

The Three Faculties of the Soul and the Cultivation of “Good Thoughts”*

Patristic Therapeutics



ACCORDING TO the Holy Fathers, the soul has three faculties: “It has the appetitive, the incensive, and the rational.”¹

Blasphemous thoughts are engendered by the passions of the rational faculty. Malicious thoughts are engendered by the passions of the incensive faculty.² Lascivious thoughts are engendered by the passions of the appetitive faculty.

In general, when the three faculties of the soul do not function according to nature, they become ill and perverted. When they are in the state that is contrary to nature, they become seats of the three most general passions: ambition (rational), avarice (incensive), and love of pleasure (appetitive).

Abba Dorotheos, with great grace and simplicity, in the first place assures us that “All of the Fathers say that each passion arises from one of these three passions: ambition, avarice, or the love of pleasure.”³

Further on, he gives us guidance on how to cure the three faculties of the soul and the evil thoughts engendered by them:

“Each passion has its opposing virtue. Pride has humility, avarice has almsgiving, prodigality has temperance, faintheartedness has patient endurance, wrath has meekness, hatred has love. In short, every passion, as I have said, has its opposing virtue.”⁴

It does not suffice, however, to expel the passions; it is necessary to put the virtues back inside us and to establish them in their place, because they have been sown in our hearts by God Himself:

‘The virtues have been given to us by God as part of our nature. At the same time that God created man, He implanted the virtues in him’; ‘Thus, God has endowed our nature with the virtues, but the passions do not belong to us by nature; they have neither essence nor substance’; ‘When the soul turns away from the virtues through love of pleasure, it creates the passions and sets them up in opposition to itself.’⁵ [Darkness, which was not created and does not exist in essence, prevails when there is no light—*Ed.*]

Abba Dorotheos goes on to exhort us: “This is why I am always telling you to be zealous in cultivating good thoughts, so that you might find them in the next life [after your departure from the body].”⁶

Speaking in particular about the “harmfulness of suspicions,” this God-bearing Abba advises us to be sure, “with all our strength, never to trust our suspicions,” but to confront them actively with “good thoughts”:

“Therefore, if suspicions are sown in us through our own evil, let us immediately transform them into good thoughts, and thus they will do us no harm. Suspicions are evil, and they never allow the soul to find peace.”⁷

“Do not seek to know your neighbor’s evil and do not accept suspicions about him. If, however, suspicions are sown in our heart because of our own wickedness, take care to transform them into good thoughts, and in all things be thankful to God. Thus will you obtain goodness and holy love.”⁸



*Source: Άγιος Κυπριανός, No. 303 (July–August 2001), pp. 54–55.

1. Abba Dorotheos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVIII, col. 1832B (“An Interpretation of Certain Sayings of St. Gregory Chanted in Honor of the Holy Martyrs”).

2. By “malicious thoughts,” here, are meant not the usual kind of lascivious thoughts, but those by which people “deliberate about how to harm and take revenge on their enemies” (St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite, *Ἐξομολογητάριον* [*Manual of Confession*] [Athens: M. Saliveros, n.d.], p. 42).

3. Abba Dorotheos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVIII, col. 1756C (Homily 12, §5).

• See also St. Mark the Ascetic, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXV, col. 917C (*On the Spiritual Law: Two Hundred Texts*, §103, and *Φιλοκαλία*, Vol. I, p. 102, §101: “The intellect is made blind by these three passions: avarice, vainglory, and sensual pleasure.”)

4. Abba Dorotheos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVIII, col. 1757B (Homily 12, §5).

5. *Ibid.*, col. 1757C (Homily 12, §6).

6. *Ibid.*, col. 1753C (Homily 12, §4).

7. *Ibid.*, col. 1720C (Homily 9, §3).

8. *Ibid.*, col. 1804BC (Teaching 17, §3) (*Sources chrétiennes*, Vol. XCII, p. 504, ll. 26–30 [Letter 2, §187]).

• See also *ibid.*, col. 1800B (Teaching 16, §4) (*Sources chrétiennes*, Vol. XCII, p. 496, ll. 15–21 [Letter 1, §183]): “May God, in His goodness, grant us a good spiritual state, so that we also might be able to derive some profit from every single person and never think anything evil of our neighbor. Even if we think or suspect something evil out of our own wickedness, let us immediately transform our thought into a good one. For, not seeing evil in our neighbor gives birth to goodness, with God’s help.”