becomes a straight road to final perdition.

I shall add also that delays occur not only when an inner impulse is felt to exchange one's bad life for a better, but also when a man already leads a good life. For instance, when an opportunity presents itself to do good and a man puts it off till to-morrow or till some other indefinite time. All that was said about the first form of delay applies to this second one, and it may lead to the same consequences. Know that if someone misses a chance to do good, he not only deprives himself of the fruit of the good he might have done, but also offends God. God sends him a man in need, and he says: 'Go away, later!' Although he says this to a man, it is the same as saying it to God, Who has sent him. God will find him another benefactor; but the man who refused will have to answer.

---St. Theophan the Recluse and St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, ch 31, *Unseen Warfare* (SVS Press, 1987/2000), pp. 161-164

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Unseen Warfare on Peace of Heart and Combatting Agitation of Heart

Just as it is a pressing duty of every Christian when he loses his peace of heart to do all he can to restore it, so is it no less obligatory for him to allow no accidental happenings of life to disturb this peace; I mean illness, wounds, death of relatives, wars, fires, sudden joys, fears and sorrows, memories of former sins and errors, in a word everything which usually troubles and agitates the heart. It is indispensable in such cases not to allow oneself to feel

worry and agitation, for, having succumbed to them, a man loses self-possession and the capacity to understand events clearly and see the right way to act, each of which gives the enemy the possibility to agitate a man still more and push him to take some step, that is difficult or quite impossible to remedy.

I do not mean to say you must not admit sorrow, for this is not in our power. What I mean is—do not let sorrow take possession of your heart and agitate it; keep it outside the bounds of your heart and hasten to soften and restrain it, so that it may not prevent you from reasoning soundly and acting rightly. With God's help this is in our power, if religious and moral feelings and dispositions are strong in us.

Each affliction has its own peculiarities and each requires its own remedies; but I speak now about them in general, having in view their common quality—to trouble and agitate the soul, and having in mind a general remedy against them. This remedy is faith in the good Providence, which arranges the course of our life with all its accidental happenings, for the good of each of us, and a serene compliance with God's will, expressed in our attitude, in accordance with which we call from the bottom of our heart: Let God's will be done! As the Lord wills, so let it be, and be for our good.

This good is realised and felt differently by different people. *One* realises: this goodness of God's leads me to repentance; *another* feels: it is because of my sins that the Lord has sent me this trial to purify me of them; I am bearing God's penance; a *third* thinks: the Lord is testing me, whether I serve Him sincerely. Those who look from outside at a man subjected to afflictions may think the *fourth*: this is sent him, that the works of God may be revealed in him. But such a verdict can be in place only when affliction is ended, and when God's help is evident in the soul of the afflicted man. Only the first three feelings should have place. No matter which of them enters the heart, each has the virtue and strength to still the rising storm of sorrow and establish peace and good cheer in the heart.

And here is a general means for making peace in the heart, when some affliction tries to disturb it: with all your strength make firm your faith in the goodness of God's Providence towards you and revive in your soul a devoted submission to God's will; then introduce into the heart reflections mentioned above and urge it to feel that the affliction you suffer at this

moment is either a means y which the Lord puts you to the test, or a purifying penance He imposes on you, or that He thus presses you to repent, either in general, or particularly in connection with some wrong action of yours, which has remained forgotten. As soon as the heart begins to have one such feeling, the pain immediately abates and these two other feelings also can come in. All these together will very quickly establish such peace and good cheer in you that you cannot but cry out: 'Blessed be the name of the Lord for ever!' These feelings in the troubled heart are as oil on the waves of the sea: the waves are stilled and there is a great calm.

Thus bring peace to the heart, in whatever degree it be troubled. But if by long effort on yourself and by many spiritual endeavors you implant these feelings in your heart, so that it is always filled with them, then no afflictions will ever trouble you, for this disposition will most effectively prevent them. I do not mean that feelings of sorrow will never assail you: they will come, but will at once retreat, as waves from a mighty cliff.

--St. Theophan the Recluse and St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, ch 27, *Unseen Warfare* (SVS Press, 1987/2000), pp 155-156.

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