"Sister Funk offers the reader a helpful synthesis of the theology and practice of the Christian discernment tradition. Contemporary readers will be gently challenged to examine and reorient the way that they have allowed themselves to develop 'the discerning heart.' Funk's story of her personal journey will be helpful to pastors, spiritual guides, and students of the Christian spiritual tradition."

Howard Gray, SJ
Georgetown University

"A particular value of Sr. Meg Funk's latest book is that she doesn't speak only in generalities about discernment but gives specific examples of how she and others have gone about making God-centered decisions. In addition, she provides a very helpful summary of the core teachings of classic spiritual writers like Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection and St. Teresa of Avila."

James Wiseman, OSB
The Catholic University of America
Author of *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View*

Discernment Matters

Listening with the Ear of the Heart

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

LITURGICAL PRESS
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To my guardian angel,
Brigid Funk,
who shows up from time to time
when discernment matters!

Contents

"Moses at the Burning Bush," by Eastern Orthodox Nun Rebecca Cown of New Skete, Cambridge, NY, commissioned by Pamela Farris, based on an original at the Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt

Iconographer's Preface

Rebecca Cown

By means of all created things, without exception,
The Divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us.
We imagine it as distant and inaccessible.
In fact, we live steeped in its burning layers.
—Teilhard de Chardin

One of the pillars of spiritual teaching in Eastern Christianity is deification (Greek: *theosis*),[1] which means participating or sharing in the divine nature. This is our inheritance, according to St. Dorotheus of Gaza; it is an inborn spark of divinity like a light burning deep within our hearts, within the core of our being, guiding us as we discern what pleases God, and illuminating our journey upon this earth. Christ speaks about this same light when he says we are not to hide our light under a bushel but bring it into the light of day. In this broken world, however, this inner light, this divine

sensation, is often covered up by the cares and concerns of our daily lives and by our conditioning from early childhood. St. Paul also speaks about this enlightenment and the need to stay awake, to become conscious and aware—not simply about the life of our outer senses, but especially about our interior senses.[2] We call this the light of discernment. Another term is *aesthesis*, a Greek word difficult to translate into English, which we may understand as inner perception or divine sensation: a spiritual sense. Our innermost spiritual senses need to be made conscious and honed and practiced in our daily lives.

Our earliest Christian teachers reiterated that "God became human in order that the human person may become God." This divine gift presupposes our personal and collective inner work, our synergy with God. This potential has been present from the very beginning, according to the account in Genesis, since we are created in the image and likeness of God. The "image" is the reflection of God. One commentary on this Genesis passage says that "likeness" refers to being endowed with discernment and understanding. So, by inference, we might say that the "likeness" is what we are called to bring into reality by inner discernment.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus says, "Whatever is not consciously embraced cannot be transformed." That is, unless we awaken to this divine reality in our hearts, to who we really are and to what we are called, we cannot engage with this Divine Spirit within, and it will remain dormant. We are personally called to be transformed and

transfigured into our God-likeness, but not just for ourselves; we are called personally to become God's agents and to enable God's ongoing creation of this world of ours.[3]

God has no other hands, feet, eyes, mind, or heart than ours to continue God's creating. The Spirit of God is everywhere present and filling all things, and human beings have been called to cocreate with God. The raw materials, so to speak, need our working with God to bring about life, harmony, peace, justice, and beauty out of chaos and disorder. God has given us the mission and purpose of incarnating God's very first words—"Let there be Light"—and to make it a living reality in our lives.

The story of Moses before the burning bush may well be a paradigm of every person's divine visitation or awakening to the divine presence. If heeded, this encounter will change a person's life. This change, or *metanoia* (Greek for "change of heart," "change of purpose, direction"), moves us away from our former identity, where the ego is in control, to become an instrument in God's hand. This is what happened to Moses, who once was a Hebrew slave, saved by an Egyptian princess. He was raised and educated as an adopted prince but later, having slain an Egyptian overseer, fled for his life into a foreign land and then became a shepherd. After many years in this lonely desert, God revealed to Moses his true identity and purpose in life.

The story tells us that Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, and led the flock to the far side

of the desert. He came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a thorn bush. Moses saw that, although the bush was on fire, it was not consumed. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush is not burnt." When the Lord saw that Moses had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush: "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

The icon on the cover of this book depicts this encounter. Several aspects of the icon highlight our journey toward discernment. First, the bush is actually a thorn bush, typical of the desert, indicating that there isn't any place where God cannot be encountered! Next, we see the blackened sandals behind Moses. Sandals are made of the skin of animals; they are dead skins, indicating the passing nature of our persona, our identity in this world. Moses puts behind him his sense of who he has been; without it, he is vulnerable and full of fear. Yet, the icon manifests his readiness to follow the call into an unknown, to a mysterious and awesome divine encounter. His ego identity is not in control. The icon also indicates a change in his consciousness of who he really

is. His clothing is radiant with divine light. His ego is not obliterated but participates in the Light of God. He has awakened to the divine spark within, to his true identity in God. His inner senses are illumined, awakened, and he hears the voice of God telling him to lead his people out of Egypt.[4]

What ensues is a dialogue with God. Moses' first reaction is "Who am I?" Stripped of his former security in who he thought he was, he now is aware of his limitations, his sense of inadequacy. But his former identity doesn't just totally disappear; for now it will become God's agent in responding to the plight of his people. God assures him, "I will be with you." To us as to Moses, this is the invitation to center our attention on a new identity—on God-consciousness, on a God who is full of compassion.

After the divine awakening comes the descent into the daily: the call for us to incarnate ("en-flesh") God's presence in this broken world. We perceive Moses' resistance, his difficulty in accepting the challenge of being God's instrument in the liberation of his people. He is *invited* by God; this mission is not forced upon him! The experience gives him the light, the strength, the discernment to face the challenges, to face his own fears, his resistances, and his limitations in fulfilling the divine mission—which is also his own purpose.

We see Moses at the foot of the holy mountain. Mount Horeb is at the bottom; the summit is Sinai, which Moses will later ascend and where he will commune with God

in the deepest recesses of his being. This present encounter is his new beginning. Enlightenment is not a place where we build a tent and savor God's presence in bliss for the rest of our lives. Nevertheless, it is a divine light.

When Meg asked me to write this preface, my very first thought was a certain sense that whoever is drawn to this book has most certainly already experienced something akin to Moses' visitation (or theophany, as Eastern Christians may say). In other words, one who is drawn or deeply attracted to God must surely be responding from a God-given divine sensation, the inner light I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Our experience may not be as dramatic as Moses' or St. Paul's experience, but even if it is more subtle, it is nonetheless real. It is one thing, however, to experience this divine presence and another to flesh it out in our lives. This process requires serious reflection on the tools for the spiritual journey. Who am I? What am I called to by God? How do I discern the path ahead? Discernment grows as we are purified in all the areas of our being.

In these times, when spiritual guides and teachers are often inaccessible, this book may well be a companion on the journey, one that will support us through what may feel like a labyrinth or a maze as we make our way through the complexities of everyday life and the seasons of more profound changes. Just as Moses in the desert received what he needed to discern his new life, these writings by Meg Funk offer tools for growth in self-knowledge, for deepening our relationship to God,

and for growing in discernment with God-consciousness in our own life and purpose.

Rebecca Cown
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Introduction

We desire God. In our hearts we feel this longing. Discernment is finding that still, small, "as if" voice of God. This seeking is inner work. We have sound teachings from the monastic tradition to help us. Through our spiritual senses, the ear of our heart actually awakens.

This way of living is a personal relationship with God. We make choices to go this direction of our heart's desire. Making these decisions through the help of the Holy Spirit is discernment. We are not alone. We are free to make choices on our own, but in faith we have a warm invitation to welcome accompaniment by the Holy Spirit. This is discernment: to sort our thoughts and follow the impulse of grace given by the Holy Spirit. Since we are not our thoughts, we can observe them rising and follow the ones that are from God. We learn to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit rather than our own voice, self talking to the self. The voice of the Holy Spirit is a dynamic voice that we hear and heed through our interior senses. This voice gives directives for action. Then, as promised by Christ, we can act confidently. This Christ alive in us

points us to our Abba/Father and brings the reign of God into our very fractured world.

This book was difficult to write as it presumes that the reader is familiar with the previous four books, both in theory and in practice.[1] Readers of the previous books might find this text to be repetitious, but the advantage of this work is another opportunity for me to share these teachings after years of dialogue with other souls so blessed by grace on this spiritual journey. What is the story of the Matters Series?

First, when I was prioress and gave conferences on the Rule of Benedict to the nuns at Beech Grove, Indiana, I discovered John Cassian and his masterpiece of literature about the eight thoughts. Hence, *Thoughts Matter* (1998). When I was teaching and giving retreats at Benedict Inn, student questions put me back to the research to find the antidotes to the afflictions. Hence, *Tools Matter* (2001). When I was coordinating programs for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, I found the uniquely kenotic spirituality of Christianity. Hence, *Humility Matters* (2006). When I was engaged in doing *lectio divina*, I discovered the early desert tradition that emphasized the spiritual senses. I wrote the book, *Lectio Matters* (2010). Now, after fifty years of my own experience of being a nun as well as living in Ireland, I have been invited to listen with the ear of my heart to the Holy Spirit. Hence, *Discernment Matters* (2013).

While the Matters Series was a slow immersion into the theory and practice of the monastic way of life, I tell the story of my own conversion in the Bolivian event of

1984. Hence, *Into the Depths* (2011). *Discernment Matters* is, then, the most comprehensive presentation of why this inner work is not only necessary but also such a joy.

This book is a source for those who want to learn and practice discernment as taught by the early monastic tradition. First, I present a short summary of the teachings about discernment from monastic traditions of late antiquity (second through eighth centuries). Then, to make discernment practical, I include decisions that need to be made today. I share examples of monastics using discernment for selecting books for *lectio*, the practice of the cell, and wearing the habit. I offer three examples of programs that teach discernment, such as a one-hundred-day retreat, selfless service opportunities, a pilgrimage, and seasonal visitation to an elder. Finally, I lift up two examples of saints who embodied discernment: St. Benedict, who taught moderation, and St. Patrick, who infused a Christ consciousness in Ireland.

While the monastic way of life is designed to give form to discernment as a way of life, lay contemplatives can adapt these teachings to suit. We ask God's blessing on this important work. There's no better time to start than now. What is discernment? How do we know that we are doing it?

Introductory Teaching on Discernment

When Jesus of Nazareth prepared his followers for his departure, he was careful not to leave them orphans

(John 14:15-21). He spoke warmly and without commentary, using a direct approach that there was One to come after him who would be with them in an abiding manner. He introduced them to this Person, whom he called the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would help each individual and the group as a whole. Jesus said that he must leave because if he did not depart and return to his Abba/Father, the Spirit would not come. This Spirit would bring to their minds all that Jesus taught; would defend in times of persecution, trial, and temptation; would quicken their minds, anoint their bodies, and warm their souls. Christ Jesus breathed this Spirit into his disciples. It has never been seen by physical eyes but has been felt and known by all who have looked into their hearts with the eyes of their soul. This Spirit has many names, but the work of this Spirit is discernment. It sanctifies and enjoins us all into communion, not in some other realm, but in this household of Earth. This Person is as distinct as Jesus the Christ. This Person, the Holy Spirit, is the soul of our soul. This Spirit shows us that the entry to this way of life is following the Gospel, that Good News brought to us by Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

The work of the Christian way of life is not a mechanical membership in a church as an institution but participation with one's own experience of God through an interior life. The secular culture provides a world of self-consciousness, which is a healthy expression of autonomy. We have a separate soul and a distinctiveness as a person created by God that is never to be annihilated.

But we seek immersion into a God consciousness. When we are young children we seem to have this God consciousness, but it is soon forgotten. We can recover this childlike immediacy with God through a combination of doing good works in our exterior life and noticing our thoughts in our interior life. We are not our thoughts. The thoughts can be sorted out, and we can follow the thoughts that remove confusion, compulsion, and forgetfulness. This work of sorting our thoughts is discernment. We can learn to listen with the ear of our hearts because we stand in place before the Living God. Like Moses, we take off our shoes. In real life, we walk in the Presence with our feet grounded in our daily rounds of work and prayer. We make choices that transform our self-centered habits toward dynamic love of others. God's reign has already started and we are a part of this dynamism. We have a limited capacity to sustain this noble work, but with the help of the Holy Spirit we can do this with joy and equanimity. A source for these teachings on discernment can be found in the literature of the early monastic tradition.

Finding This Tradition: The Sources in the Rule of St. Benedict

As I shared in the story of how the Matter Series was written it was when I was prioress that I started giving conferences on the Rule of Benedict. I taught this sixth-century text using my training in Scripture. I followed

the footnotes and sources that Benedict (b. 480) quoted in his teachings. The Rule is short: only a prologue and seventy-three chapters, about 850 verses. Benedict quotes Scripture 324 times, either directly or as an allusion. He also quotes thirty-four ancient and patristic sources. His most frequently cited teacher is John Cassian (146 quotes). This was a discovery for me as I had been a Benedictine nun for twenty-five years and had never read John Cassian. In the 1980s there was not a contemporary English translation of Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences*, even though in chapter 73 Benedict instructs his followers to follow the directives of the *Institutes* and their *Lives* (RB 73.5). I read and studied an old translation of Cassian; then I followed the sources of Cassian's teachers and found that his favorite teacher was Evagrius. I studied Evagrius and found that his dominant teacher was Origen, of the Alexandrian school of exegesis. While Christ Jesus is our only teacher, I had discovered a lineage that provided me, through the Rule of Benedict, a direct line of transmission. I belonged to and was vowed in a living tradition through the Benedictine way of life.

What was more exciting than being in a sturdy lineage of the monastic tradition was that the actual teachings were accessible to me through recent English translations of this literature. After some years of study and prayerful *lectio* I was quite taken with the theme and directives on discernment. In the writings of late antiquity (from the second to the eighth centuries), almost 30 percent of the teachings from this early monastic history are on the topic of discernment. No other concern caused more

interaction between the abbot and the monastic or the elder and the novice. Having found my tradition through the Scriptures, the Rule of Benedict, and his sources, I have tried to provide a short catechesis in this book, *Discernment Matters*. With all that preparation, then, what is discernment?

A Working Definition of Discernment

Discernment is following the inclination of grace, those personal, subtle promptings of the Holy Spirit. Decisions become sacraments of grace when we yield to "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). We need the Holy Spirit to nourish us with this kind of daily bread, this living relationship that guides and perfects what has begun in us through Christ. We need deliverance from self seeking self, from dominant cultural conditioning, and from influences of evil. For our part, we stand ready to forgive and ask to refrain from all the causes and conditions that compromise our heart's desire, which is God. Discernment is our relationship with the Holy Spirit who is at work in us. We (the Holy Spirit and us with our heart's longing) are in this loving relationship together.

A Teaching on the Holy Spirit That Matters

About ten years ago, having been a nun for forty years, I noticed that I'd follow the liturgical cycle from Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter year after year. During Ordinary Time (thirty-four weeks), I'd linger with the Christ who was subtly present to his disciples before he ascended to heaven. My piety and devotion were walking and abiding with the Christ who appeared to his disciples as a teacher in faith. I never tired of the post-Easter narratives: Mary meeting our Lord in the garden, the Emmaus story of the breaking of the bread and recognizing Jesus, and Jesus cooking breakfast for his fishing disciples. This Christ was very close and so intimate that the years simply followed one after another.

Pentecost would come, I would participate in the liturgical year as a matter of routine, but then I would go back to my postresurrection consciousness of Jesus being present to his disciples during those forty days between the resurrection and ascension.

This, I thought, was good enough for me: I felt that Jesus was very present, he was very alive and well in my life, and I loved those gospel stories. But gradually I realized that I never went beyond the ascension and, consequently, I never entered into Pentecost.

So I think it was an invitation by the Holy Spirit that I did my habitual, sustained *lectio divina*, but this time on the theme of Pentecost.[2] I took this passage from the Acts of the Apostles, the coming of the Holy Spirit:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there

> came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

This passage of only four verses is the famous source in the whole of the Bible that is considered to name the feast of Pentecost as the birth of the church. So I took up the sustained method of *lectio divina*, using the four voices of the text received by my four senses.[3]

First, I did a thorough exegesis of that passage, those four verses from the second chapter of Acts. I followed up on every footnote, every allusion that took me back into the Old Testament with the whole prophetic tradition. I asked, "What was Pentecost?" Pentecost was a confluence of three feast days:

1. One feast was when Moses received the law and after fifty days handed the Law of Salvation to the people. The law was read to them, and they said, "All that you have said, we will do." So it's that remembrance of consenting to the law of Moses that became the feast of Pentecost.
2. Another feast was held by the Hebrew people fifty days after the Passover to celebrate being saved from slavery and entering into the Promised Land. The Hebrew people became the People of Israel.

3. The third tradition was an agricultural feast day opening the harvest celebration: sacrifice of firstfruits and festival time for a people faithful to the law of Moses.

It was revealing that I did not know the roots of Pentecost, though I had done my Old Testament studies as part of my academic work. The early church borrowed from the Hebrew calendar, and it merged these three feasts with the fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead.

After exploring the origins of the feast, I went back to the Old Testament and reread and studied the prophetic texts, including Exodus 13, Isaiah 66, and Joel, listed in the footnotes. Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise; he was the Messiah who was named in the Old Testament as the fulfillment of Israel in all its connectivity and also for us individually. Jesus is the presence of God in each one of our hearts.

So the Old Testament study was informative, but then I went forward to the New Testament and pursued all the answers to these questions: What was the reign of God? What was the *kerygma*, the Good News?

I reread the four gospels, which share the narrative stories of Jesus himself. Then I read the Acts of the Apostles and the letters. The apostles continued being historical witnesses of Christ's teachings.

I continued my study and meditation into the *Life of St. Anthony*, which was written by Athanasius, as he had all the indicators of being a prophet. I saw how the new genre of hagiography (in 357 CE) read back into the

prophetic literature and brought it forward onto Anthony to make the point that he was the prophet that now extended Christ into the New Covenant. Athanasius himself writes his own destiny into the script by using language of Elijah giving the spirit of double proportion to Elisha and leaving the cloak or mantle. We are told that Anthony is the new Elijah and Athanasius is the new Elisha.

Then, I found the same motif in Gregory the Great's book 2 of *The Dialogues*. St. Benedict's story is also told in hagiographical form. Twenty of the almost forty chapters are allusions to either Elijah or Elisha, both from the books of Kings.

So as we study the prophetic passages describing the entrance of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, we see that each one of us who has been baptized in the Spirit shares this charismatic tradition. Jesus said, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (John 14:14).[4]

The study of the Scriptures is essential to understanding, but I also read several books about the Holy Spirit, the prophetic tradition, and the reign of God. In that study I asked these questions: Was the Holy Spirit a cosmic Christ? Was the Holy Spirit the spirit of Jesus that is in us, like the Jesus who has left earthly life? Was the Holy Spirit just undifferentiated mystery and all matter? Is the Spirit a distinct person toward whom my heart would be praying? Are we to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit as distinct from the Father and the Son?[5]

In the study phase of *lectio* on Pentecost, I confirmed that the Holy Spirit is real and has a relational ontic

identity without entity. The Holy Spirit is a person. This Spirit is someone we can count on, we can pray to, we can invoke. This personal experience of indwelling has the feeling of immersion in oxygen, like a realm of cosmic energy. Presence is never not everywhere; we learn to apprehend it quicker and with more depth of knowing. Dynamic, real, actual grace seems new and now.

When we go to Mass every day here at the monastery, the priest lays his hands over the elements on the altar and calls down the Holy Spirit, that these elements—this bread, this wine—will become the Body and Blood of Christ. This moment is called the *epiclesis*. The priest invokes the Holy Spirit to effect that dynamic energy and to sanctify those elements.

And then later in the Mass the priest prays another *epiclesis*: that we who have partaken of this food become the body and blood of Christ as a group and as individuals. So there are two invocations—*epicleses*—of the Holy Spirit. And as the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, so too may we partake of this sacrament and become Christ for others.

Though I'd known about the Holy Spirit, I felt no devotion to this Person. I could not identify with a number, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, nor with an image of a dove or a legal advocate called Paraclete. This abstract conceptual notion has changed irrevocably in the last few years. Gradually, the Spirit came more and more into my consciousness. I know other Christians report a sudden infusion. This is not my experience. The shift from

a devotion to our Lord to a devotion to the Holy Spirit was personal and intimate; it felt like a call to a deeper interior life of mystery. We call this Person "Sophia," "Advocate," "Sanctifier," or "Holy Spirit." There are all kinds of names and words for this coming of Divine Uncreated Energy, but no name can aptly describe this Presence. The Holy Spirit is presence coming from within. It is an inner experience for me. The face of God is found in Jesus Christ. We can see God, as Jesus said that anyone who sees him sees the Father. The Holy Spirit is known by my spiritual senses, not the eyes of my face. There's no devotion to the Holy Spirit that is freestanding and apart from Christ who takes us to the Abba/Father. The Trinity is not an abstract principle but concrete reality. We know God because of Jesus, and the Spirit of Jesus links us to the Mystery of the Trinity. I am related to the Trinity in my own human person.[6]

I could identify with Pentecost being a formative event for the disciples gathered in one place. In the Old Testament, "one place," a place of God, is code for having the experience of God's presence. For me, this gradual awakening was neither dramatic nor anything I shared with others. I've heard many other contemplatives speak of this happening to them too. The event, the story of Pentecost, is actual. I have learned from my experience that Pentecost happens to us as individuals and also as a community. Pentecost is the birth of the church.

After some weeks of study about the literal text of Pentecost, I was drawn to understand the *meaning* of

Pentecost and then the urgency of how the Holy Spirit wants to be active in my life. The Holy Spirit comes and enlightens my judgment, gives me answers, gives me insights, gives me the way to go. I feel, when I call for help, that the Holy Spirit enkindles my heart and fills my mind with the right thoughts, wisdom, understanding, compassion, and fear of the Lord. I gradually began to ask the Holy Spirit about everything that was on my heart. Should I do this, say that, or accompany that person? Should I continue this work, start another, or be ready to let go of this project or that work in progress? Discernment replaced the day-to-day decisions that I formerly did for myself—consulting myself and doing my best, after some inner chatter, with a wink and a prayer.

I began to count on this gift of the Holy Spirit in my daily life. This was when I understood that the Holy Spirit is real. I called on the Holy Spirit and felt the courage to act with an inner strength that was sturdy and abiding. I felt for the first time that I was coming out of another domain, not my ego, not even my preferences; I was coming out of another place where there were confirming signs that these decisions were coming from God and not from my usual ego-driven self. There were fruits of the Holy Spirit that came from my actions, but I had nothing to do with them. I also had a felt realization that, even though the Spirit is distinct from Jesus, there was no shift in my relationship with Jesus that was away from our usual patterns. The Holy Spirit dimension was a natural progression into love for our Lord. Another part

of the dynamic was that there was no possible way to slip into a "Jesus and me" cult or a "Holy Spirit and Meg" cozy nest. This energy was radically plural and outward bound. Prayer is never private but always personal and universally engaged. I'm not sure any of my sisters noticed it, but I had no fear about losing my balance or going to some extreme spirituality. From the inside I felt poised and compassionate.

So, in rereading these four lines from the Acts of the Apostles I felt my own transmission into this Holy Spirit who actually came and was at work in me. Discernment is the work we did together. This Spirit came and I listened with the ear of my heart. This *lectio* lasted for ten months, from the Ascension in May to the following Ash Wednesday in February.

This first period of zeal and fervor did not last. It faded when I got busy and moved my mind's eye to task after task instead of this inner work. Listening with the ear of the heart, which is the Pentecost agenda, shifted back up into my head. I was soon talking to myself again. I was listening to my self talking to self. I was at risk of returning to my former way of life rather than hearing the impulse of grace. I needed training in discernment.

I entered a monastery to do this inner work, and while from time to time I've given attention to my inner life, for the most part I've been an active administrator, teacher, and community worker. It took me twenty-five years to know the Rule of Benedict and its sources and another twenty-five to learn discernment. I've been a nun for

fifty years here at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, and have a fine education and live with holy nuns, but it seems to me that I am a beginner learning how to discern, which is a particular kind of listening. I had found this living God, but I faded from the theater like an actor darting off stage. I returned to my former way of life of being okay but not very connected during prayers, during common observances, or even during times alone in my cell.

After a few failed attempts at trying to find a place for training, a teacher, or a group of like-minded souls, it became clear that we do not need one more institution, one more foundation, one more abbey or monastery, or one more social network. I knew the teachings on discernment, but I needed to do them as a habit, not just from time to time. My own practice and *praxis* are what matter. Discernment is living into the relationship with the Holy Spirit impelling me toward God. Hence, the title of this book: *Discernment Matters*.

Wisdom from the Early Monastic Tradition

Tradition teaches that all of us have this inner work to do because we have inner tendencies to act from self-centeredness rather than from God-centeredness. We are burdened with afflictions. According to early monastic sources, there are eight afflictions that pertain to food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. Training in practice is helpful to root out these habits. Afflictions

are replaced with ceaseless prayer. The main practice is sustained *lectio divina*, which, when done in a sustained manner, leads us into discernment as a way of life.

We have already seen how influential the Rule of St. Benedict is in bringing forward the teachings on this inner life. We know that he assumes his followers are familiar with the writings of John Cassian, who wrote the theory and practice of religious life. Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* include hefty teachings on the topic of discernment.[7]

Begin with Prayer

St. Benedict says that whenever we begin anything, we must begin with earnest prayer and beg God with our prayer to bring it to completion (RB Prol. 4). As we know from Scripture, the Spirit hovered over the waters during creation and overshadowed the events in the New Testament: Jesus' baptism, the transfiguration, Mary's annunciation, and Pentecost. In discernment, we place ourselves under this Spirit that is hovering. We ask for no less than the same shaft of divine energy for our souls.

As we want to be quickened in our decisions, we linger here and invoke the Holy Spirit to come, inspire, dwell, abide, and let not fear or anxiety hinder our deliberations. We can simply rely on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind what needs to be done, when, where, how, and why. We do not know what is best, but God does. The Holy Spirit is the plan.

Chapter 1

Discernment and the Holy Spirit

My intention here is not so much to consider *how* discernment works but *that* it works and that we can be certain of this relationship with Christ, with and in the Holy Spirit. The head understands when it is a felt experience, but language struggles to describe this inner way of knowing. Following the gospels, we imitate Christ. He soon becomes our consciousness. We have our own experience of Christ's life, death, resurrection, our own immersion into the paschal mystery. The event reported in the Acts of the Apostles—Pentecost—actually happens to each of us to some degree. We feel the presence of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit wants to be involved in our lives, year by year, day by day, and moment by moment. Enjoying this abiding Spirit dwelling in us and among us is possible in this lifetime.[1]

The factors that prevent us from having a direct experience of the Holy Spirit are our afflictions. These afflictions can be rooted out from our body, mind, and soul. When the afflictions are extirpated, we abide in peace. We want the whole of our life to be toward God and so we invoke the Holy Spirit often, and this Spirit comes not only in faith but also in actual moment-by-moment decisions of daily life. There can be decision making by an individual or a group, but there's no discernment without the Holy Spirit.

The word "discernment" comes from the Greek word *diakrisis*, which means "to sort."[2] A factor that must be considered is the impulse or grace of the Spirit. Sometimes we decide to go from here to there or to do this or that. We see our choices and take action. Without training in discernment, there is a tendency to ignore the Holy Spirit who wants to be consulted, to make known what is the good to be done, the best option. This Spirit never overrides my free will, my conscience, or my individual spirit that was created in God's image and likeness, but this Spirit is available to my mind. I've learned that I need to invite the Third Person of the Holy Trinity into my deliberations if I want to avoid my default: thinking mind talking to myself. This collaboration with the Holy Spirit, rather than independent self-talk, is discernment. I refrain from self talking to the self and lean into discernment. What is God's way for me? I pray and then sort my thoughts.

This training in the practice of discernment has been tested and treasured in the monastic tradition. While it may seem ponderous, these teachings are valuable to

learn how to listen to the Holy Spirit. When we listen, we hear thoughts, feelings, emotions. This inner chatter comes quickly, frequently, and loudly, but there are skillful ways of managing our thoughts. If we pause, back out of our thinking mind for a moment, and observe, we can use all these packets of internal data. We begin our sorting, our discernment. This training is about listening with the ear of our hearts. This is a big shift away from thinking that goes up the chain of content, rather than observing the endless flood of thoughts that come and that go.

Thoughts and Prayer

In this book, we will attend to the classic instruction about our thoughts—our inner thoughts that lead us either to virtue or to vice—and then we will look at the teachings on prayer that can help us prevent our thoughts from rising or help us overcome them if they are leading us astray.

The thoughts can cause a relapse and can trick us into acting the way we did before we entered the monastery, but the antidote is to begin a strenuous effort toward a sustained practice of rooting out vices (habitual faults) and replacing them with virtues (habitual compassion). This is the ascetical life of a spiritual athlete. We literally go into interior training of the mind, and the afflictions are a port of entry. This is the combat that takes place in one's mind and heart.

When I first engaged in this interior work, I underestimated the effort entailed. I didn't take up the edges that

words like "combat" and "athlete" connote. I thought that violence begets violence so those military words were not necessary. Now, almost thirty years later, I smile at my naïveté. While "the fight" needs to be done with gentle confidence and steady resolve, the intensity of the battle certainly is like a sustained war. The trick is to be focused and ready like a warrior or a world-class athlete but at the same time to be meek and docile like a faun at daybreak.

We need a method of discernment. We observe and notice all that rises on the screen of consciousness. The traditional word for this sorting is "discernment." We sort our thoughts of food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride.

This sorting is not analytic speculation but the hard work of directing our own thoughts that rise in our minds. Again, we are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit, and we also have tradition that gives us sturdy instruction. We are not our thoughts (and feelings), but thoughts can be a skillful means to find our heart.

The teachings on the thoughts are the heart of discernment. We can sort our thoughts according to content, as in the list of the eight deadly thoughts given above. We can also sort our thoughts by seeing the stage of their rising and clustering into an entity with energy and action. We can sort our thoughts by looking at their sources, their directions, and their "spirits." We can also sort our thoughts according to frequency and persistence.

The ways of sorting constitute the theory behind discernment. Yet, an important fact to notice about the

practice of discernment is watching, noticing, and observing, not thinking, as in analysis and examination.

The problem with using the thinking mind is twofold. First, we see that our thoughts are contaminated. Debris from the human condition prevents the mind from reporting as clearly as a mirror. Our logical thinking mind cannot leap out of the loop, but our intuitive mind can step back and watch. Second, the logical mind usually misses the symbolic voice heard by the intuitive senses. But, most of all, discernment is an opportunity to hear the moral sense with one's personal senses. This is the place of the heart. We listen with the ear of our heart and respond by repenting, rooting out our tendencies toward personal sin, and replacing those habitual thoughts with ceaseless prayer.

The Afflictive Thought: Thoughts in General

The theory about the afflictions in the spiritual life owes its root teachings to the Greek idea of body, mind, and soul (spirit). The Holy Spirit is seen as the soul of the soul for the Christian thinkers from the School of Alexandria.[3]

The insight that thoughts come and thoughts go gave rise to a priority of the moral life. We can direct our thoughts, and if we do not entertain them, then they leave the mind undisturbed. The mind can contemplate, rest on, direct, or get involved with these passing thoughts. When one removes, stills, or orders the thoughts, there is a pervading stillness, a peace, an equanimity that prevails.

So it is a worthwhile goal to attend to our thoughts and root out the ones that are not of God.

The fact that we are not our thoughts gives rise to the whole interior journey being one of active and passive work. There's inner work to do and it is difficult, but it is not impossible. We can use these thoughts or be used by them.

There's a chain of thoughts. Thoughts "thought about" become desires, desires become passions, beneficial thoughts become virtues, and destructive thoughts become vices.

There are more than these eight afflictive thoughts—food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride—but these are classic, meaning they occur in all of us, through all times and in all cultures and in every generation. We might not have each of them, but the potential for them is present and we know it when we see it in ourselves or in others. Though we have thoughts, we are not our thoughts. We can direct them, which is called discernment.

The sources of the thoughts can come from ourselves, from God, from others, or from evil forces, even an entity we call the Evil One. The sources usually indicate the kinds of thoughts—good, bad, and indifferent—since if they are sourced in good, they usually go toward good, or if they are sourced in evil, they usually go toward evil. Second thoughts are important to notice. Our intentions matter too. Second thoughts become intentions or motivations. Motivations govern indifferent thoughts

toward good or evil and can influence even the most heroic thoughts and actions to return us to selfish gains and vainglorious results.

Tradition has it that evil can influence thoughts from the outside but cannot touch one's soul unless there's consent. We are under the reign of God and nothing can ultimately harm us. Though our thoughts cycle over and over again, we become more skillful at recognizing them. This is the art and practice of discernment. Thoughts can consolidate into stubborn afflictions or even compulsions that harden into addictions, but there's always a way out. This is the training in discernment.

Some of us have a greater percentage of agency (freedom) to direct, distinguish, and determine our thoughts. Every person is born with inherent biochemicals that lead to compulsivity, yet some people have so little freedom from this compulsivity that, through no fault of their own, there's a small window of freedom to make choices. This human condition factor is why thoughts matter. No matter how little is the discretion, this area of freedom is our part in the work of right effort to do good and avoid evil.

The Afflictive Thought: A Starting Place for Discernment

The sequence of the eight afflictions is logical and may not be one's particular story. An affliction is an adversity, but it can also be in service of the spiritual life. There is a gift when we transcend each affliction. When we pass through one of the afflictions, we can look back and

see the benefit, the fruits that emerge on the other side. When afflictions subside, Christ consciousness rises!

There is one overall indicator that thoughts need modulating with quick attention before they create danger for the soul: "Extremes meet," say the ancient monks. It's equally adverse to have too little as too much of a thing.[4]

The most compelling reason why thoughts matter is that when we let our mind go into free-fall mindlessness, listlessness, or laziness, our casual unbidden thoughts become our consciousness: food consciousness, sex consciousness, thing consciousness, etc. The goal is Christ consciousness—an abiding consciousness of God's presence. The teachings on the eight thoughts are not to cause discouragement but to help us identify our difficulties and learn the tools to root out and even prevent these thoughts from becoming afflictions. The Holy Spirit is our guide. The work is discernment.

Anatomy of a Thought

Let's review again the anatomy of a thought and how it starts and gains strength and sways us into action. This list is helpful because if we can catch our thoughts early, often, and as gently as possible, we will be able to refrain from the energies of the afflictions that cloud our discrimination. This is the first stage of discernment: sorting our thoughts, watching them rise, and noticing that we are not our thoughts.

Elders differentiated between moments of temptation. The suggestion in thought (*prosbole*) is free from blame

(*anaitios*). Next follows the coupling (*syndiasmos*), an inner dialogue with the suggestion of and struggle against a temptation, which may end with victory or with consent (*synkatathesis*). Such consent is the actual sin. When repeated, such acts produce a passion (*pathos*) and, in the end, a terrible captivity of the soul (*aichmalosia*) that is no longer able to withstand the force of the Evil One.

> The proper object of *exagoreusis ton logismon* (revelation of thoughts) is the first stage of this process, the *prosbole*. One must crush the serpent's head as soon as it appears. . . . All this is done through an entire strategy: *nepsis* (vigilance), watchfulness, the guarding of the heart (*custodia cordis*) and of the mind, prayer, especially the invocation of the name of Jesus, and so forth.[5]

In *The Ladder of Divine Assent*, John Climacus includes teachings on how thoughts come and go. Here, he reports the distinctions hallowed before his time (579–649 CE).[6]

Thoughts go from:

1. provocation (thoughts rise, simply rise)
2. coupling with dialogue (an interactive phase)
3. assent (moving along the possibility)
4. captivity (got attention toward doing it)
5. struggle and consent (*pathos*)
6. passion (the full disease/pattern: captivity)

Thoughts have an anatomy from beginning to end. When seekers would go to a desert elder, they attended

to the movements of the heart (of the mind), suggestions, inner promptings. When such an impulse or inner prompting developed into an outward deed, into consent that eventually became habitual, it would be too late to show all this to the director. Confession, as in the sacrament of reconciliation, is a more appropriate forum to seek absolution from end-stage thoughts that have become sin. But to prevent thoughts from going into full-blown patterns of sin, it is beneficial to go to a wise elder and manifest our thoughts and urges.

Manifestation of thoughts gives us the opportunity for honesty and truth bearing; it can help us notice when we get hooked and take action that is against our best self. This also helps us to notice the content of the thought (for example, food, sex, things, etc.) and the stage of the thought, the consent, the patterns of *pathos*.

I want to linger here to point out the importance of the teaching of the thoughts (*logismois*). We soon find that it is not the content of the thought that is most troublesome; it is the stage of the thought itself. It is like a virus that is infectious. The strain, as to the particular kind, might vary in degree of toxicity, but what is most important is to stop the chain of the thought from thickening into an entity that cannot be backed down from having a life of its own. Maybe the analogy of cancer is appropriate here. All cancer is to be avoided, and the earlier the treatment, the better the prognosis of being free from the destructive nature of the disease. Here is another look at the stages:

- A thought rises.
- An image appears.
- The dialogue of my mind is accompanied by an image,
- which ends in invitation to (a) continue the dialogue or (b) refrain from the same.
- I consent to the inner promptings of further imaging and conversation inside my head, accompanied by feelings.
- The thought gets solid with entity and offers a suggestion to take action.
- I either take action or refrain from the invitation or temptation.
- There's a simultaneous melody line that is another conversation with the thought and the person in this thinking mode about intention or motivation; tradition calls this the "second thought."
- I act on the invitation one time.
- I continue in that direction of the original prompting (an affliction).
- I continue being engaged with that thought that is now an entity with emotion (passion).
- I act often in collaboration with the entity, and it becomes a habit (pattern).

- I then dwell in that ethos of suffering (*pathos*) until
- this entity becomes my identity (captivity).
- I am the thought! I start acting as if this thought is me—possessed by illusion.

Repetition and Intensity

Discernment not only sorts the content of the thought, the stage of the thought, and the source and goal of the thought but also notices the repetition of that same thought rising from underneath consciousness over and over again. This sequence can be mesmerizing and almost hypnotic and, with repetition over time, can be obsessive. The teaching is to remember that we are not our thoughts, no matter how often they recur. We stay awake and watch.

The theory is that our thoughts loop around and hook us. We can watch our thoughts (*nepis*) and see the points of contact, invitation, and consent of the will. Some thoughts are slicker and more insidious and catch us before we catch them. We need help.

The work of our interior life is discernment. We discern our thoughts. These thoughts rise first as an inclination and then as an image with a story connecting the inclination to our feelings or desires. Next comes an invitation to act on the desire. This act, at first, is a single moment of enjoyment but can become a habit with repeated fulfillment of the desire, whether in mind or physically in behavior. If this habit is done for some

time and affirmed by the intellect, this can soon become stitched together with our innermost identity. The reason thoughts matter so much is that this rising of a thought is where we can discern where, what, who, and how God is acting in our lives.

Eight Afflictive Thoughts[7]

These afflictive thoughts are classic. They seem to be ever present in each generation and all peoples. No one has all of them, but the theory of how they progress is helpful to each of us. Because the afflictions are a starting point for discernment to clear the mind so that I can hear the Holy Spirit, I am providing a comprehensive list for self-examination.

I've experienced my own nothingness and have had my own experience of the Holy Spirit. I realize that these chronic negative thoughts are separating me from consciousness of an abiding sense of God's presence.

When our minds are still and at peace, we can hear that subtle whisper of grace and take action accordingly. But most of the time we are covered over with one of the afflictive consciousnesses of food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, or pride. Our right effort is to refrain from these inclinations, and then the Spirit takes over, giving us the impulse of grace needed to cultivate virtue.

Isn't there an easier way, we might ask? There's always the possibility of total, sudden, and quick transformation.

God's grace abounds, but in the monastic tradition this ascetical work with the thoughts seems to be the usual and even preferred way to encounter that grace. Through the low door of humility, we admit our weakness and cry for help, which comes in the person of the Holy Spirit.

First Affliction of the Body: Thoughts of Food

The food thought is a good starting point to perceive that you have thoughts and to observe them. It is also the beginning of training for prayer because food is a tool for connecting with people and nature and for expressing our relationship with God. Our bodies need food for well-being and health. This physical vitality is also beneficial in providing endurance in our spiritual lives. The training is not about the food or drink but rather about noticing and working with the thought of food.

Our bodies give us signals about hunger and thirst. The first step in discriminating is to "sort" our thoughts about these signals. This sorting is called *diakrisis*, and the food thoughts are usually about when to eat (time and frequency), the refinement of the food (quality), and how much to eat (quantity). The training of the mind at this discernment stage is fasting using the "middle way" to check these four decision points about what kind of food, when, how often, and how much. Fasting is a natural way to notice these thoughts because it is easy to sense hunger.

Fasting is eating mindfully with full attention, and it moderates the food thought. In contrast, gluttony is

indiscriminate eating or drinking. When we no longer have freedom to make choices that direct our food management, we give in to our impulses. It is risky to be on the edges, the extremes. When one shifts too far in one direction, it is an indication that one's food thoughts are out of balance or even out of control. Too little food is as objectionable and against the training as too much; too poor in quality is as bad as too rich; too infrequent is as harmful as overeating. Once we get our lives in order in relation to the food thought, the tendency is to evaluate another's correct amount of food or drink. In the Christian tradition, the dominant scriptural mandate is "charity prevails." Refrain from judging the motives and behaviors of another. What is too much for one may not be enough for another.

There are two exceptions to fasting: feast days and hospitality. We do not fast when it is time to celebrate the graciousness of God's gifts to us. On feast days we are encouraged to eat something special, more often, and in a little more quantity. In hospitality we lay aside our middle-way patterns by serving the guest first. This discernment is using the other's needs rather than our own as the criteria of eating and drinking. The guest is God.

To abstain consistently from certain foods or drink is a worthy practice. For example, observant Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus may refrain from all alcohol, and Muslims and Jews do not eat pork. This abstaining is not about prohibiting certain foods or drinks so much as it is about using these options as an object of training, just as

an athlete uses resistance tools to strengthen muscles and bones. Similarly, in the Hindu tradition certain foods, such as meat, garlic, radishes, and onions, are considered intrinsically harmful to the interior life. In contrast, foods that are subtler in vibration are helpful to stilling the mind. It is important to remember, however, that these particular practices belong to their traditions. As Christians all foods are good and holy unless they give scandal or have been offered to idols in sacrifice. A few days are set aside for the discipline of abstaining from meat during Lent.

There is one thought about food that is transformative: why is one eating or drinking? Fasting helps me know my thoughts and keeps me supple enough to hear the grace moving through my heart. Food is only a tool for my relationship with God. The food thought can dominate my consciousness, which would be a barrier to my deeper stillness and predisposition toward prayer. A fruit of the contemplative life is the joy of eating mindfully with praise and gratitude. The food thought is entry-level training of the mind for discernment.

Second Affliction of the Body: Thoughts of Sex

The second thought is about sex. The sex thought is like food insofar as it is the body's hunger, but sex is the desire for physical enjoyment of another's body. Sexual desire is a universal experience that has immense, persistent power from puberty until death. There is no question about the goodness, health, and wholeness, as well as holiness, that sexual energies serve. Nevertheless, if not well ordered,

sexual passions can also destroy and actually deny us life. No one is called to suppress sexual energy, but we are all called to transformation through discernment in how we express our sexuality within our given vocations (for example, married, single celibate, vowed religious).

Continence is the first stage in sexual asceticism. In this early stage, one refrains from sexual activity normally because of some circumstance, such as the death of a spouse, an extended illness, etc., rather than the absence of a desire. Religious celibacy or marriage is when the individual is governed by a vowed vocation. The celibate priest, monk, or nun renounces the fulfillment of sexual urges. God alone satisfies the person's deepest desires. A single celibate might make a private vow of celibacy and patterns this aspect of his or her contemplative life (a lifelong consecration) in a manner similar to a monastic. This path is different from continence as it is a calling from deep inside to go to God directly, without a partner. Married persons promise to have sexual intimacy with only their committed spouse.

Through the choice of a lifestyle, affirmed by taking "vows," the celibate or married individual avoids thoughts, environments, and circumstances that evoke sexual behaviors or desires inappropriate to these commitments. Celibates do not repress sexual desires; rather, they redirect these distinct and powerful energies in ways that evoke an even greater capacity to love God and others through selfless apostolic service.

Chastity, on the other hand, governs a person's innermost thoughts. All of us are called to be chaste, which

is the interior discipline of refraining from, controlling, and avoiding stimuli (external and the train of thoughts) that are incompatible with our vocation. Few reach the ideal of chastity. The gift of equanimity on the thought of sex is rare. The chaste person usually strives his or her whole life to go beyond all physical expressions of sexuality, beyond all erotic thought, and even beyond subconscious desire. When one is truly chaste, a joyous state of freedom is reached even in one's nighttime dreams. The tradition promises the chaste person episodic or sustained experiences of peace and bliss.

The goal of a contemplative is to be naked, pure of heart, before God. The teaching from the elders endorses the contemplative one's efforts to come to God with an undivided heart. Union with God is deeper and more satisfying than sex. The word "vow" in Greek is the same word as "pay." In the literature it is a play on words: one pays their vows and vows to pray.

Chastity is individual heart work offered up in prayer. One of the fruits of a chaste life is to be innocent. Our souls are open and our hearts are not divided. We must never judge another but do our own inner work. We are always beginners, as sexual thoughts live beneath consciousness and can strike anyone at any time.

In the Hindu tradition there is a traditional way to move toward holiness through stages of renunciation deeply imbedded in the ancient culture of the people. The four stages of Indo-Aryan life are, first, the student; second, the householder; third, the retired person or hermit;

and, fourth, the monk or ascetic. In each stage, the goal is to move toward celibacy as a conscious effort. In other words, everyone is celibate at some point, whether married or monastic. The married person is celibate toward all others except his or her mate. Before and after the householder phase, there is a choice to move one's life toward transcending sexual consciousness for the sake of the spiritual life. The thought of sex no longer dominates one's imagination.

Much has been written about the appropriate practices to tame "sex thoughts." Our teachers commonly recognize that discerning our inappropriate sex thoughts at the first inkling, before they cluster into feelings or passions, is fundamental. If we notice them early, we can frequently redirect them swiftly. We dash them against the rock of Christ. Short arrow-like prayers to heaven, such as, "O Lord, make haste to help me," can be effective when one is directly in a battle with sexual thoughts and needs quickly to reverse the patterns of the mind. No matter what method is used, the practice is to notice the first indication of desire and, without commentary, to move it out of consciousness by laying the thought aside or saying a short prayer. Meditation is a skillful practice for the control of thoughts. It helps to work on our unconscious motivations and compulsions. Layer after layer of buried inner debris of hubris flake off with steady practice.

The monastic tradition also advises using indirect means for subduing this passion rather than directly confronting it because the sex drive is so powerful and

lies beneath consciousness. Cassian recommends fasting and ceaseless prayer. Engaging in physical exercise, keeping distance from the person who is the object of desire, and examining one's dreams are other examples of the indirect approach. In regard to dreams, spiritual direction has four guidelines: The first is to pray just before sleep. The second is periodically to practice all-night vigils. The teaching is to experience the night by keeping vigil over one's thoughts and to pray through the temptation in a periodic rhythm, thereby dispelling the challenges of night and darkness. The third directive is to fast and still one's spirit, rising early and rededicating oneself to prayer. Finally, one is to reduce any compulsive behavior, such as too much food or drink, that might catch one off guard.

Cassian wrote that it would be beneficial sometimes to require a monk undergoing the fires of sexual passion to take a day's journey from the monastery in order to reduce stress and allow the monk to return after such a journey to better relationships within the community (*Inst*. 6.3). This is a permission to be absent—not an expelling, a punishment, or an isolation technique. The monk sent on this journey is not to be denied Eucharist or coming to the table. The leaving is for the sake of returning. It provides time for the monk to work the passions down to a less compulsive intensity.

The practice of guarding the heart helps to offset the potency of sexual urges. When we guard our hearts, we prevent obstacles to prayer from entering our consciousness by placing our primary effort and attention at the

entrance of our heart. This effort requires resisting encounters with people, places, and things that, after the experience, will linger "on one's heart." Such persistent ardors will interfere with our efforts to pray ceaselessly and eventually with our awareness of God's presence. We cannot engage in ceaseless prayer and simultaneously engage in afflictive thoughts and emotions. We must guard all of our choices to "be with" with God. The vowed individual makes an internal tryst with himself or herself and lays bare his or her secret attraction to another (as long as the person to whom one discloses is *not* the object of desire). The earlier this is acknowledged, the quicker the individual regains control.

Self-deception abounds. The practice of disclosing one's innermost thoughts to a wise elder is another helpful practice to avoid the tendency to deceive ourselves. The early monastics practiced manifestation of thoughts (*exagoreusis*), laying their thoughts out to an *abba* or *amma* (*Conf*. 2.10). This practice was the earliest form of spiritual direction. The elder would receive the thoughts and then give the monk a word, usually from Scripture, intended to break the cycle of obsessive thoughts. A wise elder is one who has tamed her thoughts and has compassionate understanding about how difficult it is to be pure in body, mind, and spirit. This elder needs to embody the spiritual teachings in order to mediate to others the meaning of life. If there is no wise elder available, the seeker matches inner thoughts to the teachings from the tradition as they are written

in a rule or in Scripture. The role of the community is to embody the wisdom of the tradition so those teachings should be readily available.

What about self-sex? Is it an acceptable way to release sexual tensions? Cassian takes up this topic in *Institute* 6 and *Conference* 12, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a teaching on this in paragraph 2352. In summary, Cassian makes a distinction between masturbation and nighttime dreams that cause erections and emissions. I understand Cassian's teachings are not evaluating the gravity of self-sex as he is trying to *train* the mind toward purity of heart. An impediment to that objective is sexual images, even in dreams. The goal of a monk's training in chastity is to be freed even of nocturnal emissions.

When night arousals cease or are only from needs of nature, the monk has doubtless arrived at a condition where he is found the same day and night, the same in bed as in prayer, the same alone as surrounded by others. "He never sees himself in secret as he would blush to be seen by [others]"; nor does he act in such a way that the all-seeing eye should see anything in him that he would wish to hide from others. The monk says, "Even the night has become my delight." (See *Conf.* 12, esp. 12.8.5.)

There seems to be a clear directive in the *Catechism* of the Roman Catholic Church that masturbation is one of the major sexual disorders and that it therefore needs to be confessed in the sacrament of reconciliation if one wants to be in compliance with church law. This is not a moral obligation, however, as venial sins need not be

confessed to be in good standing with the church. The *Catechism* goes on to say that the disorder might have pastoral reasons that diminish any moral guilt or impute the consequences of sin. Ordinary contrite personal prayer and penitential rituals at the beginning of Mass serve as "confession" for most sins and make us ready and qualified for sitting and partaking at the eucharistic table. The *Catechism* is both a juridical document and a pastoral text written for us to remain faithful to our beliefs and the teachings of our elders. It is a skillful means to inform our conscience, which for each one of us is our highest and inviolable inner law.

Rules and regulations that lead to blaming and labeling tend to engender a dysfunctional guilt rather than inform the mind toward purity of heart. Guilt has its own life cycle of violence. The judgment springing from this guilt grooves the negative attitude and behavior into our systems and energizes the very destructive emotion it condemns. The way out is to be ever so gentle with ourselves and to offer up our brokenness in prayer to the wondrous love of Christ. It is not by human effort but with God's mercy that we transcend our afflictive sexual thoughts and come to the abiding realm of chastity. The purpose of this writing is to retrieve the desert wisdom that puts the emphasis on Christ's grace and to give seekers effective tools that will assist in redirecting inappropriate sexual inclinations. These teachings put the burden on the person to be compassionate toward oneself as a member of the human family, to gently move self-centered motivation

and sexual compulsions toward the benefit of the other. This is the wholesome adult shift from self to sacrifice.

So, how can we reckon with something being wrong and not have guilt? This is the formation of conscience that proclaims God's mercy more than compensates for our propensity toward evil. We, through grace, receive a heart that prays to have the strength, insight, and stamina to follow those inclinations prompted by the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge that God understands us, and this climate of compassion creates a gentleness and willingness to follow the impulse of grace. Jesus was also human and he knows our innermost thoughts and desires.

A rampant sex addiction that is closely related to masturbation is internet pornography. An objective of pornography is to masturbate. To cultivate an arousal without a responsible relationship is harmful. Pornography within a marriage diminishes love and trust from a sexually intimate relationship. Pornography outside of marriage is considered by some to be "virtual promiscuity." This can lead to sexual addiction when what began as an occasional use of pornography rapidly escalates into a habit. At the very least, this affliction reduces the participants in the pornographic images or films to objects for one's gratification. Often the "actors" in the films are underage, and the sex trade is regularly linked to prostitution and the growing illegal business of sex slavery and trafficking of women and children. To cultivate a virtual fantasy life toward the self as a habitual way of life cools one's life force and chills the body, mind and soul. Relationships risk failure to thrive.

The best approach for subduing sexual energy that rises, as in masturbation, is to prevent it by habitual healthy monastic practices. When these energies do arise, note the causes and circumstances and start anew with gentle compassion. The language of sin leads to guilt and anxiety that usually compounds the tendency. The language of celibacy, vocation, and striving toward one's desire for God moves the energies away from self and toward God. It is in being human that we are saved. The Christian door is through the incarnation where we are made good, very good.

The desert tradition teaches the monastic that to pray without ceasing one needs to dedicate oneself totally to prayer and live a lifestyle that supports the dominant work of the contemplative life: to pray always. One therefore cannot take on the obligations of an intimate relationship with another person. For the single contemplative, the interior life cannot be consumed with seeking a mate rather than seeking God.

Even gender consciousness must be transcended for the sake of a spiritual life with God. Gender is a distinction that can be helpful or harmful in social networks. We need to use our gender for integration and transcend to a consciousness of God's presence rather than a self-consciousness of our particular gender. The whole debate of sexist language in worship is helpful to prevent domination and subservience, yet the object of worship is God, who is neither male nor female. Silence and ritual action go beyond words and can be effective means of evoking the presence of God. The Word became flesh through the

incarnation of Jesus from the womb of Mary. The gender of Jesus is male, but the doctrinal burden in the person of Jesus is that he became human. The Word, who is God, was spoken and became Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus is the Christ. However difficult it is, we must continue to strive gently for inclusive language that has universal intent. My own prayer is to the Holy Spirit, who groans within as I am praying for help. The word "paraclete" has its roots in a young suckling calling out for safety, food, and relationship.

In Christ there is no male or female, no distinctions among us that divide our love for one another. We accept others as they present themselves. It is good to have a firm grasp on one's sexual orientation so that the mind can refrain from confusion and fantasy. All of us are called to chastity—to be pure in mind and body. Another way of saying this is that no one has the right to abuse another for self-satisfaction.

Chaste thinking is a practice, not just a fruit, of celibacy. The more one grows in sweet patience, the more one grows in purity of body. The further we remove the passion of anger from ourselves, the firmer will be our grasp on chastity. The heat of the body will not cool unless the outbursts of the heart are restrained (*Conf*. 12.6.1). Sexual energies have a purpose in the spiritual life. These energies, when transmuted, return to the body and heighten other energies that at once quicken the heart for ardor, zeal, and self-donation. They also stabilize the mind for study, clear thinking, right action, and meditation. So, it's back to discernment as to the kind of energy one wants to store in the body.

The disciple who has sublimated his or her sexual energy has all the benefits of sex and more. In all these matters, the mind attains a subtle purity and will experience an increase of devotion that is difficult to describe or narrate. Just as one who has not experienced this joy cannot conceive of it, so too one cannot express it when one does conceive it. If you want to describe the sweetness of honey to someone who has never tasted it, that person will still not be able to experience with his ears what his mouth has never tasted. Likewise, those who have experienced the joy of the taste can only wonder at it within themselves. Thus, one with a quiet mind is inflamed with the words of the psalmist: "Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (Ps 139:14).

Cassian describes the heavenly infusion of spiritual joy by which the despondent spirit is quickened to inspired gladness: those fiery transports of the heart and the ineffable and unheard-of consolations of joy by which we are sometimes aroused from an inert and stupid torpor to most fervent prayer, as from a deep sleep (*Conf*. 12.12.6). It can take weeks or years, but once God grants the gift of freedom from the struggles of sexual thoughts, a period of calm sets in, and the fruit of chastity is abiding. A heart that is not divided is at peace.

Third Affliction of the Body: Thoughts of Things

Like food, things are just another thought. We are not our things! We divert our attention away from God when we give our heart to things and make them our

idols. When too much time and energy are used in acquiring and managing things, it snuffs out the spiritual life. We have a right relationship with things when they facilitate a God-given purpose. The illusion of personal ownership needs to be rooted out. We shift our thoughts from acquiring more and better "stuff" to becoming cocreators who use things as vessels on God's altar. A monastic regards all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels on the altar. He or she is neither prone to greed nor wasteful, and the tools of the altar are not neglected. Everything is gently used with moderation, with humility, and in obedience (RB 31.10–12). A lay contemplative can adapt Benedict's Rule to his or her occupational situation and personal life.

The anatomy of a thing thought is similar to food thoughts when they take on a life of their own. Things beget one thing, more things, better things, securing our things—and having enough money and resources to protect and care for our things. The train of restless, grasping thought continues and feeds on itself. This pattern of thinking is an illusion because we possess no "thing," and, as such, things will never satisfy. Is there any way out of this cycle of thought and acquiring? Yes, we must replace the grasping with a true belief that all comes from God as gift in abundance and must be returned to God. Things are on loan, and we must use them wisely with the permission of the Creator. In other words, the antidote is shifting the thought from ownership to reverence for God. The Genesis myth of the Garden of Eden was

about things that were plentiful, lush, and well ordered. The test was to be content with what was given. We are put to the same test in our little earth gardens. When we do not receive gifts in gratitude and return them to our Creator, our grasping actions cause us to be cast out of the garden. We join our personal sin to the primordial sin of our ancestors.

The monastery is a unique culture where the original divine order in the Garden of Eden myth is ritually played out. We are clothed by the abbot or abbess. As monastics, we seek permission to use things as tools in service of our assigned obedience. We receive things given in obedience and reverse our tendency to grasp and hoard them. We hold each thing lightly, gently, for as long as it is given for our use; then, freely, we offer it to another for his or her use in apostolic service and labor. We leave all—our former way of life, status, entitlements, rank, and possessions—for a second Garden of Eden. The abbot or prioress, in the name of the community, bestows things, and we have all our needs met through the rituals and practices of humility and obedience.

A sign of returning home to the garden is to put on new clothes when invested with the monastic habit, a new garment of baptism. Because avarice is a learned vice, we receive strong preventive teachings concerning things. These teachings are based on the earliest accounts of good Christian communities that are described in the Acts of the Apostles: all things are to be used for the whole community and especially for distribution to the

poor. Monastics are to live in such a simple way that the community can offer goods to the poor in the community's name.

Lay contemplatives also use as their guide the Acts of the Apostles by questioning how many things, and of what quality, are needed for making their dwelling or business a healthy, holy place to live as well as to be of service to the larger community. The poor provide an opportunity for the layperson to use discernment about personal and communal things. For example, in light of my needs, when do I have enough? Those who have been blessed with prosperity must live in such a way that the poor are served in apostolic love, outreach, and the sharing of God's gifts. It is not an option for a Christian to ignore the poor.

Like all thoughts, the thing thought needs to be rooted out over and over again. To be in the world and not of it necessitates practices that counter the prevailing world condition of consumerism. To succeed in this endeavor the ordinary seeker should stay involved in a Christian community or another group that values sharing goods, reaching out to the poor, and caring for the goods of the earth. Above all, one should pray for discernment about the right use of things for the honor and glory of God. This redirection of one's thoughts and actions repays a greater joy than the satisfaction of a single thing. All is gift.

We can never be complacent when it comes to things. The thing thought can return after years of humble living. Through lack of vigilance or increased needs of old age or some other period of insecurity and anxiety, we

begin to take back things. Our works are done for self-gain and not for the community or for God. We once again live on daydreams of having more things or more travel and other entitlements. In this relapse of faith a monastic may leave the monastery or a parent may leave the family to pursue and care for his or her own things. The thing is once again the idol and instead of not being able to live without God, the person can't live without things.

One answer to this breakdown is a return to a balanced work and prayer life, noticing the beauty and order of God's creation. This state of gratitude and continually walking in the presence of God returns the seeker to a state of equilibrium where the desire for things has no grip. In this state, the householder or monastic once again accepts that things can never be owned; they are tools for the work of God. This shift from doing work for things to doing the interior work to deepen our relationship with God in prayer (*opus Dei*) is ultimately the work of God (*ora et labora*) and returns us to Eden.

In our times, this grasping for things can come in the form of "things to do" and conceptual to-do lists that grab us from the inside. It could be the "too many," "too much" of relationships, hobbies, electronic social networks, virtual conversations, and compulsive curiosity. When one's consciousness is things or anything other than God (as in prayer and devotion to the inner purity of heart), this is an affliction of something other than God, an idol.

Both householder and monastic must refrain from attachment to things. Instead, we make personal resolutions and vows to follow a "rule of life" that makes it a habit to remember God. Afflictive thoughts about things obscure that memory. Reduce "things" and God springs up. We can use things as mirrors. In each thing we can see and remind ourselves of God. Then we will not act or use things as if they were God. As seekers, we desire to walk in the presence of God, not in the company of stuff. We accept all gifts in gratitude, tend to them graciously, and share them through our life's work, which renders them sacred for ritual and holy worship. This mindfulness not only roots out thoughts of things but also frees us from worry and anxiety.

First Affliction of the Mind: Thoughts of Anger

Thoughts of anger arise in each one of us. The good news is that anger is a learned response and, as such, can be unlearned and entirely rooted out. Anger passes quickly, even if it rises frequently and habitually because of life's ups and downs; however, we can learn to see it and resist its power. God is never the cause of our anger. The desert elders teach that anger disqualifies us from spiritual work because our capacity for love is diminished.

The adverse consequences of anger are many. Anger diminishes insight and wisdom. Anger dims and dulls the mind. Inner blindness no longer employs right thinking and acting. In this volatile state, the phrase "blind

with rage" is more literal than symbolic. The angry person perceives information poorly and projects it back on others by starting quarrels and, in the process, loses the esteem of others. Unchecked anger can lead to depression and sometimes madness, even if only temporary. In community and society this contributes to universal disharmony, at times even leading to bodily injury and murder.

The most compelling indictment against anger is that it shrinks our spiritual relationships with self, others, and God. We no longer have the capacity to discern. The seeker's ability to discern spirits when evaluating choices and making decisions is the fruit of a clear mind, so we must not hold on to even a "little" anger. One cannot justify that the scope or seriousness of an injustice mitigates the teaching about letting go of angry thoughts. When angry, the soul is inaccessible, and there is no teaching about "righteous anger" in the desert tradition. In the face of injustice and oppression, the only option is a compassionate, nonviolent response.

The goal of a seeker is purity of heart. We were created by God and our desire is to return to God who is love. Angry thoughts that linger place an obstacle between us and God. Once in the grip of anger, we must, in order to see God again, still our thoughts (*apatheia*) and rest with a calm mind in the heart. Origen uses the term "active life" to refer to the work of letting go of one's thoughts while positively practicing virtue. This is the work of asceticism. He describes the "contemplative life" as one of

pure prayer. The contemplative knows God by reason and also by emptying the mind of all thoughts of God (*apophatic*). Similarly, Evagrius defines prayer as both "lifting up the mind to God" and "the expulsion of thoughts." One's mind must be pure and clear to move from the stages where all thought and images are purged to the illuminative stage, where one's mind is filled with the light of the Holy Spirit, a state of spiritual ecstasy. With this teaching in mind the catechesis on anger is clear: anger does not befit the chosen vessel called to seek God.

Cassian spoke about six ways to offset, reduce, and ultimately rid the seeker of anger:

1. Vigilance: Keep vigilance over the heart and do not permit anger, even for a moment, to enter.
2. Reconciliation: When we have done wrong or even if we perceive that others have felt wronged, we should reconcile with them before the setting of the sun. We ask for forgiveness because we are one body, "for anyone's loss is a loss for all of us" (*Inst*. 8.14).
3. Memory: In addition to letting go of the anger, we should root out even the memory of the wrongdoing. The practice is to forget as many times as it takes to move the anger thought out of consciousness.
4. Relationship, not Solitude: The practice is to face the anger but stay in relationship rather than isolation. It is wrong thinking to entertain the idea that if only I didn't work or live with so-and-so, then I would not be irritated. The anger isn't out there; it

is an inner beast and needs to be banished. Even in solitude an afflicted person can be angry at a rock.

5. Freedom: Abbot Moses taught that it is impossible not to be accosted by thoughts, but it is in the power of every earnest seeker either to welcome them in or to reject them. He recommends frequent reading of Scripture and regular singing of psalms to keep the mind in virtue (*Conf.* 1.17).
6. Recollection: Preferring and cultivating thoughts toward God to worldly concerns of attraction or aversion is called recollection. A wonderful section in *Conference* 10 about thoughts says that whatever I think about before prayer comes into church with me. If I can't lift my heart and mind to God, then prayer is not possible. The directive is to get ready to listen to God.

Cassian reinforces these six themes with the teaching about controlling the mind and stilling thoughts. This is achieved by the practice of noticing a thought and then unthinking it by letting it go and replacing it with a sacred word or image. This quiet, wordless intention was articulated a thousand years later in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Prayer happens in the silence beyond thoughts, words, or images. Moving toward purity of heart is simply having a clear mind without thoughts. In this pure mind, charity springs up without effort.

Seeking God in every corner of one's thoughts is discernment. The search leads one to sort thoughts and

ask whether they are from God, self, the devil, or other harmful outside influences. Test and see which thoughts add beauty and grace and which ones are deadly: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). Things are not always what they seem, as partial truths can be deceptive. It is therefore wise to get the whole picture and ensure you have the right motivation. Helpful to discernment is the practice of manifestation of afflictive thoughts (*exagoreusis*) to a wise elder as well as sorting the angry thoughts (*diakrisis*). If the seeker does not separate and make distinctions early in the process, confusion follows, and instead of having a discerning heart, he or she has a fuming heart. No spiritual practice should be motivated by rage.

According to Cassian, friendships thrive on virtue and harmony and are divided by anger. Real friends want, and refuse, the same things. Equal in goodness, they renounce thoughts of anger. Both *lectio* and friendships strengthen the desire to meet God face to face. The gift of friendship, says Abbot Joseph, can only last among those who are of equal goodness. They must share like-mindedness and common purpose. They never, or hardly ever, disagree, or if they do differ, it is in matters that concern their progress in the spiritual life. But if they begin to get hot with eager disputes, it is clear that they have not dealt with their afflictions. For if they have truly renounced their thoughts, then they could listen to another's thoughts without scorn (*Conf.* 16). Frequent

quarrels cool love: friends first part their hearts, then their shared time and place. This is no surprise since anger fosters the road of adversarial thoughts, desires, and passions.

Thoughts will come and thoughts will go, but we have the freedom to consent or not to consent to our thoughts. Our consent is key and the good news is that with spiritual practices and God's grace thoughts can be redirected. Like a snake's head, we notice when anger rises and how the thought feeds upon itself. Before the snake strikes, we must catch the angry thought at the first inkling of awareness and replace the afflictive anger with thoughts of God.

The experience of days, months, and years without anger brightens the eyes, clears the skin, and quickens the walk of the seeker. The absence of anger enlightens the mind. I can more easily read the books of nature, Scripture, and experience and see clearly that my friends are manifestations of God. An ineffable joy replaces gloom, anxiety, and calculating about details of life that swing out of control. When we reverse anger, we imitate Christ accepting the role of self-sacrifice and we consent to lay down our life for another. To endure unjust persecution is the cost of discipleship.

Second Affliction of the Mind: Thoughts of Dejection

Dejection that often leads to depression is a condition provoked by thoughts, just as thoughts control our inclinations toward anger. Unlike anger that is to be calmed no matter its source or force or size, the cause of depression

designates the appropriate treatment. While depression is often caused by anger that has gone deep into the unconscious level of our mind, there are other sources. It is good to sort out the causes of depression because the way in to this state of mind is a clue to the way out.

Unresolved anger caused by harm inflicted on the dejected person needs to be anointed with reconciliation and a return to daily forgiveness: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Harm can harm again and again through memories in thoughts and feelings like resentment, regret, and cynicism. These memories need to be shifted to prayer, asking for mercy for all involved.

Another cause of depression is grief due to the loss of a person, a thing, our bodily well-being, or some change that was not our choice. With grief, one must begin the long process of letting go of a loved one or a cherished dream. The remedy is to accept the mercy and compassion of God and community and in gratitude to choose life every day. Healing comes in time and by God's grace. The desire for gain that has not been realized or the loss of hope in the future is another form of grief, and these dejected thoughts need to be met by conversion to more realistic expectations. If I live in the past or future, I miss the grace of the present moment.

There is also depression that has no apparent reason. The depression that comes out of nowhere is often chemically based and needs chemical therapy under the care of a medical doctor. Other times dejected thoughts are clearly caused by us through the burden of personal sin.

Honest contrition, making amends, and confession of sin in the sacrament of reconciliation can work wonders for peace of mind.

Another type of dejected thinking that has no apparent reason is existential dread. It is characterized by a dark mood and a desire "not to be." This thinking is offset by accepting the human condition as it is and realizing that the personal source of such feelings may not be one's own; rather, what does matter is what one makes of this mental suffering. This dejected thought of undifferentiated dread just is. Thoughts can be noticed. Thoughts can be healed with the individual choosing, in freedom, life and wholeness over sadness. This dread can be both personal and collective (the being caught into the web of the culture that has dishonor as its way of being). To realize what is normal for all humans swimming in our human condition and my place in the universe requires courage and sturdy faith that all is redeemed by God's saving grace. The cross is real, but Christ Jesus who saved us is our source of abundant grace and lasting hope now and in the things to come. There is a grace to accept the situation and a patience to undergo the hardship.

Dejected thinking that leads to self-denigration is actually a perverse form of pride in need of God's mercy. We are dejected because we are not receiving from others and from ourselves the praise we deserve. Here, the person may think more highly of oneself than is the reality. In all humility (truth), derogatory thoughts need to be replaced with honest self-appraisal and realistic

expectations. When the self is offended, then humility is the antidote.

Finally, dejection may also be an honest fear of death. Transformation in the heart of Christ with renewed faith that death has been conquered through the cross is the spiritual way out of this depression. Through the door of mortality is eternal life.

Five practices plus recommendations for training:

1. Stay in relationships. To isolate when depressed can lead to more confusion.
2. Amend faults and correct manners.
3. Refrain from thoughts that lead to self-destruction or suicide.
4. Refrain from and redirect any and all thoughts of putting oneself down.
5. Resist morbid suffering; "not to care" needs to be replaced with patience, which is self-donation.

The training on rooting out dejection is similar to the teachings on other afflictive thoughts. Cassian advises us to catch it early. Notice your thoughts, and when a sad thought begins say, "It just is: I feel sad. I count on God's grace." Then redirect the thought out of consciousness. In short, check it early, dispatch it, dash it on the rock which is Christ. Since this kind of depression and sorrow rises from the unconscious and can lead to deadly despair, utmost compassion needs to be the first concern. One must remember that there is always a way out. The

alternative to self-abuse or suicide is forgiveness. Christ has overcome all evil, sadness, and even death itself. If I am not my thoughts, neither am I my moods or feelings.

One benefit of dejection is that for some folks sincere grief for wrongdoing softens the hardness of heart. This, in turn, may lead to compunction, which fires up our desire for God. Compunction is wholesome sorrow. Dejection is unwholesome sorrow and it replaces the fruits of the Spirit. They cannot coexist. So, how can one discern the difference between compunction and dejection? Dejection cycles round and round about harm done to me. Since dejection resides in the subconscious, the dejected person needs compassion, because it is difficult for him or her to achieve complete peace of mind even after conversion of heart.

Detachment from painful experiences is not indifference and it is the preferred way of thinking. When we are dejected, we must let go of and change parts, or the whole, of a lifestyle that is sinful. Even if chemically depressed, one can practice faith in the mercy of God. In the end, there are fruits from our periods of dejected thinking. By staying hopeful even in darkness, one is aware, moment by moment, of the true nature of reality. Dejection also weans one from the physical senses and awakens the spiritual senses. For example, a depressed person may enter into the contemplative mystery and have a taste of seeing without images. This undifferentiated reality is the experience of the dark abyss of nothingness, which empties all that is illusion. When

darkness lifts, we see the beauty in the smallest trifle—even the dazzling darkness of emptiness.

The Hinge Affliction: Thoughts of Acedia

Acedia is really a hinge affliction: the third affliction of the mind and the first affliction of the soul. *Acedia* is recognized by a great weariness of the soul. The seeker's ability to discern sleeps. He or she is separated from reason and awareness (*Inst*. 10.4). This toxic fatigue puts the soul to sleep. *Acedia* is easy for others to detect in another person, but it is hard for the afflicted one to own his or her hardness of heart and the temptation to get off the spiritual journey. The mind is sluggish, and thoughts are slow and diminished. There is an irritability of spirit, profound boredom, and discontent toward one's current condition. *Acedia* shows itself in distaste for spiritual things. Scripture and spiritual reading are repulsive. The ability to notice thoughts is gone—replaced by a bad mood. There is an overwhelming pull to ignore one's spiritual practice and to "give up," to surrender in hopelessness. The tragedy of *acedia* is that I could die while I am not really living. While dejection leads to suicide, *acedia* leads to soul-death ("soulside") when the seeker rejects continuing work on the spiritual journey.

It is difficult to exaggerate the seriousness of *acedia* for the practitioner who has abandoned a former way of life and renounced afflictive thoughts of body, mind, and spirit. The serious seeker who has completed all this training and who practices fasting, vigils, discernment,

and prayer suddenly denies (through spiritual lethargy) his or her committed life with God. The psalmist describes the affliction of suddenly stopping one's relationship with God as the noonday devil: "the destruction that wastes at noonday" (Ps 91:6).

Cassian identifies *acedia* as a secondary thought because it is a thought "about" thoughts. The practitioner is in a crisis of spiritual fulfillment and doubts his or her motivation, intentions, and reasons for doing sacred work. What's the use? This noonday devil lies in ambush when there is no return—no satisfaction or consolation—from the spiritual practices to give the seeker strength. This period of life is dangerous as temptations multiply to just "give up" and return to a self-centered life. The seeker may leave a monastic community, profession, marriage, etc. In the grips of *acedia* a seeker may even try to start one's own monastery (church), become a bishop or abbot, or transfer to another community.

Cassian describes this period in the practitioner's life as having a soul that is sick, asleep, and weary about doing anything good or bad. The thought of *acedia* produces a dislike of the place and the members of the community. This disdain evolves into contempt, public disdain, and faultfinding. The person afflicted may seek to go away from the monastery frequently, and he or she shirks monastic or apostolic work. Other symptoms that Cassian describes are sleeping all day, discontinuing personal and common prayer, and the inability to stay in one's cell or to do *lectio* (*Inst*. 10.3).

The afflicted seeker believes that the monastery or other spiritual community is preventing spiritual progress and romanticizes a distant "perfect" monastery or community. Leaving would be a heroic virtue. If the afflicted person stays, unfortunately, the restless mind and soul cause restlessness in others. Or the individual merely exists, with no energy. If the person leaves in a state of *acedia*, he or she will start an exterior life once again but not bring the practices of the interior spiritual journey. The afflicted soul is asleep, with no capacity for contemplation or insight. A soul that stays in this state is making a choice away from salvation and certainly from sanctification.

Cassian advised his monks who were plagued with *acedia* to rededicate themselves to all work—manual labor and spiritual practices. Check the temptation to think you are more spiritually advanced than you really are. Your spiritual practice is just now at the place of its transforming power. Start over as if you are a novice with the training of fasting, guarding the heart, manifesting and sorting thoughts, discerning prayerfully, keeping vigils, and observing common life. Reverse the tendencies that spring from *acedia* by doing the opposite of what you feel. For example, if you feel like aimless roaming, stay in your cell, avoid idleness and laziness, resist traveling and restless visiting, work mindfully, eat and drink mindfully and moderately, be content with assigned work, stop activities that give permission to skip community obligations and personal practices, avoid others with the same affliction, resist chatter, and return to silence.

Other recommendations include the following: Work honestly for others who are in need as it checks desires for possessions. Resist those who give gifts because gifts reinforce an autonomous lifestyle rather than supporting one's economic commitment to the community and family. Likewise, refrain from public work until a measure of selflessness is obtained. Then, the service is truly for the "other." Refrain from taking too much time "for yourself" because, instead of receiving energy, idle time can easily kill your industriousness, perpetuating spiritual sloth—therefore, study and be quiet (*Inst*. 10.7.3–5).

The effects on the monastic community of severe cases of *acedia* can be significant. *Acedia* is an illness, and kindness should be shown. But just because someone is sick, we should not become ill ourselves. *Acedia* is an infectious disease for a group, and the leadership must take action on behalf of the group. A monastic afflicted with *acedia* might actually try to persuade others to leave while he or she stays. This manipulation should be resisted. In fact, Cassian advises the monastic not to keep company with one who is afflicted with *acedia*. The group sets boundaries as a starting place for dialogue. A wise elder is sent to extend compassion delivered with apostolic sternness. The group members should keep the boundaries. Two further teachings are stored in the sections on *acedia* and its remedies: the cell and compunction.

Practice of the cell. How does the practitioner afflicted with *acedia* "stay" and work through this time of spiritual

dryness? The most important ascetic practice for *acedia* is solitude and sitting alone in the silence of the cell. This is done not for the sake of being alone but for the intention of being with God. This is the practice of the cell and the place of the cell is the teacher. This is where I memorize psalms and study Scripture, practice recollection and pray without ceasing, or refrain from working to rest and to meditate. Overwork is the biggest obstacle to seekers moving into the kind of prayer that is absorption into God, beyond images (see *Conf*. 9).

The cell is a personal place where simplicity reigns, where my mind and soul can breathe and listen in the daily and seasonal rhythm of the *horarium*. Here, I slow down my thoughts, one at a time, and truly know that I am not my thoughts. This personal sanctuary is more than a safe haven, for it keeps me faithful to my commitments even when zeal wanes. In this sacred place, I sleep, surrender, and experience the night. My cell also reminds me I will die, and this personal bodily death is something I must do alone. So there is no running from this cell, no denying death.

The gift of tears: Compunction. *Acedia* creates a dried up, hardened soul. Tears of compunction soften us and prepare us to begin again. Compunction, says the *Philokalia*, is the state of one who is "pricked to the heart," who has become conscious of his or her distance from God and yet has an altered awareness and ardor for God, the heart's desire. Once again, the heart softens and there is

a feeling of sorrow, tenderness, and joy springing from sincere repentance. It's a burning state, like being in love, not a reaction to an incident. Compunction resolves *acedia* with a heightened relationship with God that has no moods or periods of doubt. One feels like a sinner in constant need of God's mercy. Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and is a right relationship with God. This is well-ordered humility for a creature toward the Creator. Compunction purifies and causes us to come closer to God in love through remorse. One is naked before God without shame or guilt. Pierced to the heart, only one's relationship with God matters. If *acedia* is not negotiated, one can pass into the affliction of vainglory.

Second Affliction of the Soul: Thoughts of Vainglory

Vainglory is doing all the right things for the wrong reasons. Vainglory is taking credit for good actions. "Glory" means "God's presence," and the vainglorious person takes that presence to mean "self" rather than "God." Shifting all my attention toward self is an affliction of motivation. It is a secondary thought, as it is what I am thinking when I do something. My vainglorious thoughts are about what others think about me; in this way, I actually perceive myself through what I think others think of me.

Many spiritual directors as well as the afflicted one cannot detect vainglory. We deceive ourselves and conclude that we are holy and spiritually advanced. This affliction may prompt us to become leaders in spiritual

and public professions. Vainglory is the opposite of dejection. In the one, I put myself down; in the other, I puff myself up. Both are forms of pride, not recognizing or accepting reality as it is. Humility is to be neither too high nor too low.

Vainglory is presumption when I act out of overconfidence. Vainglory replaces God with "me" as the object of worship. If glory is the experienced presence of God, then we cannot appropriate the glory for ourselves. Adoration and reverence are proper to experience God in one's interior life. If I take to myself what belongs to God, then there is no veneration, only illusion and vanity. Glory, when given to God, glows with the light of the Holy Spirit. It is palpable "presence" and "beauty." Shame is the inverse of glory, a terrible knowledge of our destiny, the awful nakedness we feel without the garment of light. Glory is the way the living God is known. Glory is the way it is when we see in faith. Sometimes in prayer we actually see our souls with our physical eyes. It has light, color, and subtle movement. When we see God, it is more. We use the word "glory" to describe it. We can't exaggerate how important it is to see through the eyes of faith that has all matter clothed in God's glory.

Vainglory attacks the spiritual side of serious seekers. It is a wound of the spiritually proficient who have mastered the earlier afflictions of food, sex, things, anger, dejection, and *acedia*. These afflictive thoughts, ever so quietly, twist the truth in order to move toward self instead of toward God. It is like saying, "I am so virtuous

I don't need God anymore. I can do anything." This attitude is dangerous to the soul. If a stilled heart is full of self, then the spiritual powers of keen insight and single-minded concentration can outwardly look good but be brutally devastating. If I foster vainglorious thoughts, I appropriate to myself what belongs to God.

Vainglory is an illness that attacks from both the right (good impulses) and the left (negative impulses). On the right I flatter myself about my "perfect" practice. Everything about me looks good from the outside: *my* dress, voice, vigils, fasts, prayers, reading, practices, obedience, silence, and display of outward humility. Vainglory attacks on the left by glorying in one's failures. Even if bad—no one is as bad as I am. To be the worst sinner is to glory in one's wicked ways. I, more than anyone else, am in need of God's mercy. Either excess good or bad when attributed to the self is vainglory and puffs up the ego. One who is afflicted with vainglory may indulge in daydreams about grandeur and public acclaim, or of having been rejected. Both are forms of vainglory, which intoxicates the mind. Any thought of envy is vainglory because one takes to oneself what glory properly belongs to another.

Vainglory is subtle. It has the ability to turn virtue into vice. For example, even my "middle way" in fasting is better than anyone else's moderation in fasting. Vainglory can deceive or even cause delusion. I'll not pray in front of others because they will think me holy. So then I don't pray at all. It's better not to do the practices because

I'll do them poorly, and they will become vices, and so I'll not do them (for example, fasting, vigils, and manifestation of thoughts). In this way, vainglory is an affliction that may wind itself through all the virtues, turning true humility into vanity. In this sense, vainglorious thoughts can subtly permeate all the gains of previous ascetical work and may disqualify the person from ministry.[8]

Recommended actions for one who has vainglory. As one progresses in the spiritual journey, discernment is absolutely essential, especially with vainglory, because good things look bad and bad things look good. Discussing this confusion with a seasoned elder is always a good starting place. Through sharing the practices, the elder should probe the motivations, discover the root causes of the thoughts, and help bring clarity to one's intentions. Be vigilant in overcoming vainglory because, after phasing out the affliction, one feels confident and superior, and this self-satisfaction is worse than the first affliction. Refrain from any thought that one has evolved past the spiritual practices and no longer needs fasting, prayers, guard of heart, watchfulness of thoughts, etc. If one is beyond them, then an outside authority must confirm it, because from the inside one would never know. A guide should confirm that the person is ready for a strict meditation practice and training of the mind to do prolonged silence and protracted solitude.

Rather than rushing into public work, refrain from any public role of ministry, because that would enhance

the external viewing of oneself from the point of view of others. There is the danger that the positive feedback the afflicted one receives from others will be appropriated to self and not to God. Refrain from imagination, daydreams, and the excessive remembering of situations where one is the center of attention. Practice watchfulness of thoughts; stay in the present moment. Notice subtle signs such as boasting, being competitive, telling remarkable tales about yourself, seeking and taking credit, playing the role of the hero. In short, always edit, redirect, and change the thoughts about self that are either high (praise) or low (dejection). The practice of humility is to think about myself exactly as I am.

Watchfulness or vigilance over my thoughts is a specific practice that will anticipate situations or inklings that engender either grandiose thoughts or low self-esteem. Guard of the heart is a practice that turns even the potential of an afflictive thought into thoughts about prayer. In this way, prayer is a barrier to unwelcome thoughts. Another antidote is to return to a practice of ceaseless prayer. When prayer is automatically going on, vainglory cannot coexist. The words of the Jesus Prayer are particularly powerful to offset vainglory and pride: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

In summary, to be seeking self-esteem rather than an all-out pursuit of God is contrary to the spiritual life. To move away (and stay away) from vainglorious thoughts of self and to shift the focus on God and others, we have to practice the simple but difficult work of dealing with

our thoughts by guard of the heart, watchfulness over our thoughts, and vigilance in ceaseless prayer. "Watch and pray" is what Jesus said to his disciples at the end of his earthly ministry when they went to the Garden of Gethsemane. If I consent to vainglory and take credit for my good actions, all the forces of pride emerge. Pride is, without a doubt, the most dangerous of all the thoughts that become afflictions.

Third Affliction of the Soul: Thoughts of Pride

About carnal pride. There are two kinds of pride: carnal and spiritual. Carnal pride is human lack of discrimination when acting on inner conversations about the afflictive thoughts of body, mind, and spirit. Carnal pride gives me thoughts of exaggerated self-importance and is common to everyone. There is a self-willed defiance along with self-talk, for example, "Just this time," or, "I need this more than someone else," or, "I'm worth it." I begin to think that things that would be wrong for another to do are permissible for me, since I am good. My reference point is my own thoughts, desires, and passions, not God. I simply live for myself. Vainglory has to do with what others think and my own perception of that governs what I do, but pride has to do with my very being. Pride is who I think I am.

In pride, each thought gets distorted: I don't share food, I lust for others' affection or things, I seduce someone for my own pleasure, and I grasp things without consideration for how much is enough or what other people

might need. I am also justified in my anger, believe I am above others, and put people down. I devote more time to self instead of to my spiritual practices. I may think, "Living is simply too much effort, let alone keeping my prayer life," which leads to a collapse of the training of my thoughts and a return to myself. God's word isn't defied as much as it is forgotten and dismissed as "not for me." Carnal pride is different from spiritual pride because the self takes precedence over God. Spiritual pride actually places the self *as god*.

About spiritual pride. Spiritual pride is a sin of the proficient. Once this person was turned toward God in thoughts, words, and deeds. Now the person turns only toward the self. This person's internal reference point is self-centered and not God-centered. This person acts as if God does not exist. Spiritual pride is a radical defiance with grave symptoms that involve audacious thoughts against God—even hatred and teaching against God and other believers. The spiritually proud have powers, including spiritual influence and abilities, that they use confidently in their "own name" and for their own benefit. If I am spiritually proud, I use my power to condemn and hurt others when they get in the way. Because I decide what is good, I appropriate the law to myself and use it in such a way that others fear my domination and punishment. God can be damned, for all I care. Hell doesn't exist, and if it does, I wouldn't want to be on the side of a God who creates hell.

The end stage for those afflicted with pride is defiance. The same person who renounced his or her former way of life, and all the thoughts of the former way of life, and who has all the powers of the practices and training of the mind now takes thoughts back toward the self and eventually toward evil. In this shift back, the prideful person decides that his or her thoughts can determine the Good, equating self with the Good for all. No discernment is necessary since the defiant one believes he or she is God.

Sadly, where once there was prayer without ceasing and mindfulness of the presence of God, now there is only self-adoration. The ego-self rises up and identifies with the culmination of the thoughts: gluttony, lust, rage, things, despair, boredom, vainglory, and pride. The defiant one then gets an invitation from the evil entities that promise to deliver double powers and strength. Subtle end-stage arrogance replaces any reverence for another's dignity. The narcissistic self is commander in chief and takes the place of God. Sometimes the prideful person bows to the Evil One, who now holds God's place, determining the moral good and demanding worship and adoration.

How can pride be detected? Cassian describes the indicators of pride in *Institute* 12.27. One symptom is a lukewarm spiritual fervor. The practitioner may not have fully renounced his or her former way of life or may have returned to old patterns after a full renunciation. My outside demeanor is rough, not gentle and kind. I

consider myself above my peers. I determine what I need so I deny myself nothing. My eyes are dead. My heart is dull, and I have a flat affect. I am socially bored and become a taker rather than a giver. Restraint is not even an option because I now feel my earlier life was senseless.

The prideful practitioner is impertinent and scorns authority because he or she knows what is best. In fact, this person will be troublesome in taking directions or supervision except when he or she gets a self-serving order. A person trapped in carnal pride has an outward gait more like a strut and a loud, dominating voice with a noisy and excessive mirth that is ostentatious. If the person is silent, it is a bitter silence, an unreasonably gloomy mood. This person speaks with authority, answers with rancor, is too free with the tongue, lacks patience, and is "chatty." This person freely hands out insults but is faint-hearted in receiving slights and unforgiving in receiving admonition. In short, a person afflicted with pride is stubborn about yielding to others, is never ready to give up self-will, and always seeks selfish ends. This person gives advice freely, but not according to the teachings, and has renounced traditional wisdom. This is the same person that once renounced their former way of life, renounced their afflictions, renounced all thoughts of God that were not of God, renounced thoughts of self that were not the true self. This person now renounces the way of life that is the spiritual journey of renunciation. This person renounces not only spiritual practice buy also renounces God. This is blasphemy.

Humility reverses pride. When we have the pride affliction, we go up the same twelve steps that we descend by way of humility (see RB 7). Most persons afflicted with pride don't want to be rid of it because it feels good to be right. Part of the end stage of pride is feeling sacrosanct—having no need of repentance, conversion, or change of heart. We know, however, that God's mercy as granted to the "good thief" can prevail, even at our last breath. It is prudent and humble to start all over on the spiritual life as a novice.

How can the affliction of pride be rooted out? Use the three guides: (1) teacher, (2) teachings (stored in Scripture and writings), and (3) traditions as lived by others (community) on the way.

A helpful starting place is to establish a good order in things and thoughts and then in relationships. Find a good teacher who has mastered the eight thoughts. Don't rely on gray hairs, but notice if the teacher has afflictions that are not resolved. Return to the practice of the eight thoughts. Renounce extremes and live a discerned life in the middle way. Do the practices of the cell, ceaseless prayer, compunction, discernment, fasting, good zeal, guard of the heart, *lectio divina*, manifestation of thoughts, manual labor, present awareness of God, recollection, silence, vigils, and watchfulness of thoughts.

Confess one's sins and receive absolution. Make amends. If we sort our thoughts and practice manual labor, the cell, ceaseless prayer, common life, and apostolic service, our prideful afflictions will be purified and replaced with humility.

Obviously, if one is in captivity of the Evil One and enmeshed in ontic evil, there is the need of the rite of exorcism that can be done by an ordained priest with these faculties. It's very serious to undergo an exorcism, and sometimes it takes several months, maybe years, to detoxify the soul. Thank God it is rare that there is genuine possession, obsession, or infestation of the Evil One in a sincere monastic. It is wholesome to fear evil and take precautions shunning any opportunity for the Evil One to contaminate persons, places, or things. We make the sign of the cross and say the Our Father with full intention and sincere humility.

One can see that in the light of the affliction of pride the practice of humility needs to start early, often, and always in the spiritual training. Katherine Howard, OSB,[9] translates St. Benedict's chapter 7 on humility into contemporary language. The Rule requires:

- reverent mindfulness of God
- watchfulness over behavior and inner thoughts
- desire to live in harmony with God's will
- willingness to respond to others' legitimate desires and commands out of love for God
- acceptance of suffering in life
- resistance to anger and depression or the desire to run away in the face of difficulties
- acknowledgment in our hearts that we are no better, and could very well be worse, than others

- living in community without the compulsion to project our unique identity by acting contrary to others
- refraining from speaking on every topic, in every situation
- avoidance of silly, sarcastic and demeaning laughter
- presenting oneself simply, gently, with a quiet and nonostentatious bodily demeanor

The first fruit of overcoming pride is a heart capable of meeting God "face-to-face." Earthly time is dedicated to loving God through the path of unknowing. If I am a serious seeker and I know my thoughts and renounce them, God as God emerges. The spiritual senses open and awareness awakens.

Benefits of Passing through Each Thought

When we pass through one of the afflictions, we can look back and see the benefits, the fruits that emerge on the other side, purging each of the afflictions.

When the thoughts get stilled and lose their binding power as afflictions, there is *apatheia* or purity of heart. Life is full of manifestations of God because the spiritual senses are awakened. The heart is warm, and there is a personal experience of God from the inside. Discernment is living from the mind that is descended into the heart. That still, small voice rises with grace, courage, and poise.

About food and drink: To eat the middle way is not only healthy for the body's weight, energy, and longevity but also the first step in living a life of discrimination—being able to sort, to anticipate my "enough," to feel the equanimity of being satisfied, of absences of urges dominating my consciousness. When I eat and drink mindfully, with poise and appreciation, I experience the fruits of transcending the compulsive affliction of the food and drink thought. Fasting becomes a way of life and feasting is the way I celebrate it!

About sex: To be continent, celibate, and chaste is to be in right relationship with my vocation. To hold the sacredness of the other and to be treasured by my community or my marriage partner or to enjoy being single is to be fully human. I am the same in the day as I am in the night. Sexual energies quicken life and all its living.

About things: To be a gardener on this planet earth is to breathe and to work. I use things because of what I do—art, crafts, nature, reading, cooking, enjoying the entire universe. What I have for my use is enough. All is good, very good. "Things" become who I am. I am rich indeed! I take up my responsibility to preserve things for the next generation's well-being and prosperity.

About anger: After my emotions are quieted, I have the facility to see the other's point of view and experience compassion. The forgiver and the forgiven merge. I become an elder with bright eyes, clear skin, a quick step, and a gentle smile. Others are attracted to me, but I am at

peace in my cell. Forgiveness reigns. No past diminishes my present and no future supplants it.

About dejection: Mystery rises in place of dense fog and weighty sorrow. A smile relaxes my brow. In place of darkness, I see luminous, clear, and intense light. My spiritual senses open. My experience of depression is lifted, and my thoughts become quiet. On the other side of mystery, I know that I know and am known.

About *acedia*: The hard heart melts into compunction, and the gift of tears cleanses me and takes me beyond returning to my former way of life. The cell becomes the home of my heart. My work is my prayer and my prayer is my work. Ceaseless repentance becomes an abiding experience of mercy. All is well. I am stilled. There are several benefits from the afflictive thoughts and suffering of *acedia* if one adheres to the above practices and purifies the intention in faith rather than in self-interest and consolation:

- Once again the beauty and health of the practice of manual labor is seen.
- The seeker is trained to recognize that work and prayer are interchangeable.
- The sacredness of the moment is experienced.
- In ceaseless prayer the mind is increasingly stilled, chatter stops, and layers of consciousness surface.
- In the silence of not speaking (taciturnity), we learn to listen, rest, receive, observe, and live in the present moment.

- Restfulness of mind is restored with the rhythm of the work of the body.
- Mood swings shift to a moderate and acceptable range.
- Once the mood becomes more settled, a new feeling emerges: compunction.

About vainglory: Glory is God's. My self-centeredness actually dies. Only God satisfies. Public ministry or manual labor is equally my preference since God is at work in me and I am not the one doing it. Either success or failure is all right. I have a single-minded energy; inner fantasies no longer influence me. All is God's way and that is my way. There is no separation.

I can discern motivation for apostolic service. Embarrassment is overcome since the response to failure or accomplishment is neither high nor low: interior poise emerges. One can work in either ministry or the monastery because the inner work is the same.

Watching thoughts is a discipline whether alone or with others. The cloister and the cell can be interchangeable with work and social obligations. There is no need for a desert if one has overcome vainglory. A solitary life is helpful to know my thoughts; the practice of watchfulness can be a mental substitute for the desert culture of a monk or a hermit.

Confidence in myself is placed securely in confidence in God; there is no practice of "self-assigned" virtues. I

lay aside thoughts and give God glory (ceaseless prayer), and God raises up the virtue necessary for my situation.

The practice of compunction is to give God glory and ask for mercy for oneself. Interior dialogue is away from self-chatter and toward God. Christ consciousness emerges. The I-thought continues to "watch and pray."

About pride: Pride is doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons, but humility replaces gluttony, lust, greed, anger, depression, *acedia*, vainglory, and self-righteousness. Purity of heart is our default place of rest. All harsh and unhealthy fears are at peace. We renounce our former way of life; then we go deeper inside and renounce our afflictive thoughts that put us at risk to return to our former way of life.

When the ego relaxes its grip from holding us toward the self, we enjoy the True Self of being made in the image and likeness of God. Christ-consciousness replaces our ego-consciousness. Beyond ego-consciousness, we enjoy a mind at peace. Purity of heart abides, but humility is what others see.

Ceaseless prayer maintains the warm, devoted heart that has compassion toward others. The self empties out through Christ. But this gets ahead of our story. The battle with our thoughts happens over and over again with more subtle invitations. Now that we have seen how seductive the thoughts are, it is wise to catch them early, often, and with humble expectation. I am not my thoughts! The work of sorting thoughts is called discernment.