

**AN
ELDER
SAID...**



**Edifying Stories
and Teachings from
Ancient and Modern Times**

■ **On the Commemoration of the Holy Staretz Ambrose of Optina († October 10)**

Teachings of Staretz Ambrose on Sinful Thoughts and on Prayer*

Someone asked Staretz Ambrose of Optina:
“Father, when, against my will, unclean thoughts pass through my mind, am I sinning?”

“Listen, my child,” the Staretz replied. “A certain ascetic, Ekaterina Seneiskaya, was vexed for a long time by unclean thoughts. In the end, Christ visited her and immediately drove them away. ‘Where were You all this time, my sweet Jesus?’ she asked him. ‘I was in your heart,’ He replied. ‘In my heart? But how can that be, since it is full of unclean thoughts?’ ‘Know that I was in your heart, for you did not accept any of those thoughts. On the contrary, you strove to banish them. You could not free yourself from them and were distressed, but you struggled against them. In this way you made room for Me in your heart.’”

What conclusion can we draw from this, then? When we do not consent to unclean thoughts, we bear no guilt for them.

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Speaking with a monk about the Jesus Prayer and shameful thoughts, the Staretz told him the following striking account:

“A brother asked another brother, ‘Who taught you the Jesus Prayer?’ and he replied, ‘The demons.’ ‘But is such a thing possible?’ ‘Certainly! They assaulted me with unclean thoughts, and I defended myself by saying the Jesus Prayer, and that is how I learned it well.’”

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“**B**atiusha,” a monk asked Father Ambrose, “what am I to do? When I am performing my prayer rule, my head fills with thousands of thoughts.”

“**L**isten, my brother. A man rides through a marketplace. Around him is a crowd of people, shouts, noise—a real ruckus! But he pays no attention to what is going on around him. He just goes about his business, calling out to his horse, ‘giddy-up, giddy-up!’ and little by little he passes through the whole market. Let it be the same with you. No matter what the thoughts say, just keep at your business: pray!



(*) Source: *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 269 (May-June 2000), p. 320.