

Moral Psychology

Session 7a
Theophan -- Self-Examination and
Spiritual Growth

Spiritual Techniques

- Grace and God's Holy Spirit imparted at baptism
- But require conscious cooperation of the will in a person who has reached age of reason and independent action.
- Discussion of things to do:
 - At the outset of spiritual life
 - On a daily basis
 - Occasionally (e.g., during Lent) -- *govenie*

The Outset

- Recall the relational model of spiritual life-- requires action both by God and by a person
- First Christians were adults -- began with a conscious choice to repent and change their lives -- baptism was the entrance.
- Soon Christians began baptizing children.
- Question of relation of grace of baptism to conscious intention to commit life to God
- General agreement that both are needed.

Theophan's Interpretation

- God's spirit respects our free will, does not force itself upon us
- Although grace is imparted to a baptized child, when it reaches the age of reason and free choice, God waits for the person to choose
- If one chooses against grace, or simply dithers, its effects will gradually dissipate (lack of center)
- Making the initial choice with zeal and commitment is the most important moment

Steps (p. 135)

- Acknowledge the presence of grace
- Comprehend its value
- Desire to imbue our entire nature with it (a fixed and not a fleeting intention!)
- Resolve to achieve this (importance of zeal)
- Carry this decision into reality, having put everything else aside

Need for Ongoing Spiritual Disciplines

- Initial step is all-important, but does not completely transform a person.
- Requires ongoing work in cooperation with grace.
- Requires "surgical" work upon ourselves. (Story of the man who was cleansed by angels is misleading! P. 120)

Spiritual Disciplines

- Some ongoing and daily, others occasional and purgative. (*govenie* during Lent)
- Purgative disciplines contain much that was pioneered by the desert monks, adapted for people who are not hermits. (Incorporated in different degrees into daily life as well.)
- Note, however, importance of withdrawing as much as possible from the world for a period of spiritual retreat.

Ongoing Disciplines

- Prayer in morning
 - thanks for rest and revitalizing
 - Ask help to do things for God's glory throughout the day
- Prayer in evening
 - Thank God for events of day, good and bad
 - Repent any misdeeds, promising to make amends the next day
 - Pray for protection during night

General Prayer Counsel

- Put your needs openly and honestly before God.
- Pray with warmth of heart -- I.e., with feeling, not just saying the words.
- Your own prayers, not just rote ones. (Role of prescribed prayer is to teach us to pray, give form to prayer when it is lacking)
- Remember God and pray throughout day as well as prescribed times.

Special Times of Self-Examination

- Generally recommended to Christians on a periodic basis
- Long-time use of Lent (the 40 days before Easter) as a period of reflection, self-examination and change
- Use of monasteries and retreat houses for retreats in which one removes oneself from ordinary circumstances and distractions.
- E.g., Some do a day a month, a week a year

Practices

- Physical practices
 - Mild fasting (not like Desert Fathers!)
 - Less sleep
 - In Orthodoxy, prostrations (bows)
- Spiritual practices
 - Withdrawal from distraction
 - "Go inside yourself"
 - Exercises of self-examination
 - Meditations/remembrances

Withdrawal in *Govenie*

- Physical withdrawal (at home)
- Cultivate eagerness for solitude, inner work
- Do not allow daydreaming
- Do not encourage straying thoughts
 - Thoughts will stray
 - Do not consent to it -- bring them back
 - Return to other thoughts
 - Jesus prayer
- Use of a manual task to fill time

Self-Examination

- Examination of different levels of self
 - Actions
 - conscience will pick out ones that are problematic
 - Must immediately act as conscience directs
 - Dispositions
 - Two people can perform the same action but with different intentions
 - Important exercise of getting to know the inner self that lies deeper than actions
 - General character of life of life
 - Living for God? Self? World?

Use of Commandments

- Conscience may miss things, need a “tune up”
- Exercise: Review of the commandments
 - “The law says ‘do not covet.’ Do I covet?”
- Exercise: Review of cardinal virtues, deadly sins
 - Do I find this (greed, sloth, gentleness, temperance) in myself?

Journaling

- Theophan suggests to “get a notebook”. (146)
- Many find it useful to write down insights and ruminations they have during prayer and meditation
 - Can review them later
 - Also forces a kind of clarity to thought

Self-Programming

- In review of our actions, we may come across things we wish to repent of.
- In addition to repentance, Theophan recommends that we formulate a concrete plan of how to handle the same sort of situation in the future without sinning. (165)
 - Example of anger

Spiritual Reading

- Books of counsel (like the one we’re reading!)
- Books that inspire by example -- e.g., lives of the saints.
- Theophan suggests viewing spiritual reading as a kind of nourishment for the day

Other Exercises -- Reminders

- Exercises to remind ourselves of important realities
- Through words or visualization
- Reminder of our own mortality, uncertain hour of our own death puts our choices in perspective.