

The Three Powers of the Soul and Their Curative Exercises

by St. Theophan the Recluse

St. Theophan the Recluse explores the three powers of the soul and their respective curative exercises to foster spiritual growth and maturity.

Scripture: James 4:7

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Holy Living"

Description

St. Theophan the Recluse emphasizes the importance of developing the three powers of the soul - the intellect, the will, and the heart - through specific exercises prescribed by holy ascetics. For the mind, exercises include reading the Word of God and engaging in mutual discourse. The will is developed through submission to God's will and righteous deeds done with humility and discernment. The heart is cultivated by developing a taste for all things holy and spiritual, primarily through prayer and participation in Church services.

Transcript

In the soul we find three powers: the intellect, the will, the heart, or, as the Holy Fathers say, the intellectual, desiring and incensive powers. Each of them is assigned particular curative exercises by the holy ascetics. These related exercises are both receptive and conducive to grace. They need not be contrived according to some theory, but rather chosen from tested ascetic labors particularly suited to a given power:

For the mind

1) Reading and hearing the Word of God, the writings of the Holy Fathers and the lives of the God-pleasers. 2) Studying and impressing upon yourself all the God-given truths in brief statements (the catechesis). 3) Asking questions of those older and more experienced. 4) Mutual informative discourse with friends.

For the will

1) Submission to the whole church rule. 2) Submission to civil order, or to family duty, for they are conduits of God's will. 3) Obedience to God's will as manifested in your fate. 4) Obeying your conscience in the

doing of good deeds. 5) Subjecting yourself to the spirit that is zealous to fulfill its vows.

For the heart

1) Attending holy Church services. 2) Prayer, as specified by the Church; home prayer rule. 3) Using holy crosses, icons and other sacred substances and objects. 4) Observing holy customs established and promoted by the Church....

There are three powers: the intellect, the will and the senses. Corresponding exercises are given to them. They act directly to develop the powers, but in a way that does not quell the spirit-to the contrary, it ignites the spirit more and more. The latter serves as a measure and stabilizer to the former, which subjects itself to the latter to the point of speechless submission or even total cessation.

Exercises that develop the intellect, and also warm the spiritual life

A Christian intellectual development occurs when all the truths of the Faith are impressed so deeply into the intellect that the intellect's whole existence is made up of these truths alone. When it begins to reason over something, it reasons according to what it knows of the Christian truths, and would never make the slightest move without them. The Apostle calls this keeping the image of a sound mind (II Tim. 1:7).

Exercises or work related to this are: reading and hearing the Word of God, patristic literature, Lives of the Holy Fathers, mutual discourse and asking questions of those more experienced.

It is good to read or listen, better to have a mutual discourse, and even better to ask questions of those more experienced.

The most fruit-bearing is the Word of God, then patristic literature and the Lives of saints. Incidentally, it is needful to know that the Lives of saints are better for beginners, patristic literature for the intermediate, and the Word of God for the perfect.

All of these are the sources of Truth as well as the means for drawing from them; obviously, impressing them in the mind along with preserving the spirit of zeal also help.

Often one text will warm the spirit for more than a day. There are Lives of which the mere remembrance is enough to inflame zeal. There are also passages in patristic writings that inspire. Therefore we have this good rule: write down such passages and save them, in case you need them later to warm your spirit.

Often neither internal nor external work helps-the spirit remains sleepy. Hasten to read something from somewhere. If this does not help, run to someone to discuss it. The latter performed with faith is rarely fruitless.

There are two kinds of reading: one-ordinary, almost mechanical, and another-discriminating, according to spiritual need and advice. But the first kind is also not useless. It is, as we have said already, what is simply repeated and not studied.

It is most necessary for everyone to have someone with whom he can discuss spiritual matters-someone who already knows all our problems and to whom we can boldly reveal everything on our soul. It is best if it is only one person; two is too many. Idle conversations carried on only in order to pass the time should be avoided at all cost.

Here is a rule for reading:

Before reading you should empty your soul of everything. [1]

Arouse the desire to know about what is being read.

Turn prayerfully to God.

Follow what you are reading with attention and place everything in your open heart.

If something did not reach the heart, stay with it until it reaches.

You should of course read quite slowly.

Stop reading when the soul no longer wants to nourish itself with reading. That means it is full. If the soul finds one passage utterly stunning, stop there and read no more.

The best time for reading the Word of God is in the morning, Lives of saints after the mid-day meal, and Holy Fathers before going to sleep. Thus you can take up a little bit each day.

During such occupations, you should continually keep in mind the main goal--impressing the truth on yourself and awakening the spirit. If reading or discourse does not bring this about, then they are but idle itchings of the tongue and ears, or empty discussion. If it is done with intelligence, then the truths impress themselves and rouse the spirit, and one thing aids the other. But if the reading or discourse digresses from the proper image, then there is neither one nor the other--truth is stuffed into the head like sand, and the spirit becomes cold and hard smokes over and puffs up.

Impressing the spirit is not the same as searching for it. This requires only that you clarify what the truth is, and hold it in your mind until they bond together. Let there be no deductions or limitations--only the face of truth.

The easiest method for this could lawfully be considered the following: the whole truth is in the catechesis. Every morning take the truth from it and clarify it to yourself, carry it in your mind and nourish yourself with it for as long as it feeds the soul--a day, two days or longer. Do the same thing with another truth, and continue thus to the end. This is a method that is easy and applicable to everyone. Those who do not know how to read may ask for one truth and proceed from there.

We can see that the rule for everyone is this: impress the in Holy little truth in a way that will awaken you. The methods for fulfilling this rule vary, and it is not at all possible to prescribe the same one for everyone.

Thus, reading, listening and discourse that do not impress the truth or awaken the spirit should be considered wrong, as they lead away from the truth. It is a sickness to read many books out of curiosity alone, when only the mind follows what is being read, without leading it to the heart or delighting in its flavor.

This is the science of dreaming; it is not creative, does not hasten success, but is devastating and always leads to arrogance. All your work should be limited, as we have said, to the following: clarify the truth and hold it in the mind until the heart tastes of it. The Holy Fathers put it simply: remember it, hold it in the mind, and have it always before your eyes.

Exercises for developing the will, focusing also on awakening the spirit

Developing the will means impressing upon it good dispositions or virtues--humility, meekness, patience, continence, submissiveness, helpfulness and so on--so that in blending with and grafting onto the will, the virtues would eventually constitute its very nature, and when something is undertaken by the will, it would be undertaken according to their inspiration and in their spirit, and they would govern and reign over our deeds.

Such a disposition of will is the safest and most stable. But inasmuch as it is contrary to the spirit of sin, its achievement requires toil and sweat. That is why the activity related to this is for the most part directed against the chief infirmity of the will, that is--self-will, unsubmissiveness, and intolerance of the yoke.

This infirmity is healed by submission to the will of God, with denial of your own and of any other. The will of God is revealed through the various forms of obedience that each person carries. Its first and most important requirement is observing the laws or commandments according to each person's duty or calling; next is observing the rubrics of the Church, the dictates of civil and family order, the dictates of circumstance that are wrought by providential will, and the demands of a zealous spirit--all done with discernment and counsel.

All of this is within the field of righteous deeds which is open to anyone and everyone. Therefore, know only how to arrange this for yourself and you will not experience a dearth of means for developing the will.

For this you must clarify for yourself the sum of righteous deeds that are possible for you to do--in your station, calling and circumstances--together with an assessment of what, when, how, in what measure, and what can and should be done.

Having clarified all this, determine the general outline of the deeds and their order, so that nothing you do would be accidental. Remember at the same time that this is only an outline--details may change according to what is required under the circumstances. Do everything with discernment.

Therefore it is best to daily go over all the possible occurrences and deeds.

Those who are used to doing righteous deeds never pre-determine what they are going to do, but do always what God sends them, for everything comes from God. He reveals His own determinations to us through different occurrences.

By the way, all of this is only deeds. Doing them only straightens you out. In order to flow also into virtues through them, you must forcefully keep a true spirit of good works. To be more precise, do everything with humility and fear of God according to God's will and to His glory. He who does something out of self-reliance, with boldness and audacity, out of self-gratification or man-pleasing, no matter how righteous the works may be, only fosters within himself an evil spirit of self-righteousness, arrogance and pharisaism.

Carrying a right spirit, you should also be in remembrance of the laws, especially the law of graduality and constancy; that is, always begin with the small and ascend to what is higher. Then, once you have begun, do not stop.

By this you can avoid:

Embarrassment that you are not perfect, for perfection does not come all at once. The time will come.

Thoughts that you have already done everything; for there is no end to the heights.

Arrogant aspirations, ascetic feats beyond your strength.

The last stage is when good deeds have become natural for you, and the law no longer weighs upon you as a burden.

The one who achieves this most successfully is one who is blessed with the grace of living with an actively virtuous man, especially if he is being taught this science. He will not have to repeat and re-do every failure he has allowed through ignorance and inexperience. As they say, even if you do not read or intellectualize, only find a reverent man, and you will quickly learn the fear of God. This is applicable to any virtue.

Incidentally, it is good to choose one outstanding virtuous work according to your character and station, and stick with it unswervingly--it will be the foundation or basis from which you can go on to others. It will save you in times of weakness--it is a strong reminder and quickly inspires. The most reliable of all is almsgiving, which leads to the King.

This concerns only works and not dispositions, which should have their own inner framework that is founded on the spirit, and are in a certain way independent of the consciousness and free will--they are as the Lord grants. All the saints accept the beginning of this to be the fear of God, and the end to be love. In the middle are all the virtues, one building upon another. Although they are perhaps not all the same, they are inevitably built on humble, compunctionate repentance and sorrow over sins, which are the essence of virtue. A description of each virtue--its nature, activity, degrees of perfection, and deviations from them--is the subject of special books and patristic instructions. Get to know all of this through reading.

This kind of virtuous activity directly develops the will and impresses the virtuous into it. At the same time it also keeps the spirit in constant tension. Just as friction causes warmth, so do good works warm the heart. Without them a good spirit also grows cold and evaporates. This is what usually befalls those who do not do anything, or those who limit themselves to merely not doing evil and unrighteousness. No, we must also find good works to do. Incidentally, there are also those who make too much fuss over their works, and therefore quickly exhaust themselves and dissipate the spirit. Everything should be done in moderation.

Development of the heart

Developing the heart means developing within it a taste for things holy, divine, and spiritual, so that when it finds itself amidst such things it would feel as though it were in its element. Finding them sweet and blessed, it would be indifferent to all else, with no taste for anything else; and even more--it would find anything else revolting. All of man's spiritual activity centers in the heart. The truths are impressed in it, and good dispositions are rooted into it. But its main work is developing a taste for the spiritual, as we have shown. When the mind sees the whole spiritual world and its different components, various good beginnings ripen in the will. The heart, under their influence, should taste sweetness in all of this and radiate warmth. This delight in the spiritual is the first sign of the regeneration of a soul deadened by sin. Therefore the heart's development is a very important point even in the early stages.

The work directed at it is all of our Church services in all forms--common and personal, at home and in church--and it is mainly achieved through the spirit of prayer moving within it.

Source:

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