TOOLS MATTER

Matters Series

Thoughts Matter: Discovering the Spiritual Journey

Tools Matter: Beginning the Spiritual Journey

Humility Matters: Toward Purity of Heart

Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush

Discernment Matters: Listening with the Ear of the Heart

Tools Matter

Beginning the Spiritual Journey

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To my guardian angel,
Brigid Funk,
who shows up from time to time
when tools matter!

Contents

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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.

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Foreword

The spiritual journey of growth in love, truth, and freedom is often compared to a spiritual warfare, and we are all very familiar with the idea of workshop, tools, right effort, and grace that leads to purity of heart, the essential precondition for listening to the Spirit and conformity to Christ.

When Sister Meg came to our monastery and renewed our interest in the foundational teachings from John Cassian about the eight afflictive thoughts, we appreciated how relevant those afflictions were to our twenty-first-century Cistercian house. The afflictive thoughts of food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride are applicable to everyone undertaking the spiritual journey. This book has twenty-six tools that deal with the afflictive thoughts, replacing them with a steady stream of prayer, which then can continue in a natural and habitual way.

This book is practical, not to be confused with spiritual reading that might be interesting but for someone else to

do. Like the book *Thoughts Matter*, this book is to be read and done. It has come to our door just at the right time for us here in Ireland when the church strongly recognizes the need for authenticity, purification, and renewed efforts to consent to grace and resist self-deception. I have no doubt that *Tools Matter* will be of great benefit to all seekers of Love, Truth, and Freedom whose lives will bring a new depth of holiness and goodness to our world.

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Introduction

Tools matter. We may have had an encounter with God before a burning bush and taken off our shoes, but we need help to start on the spiritual journey. To know one's thoughts is the starting place to take action for one's responsibility to live a life of doing good and avoiding evil. In my previous book, *Thoughts Matter*, I retrieve and reclaim those foundational teachings of the eight afflictions taught to monks since the third century CE. In 1997 I was teaching in classroom 208 at Benedict Inn here in Beech Grove. The students—monks and nuns, married men and women, single laymen and laywomen—sat dejected. One big guy stood up and said, with a long face, "So now we are burdened with at least some of the eight afflictions of food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. So, now what do we do? This is depressing!"

I walked across the full length of the chalkboard and with impromptu quickness wrote quickly through the full six panels of the chalkboard: for food . . . here are

the tools . . . fasting, exercise, moderate fasting, eating at right time, right amount, right degree of nourishment. I repeated the exercise for thoughts about sex and then again for anger. Before I knew it, I had scratched the board full of twenty-six tools that are the mechanics to reduce, refrain, reroute, and refuse the afflictions from getting into one's habitual pathos.

One of the students asked the question, "Is this another book that should be written?" Another said, "Meg, thoughts and tools must be taught as a unity. It's not helpful to know one has afflictive thoughts that become obstacles to prayer without knowing how to root it out and return to some peace-filled equanimity. Also, to just know you have an affliction is paralyzing. What is the way out before it gets worse?"

So, I went back through more than a thousand pages of Cassian's writings and studied some of the tools he recommends to his monks and nuns. I also read through some Catholic saints' writings wherein they proposed specific tools for their members. We have many saints in the Catholic Church, and many of them report their revelations or even heroic deeds but leave to our imagination how to get there. I found a few very practical souls who taught a method: St. Nil Sorsky, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, Brother Laurence, Madame Gyuone, and the unknown author of *Cloud of Unknowing* to name a few.[1] In this book, *Tools Matter*, I will present entry-level practices that a reader can grasp simply through reading the text and put into practice. In my books *Lectio Matters*

and *Discernment Matters* I'll present the major practices that become prayer. But this book on tools is meant to be entry level for anyone to pick up, read, and then heed. Start from where you are. There's no better time, place, or space than here and now.

This Book Is for Beginners

We review lightly the afflictions and pick up recommended practices that can provide clear and compelling assistance for the spiritual journey, both for the individual and for the community.

Tools Matter is about staying awake. We are stunned for a moment before our burning bush, but then we return to our habitual ways of working and loving. If we know ourselves, we know that one disorienting factor can obliterate any peak experience in the blink of an eye. We try to pray, but our thoughts are like distant rocks and trees. Sometimes we feel as if we are going mad, that we are out of our minds. Perhaps we should want to be "out of our minds" because our thoughts are always conditioned to keep us in stale, starched patterns. We are not our thoughts. When stilled, our minds are warm and wonderfully in the Presence.

A Brief Presentation of Tools

How can we tend to the mind to stabilize our memory? Are there any tools? How do these tools work? This book

is a brief presentation of tools found in the Christian tradition and how they worked for the early monks and nuns. These monastics were people like you and me. They felt the same impulse we do; they needed help. To find that help, they went to visit the early hermits, quiet dwellers in the desert, and asked them, "How do you do it? How can I do it?" These wise persons taught them to guard their hearts, to watch their thoughts, to spend time in vigils, to fast, to confess, to practice ceaseless prayer, to practice the prayer of the heart, and to do manual labor, to name a few of the recommended practices.

A critical assumption in this book is found in John Cassian's notion of "springing up" (*Inst*. 4.43).[2] From this important text in Cassian's *Institutes* we see that there is a sequence to the inner journey. The first thing required is a disposition of reverence, of awe toward God, a disposition that fosters compunction and humility. But the actual work of the spirit is, somewhat surprisingly, a reversal of our ordinary intuition. We assume that we must learn and practice the virtue of humility and strive to put love into practice. This is not the advice that stretches over Cassian's eight *Institutes* and into his first eight *Conferences*. We need not assert love. It just happens when we remove attachment to our own self-acting thoughts.

Presuming that we have left our former way of life, we are told simply and humbly to remove the obstacles to prayer. We are told to attend to our thoughts. The obstacles are the eight thoughts (later translated into the seven capital sins): thoughts of food, sex, things, anger,

dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. In practice, the way to purity of heart, and hence to having a full-blown peace of mind, is to remove the human afflictions by reducing, redirecting, and removing our thoughts. Then God's presence "springs up." We experience God (knowledge and contemplation). So, right effort is to root out; God does the rest.

God's work in us is grace, that presence that quickens our hearts. Our work is to remain present to the presence. Thoughts that claim our consciousness are obstacles to this abiding. This wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers is simply to remain in God's presence and, when thoughts rise, to redirect them. Our effort is to let thoughts simply be and to refrain from giving our attention to our thoughts. Those same desert dwellers teach us many ways to do this. This book is a collection of their teachings on "right effort" that puts into practice ways to lay aside our thoughts so that love (the consciousness of God) can spring up.

As difficult as this must sound to beginners, it is also sweet. It asks for a single-minded attention to our thoughts with no commentary or clutter in our minds. This is a liberating experience, and we soon fall into the mystery of hearing the still, small "as if" voice awakening to the subtle presence of God in our everyday experience. This practice calls for no wild seeking of exotic people, places, or things. We simply understand that the reign of God is already blooming within us.

Some might say that this presence can be felt without inner work. Many, if not all, of us have had the experience

of a breakthrough of the transcendent. But because of our human condition, in a short time the memory of such an encounter vanishes, and no sustained vigor with its quickened warmth is left in our hearts. "Now what?" says the mind and the body to the soul. The answer from the monastic tradition is to learn to observe and redirect our thoughts. To do this, we use the tools the early monks and nuns found helpful as long ago as the fourth century.

We find those teachings in Cassian's works, where he makes an extraordinary discovery about the nature of our minds:

> Therefore, before we pray we should make an effort to cast out from the innermost parts of our heart whatever we do not wish to steal upon us as we pray, so that in this way we can fulfill the apostolic words: "Pray without ceasing." And: "In every place lifting up pure hands without anger and dissension." For we shall be unable to accomplish this command unless our mind, purified of every contagion of vice and given over to virtue alone as to a natural good, is fed upon the continual contemplation of almighty God.
>
> For the character of the soul is not inappropriately compared to a very light feather or plume. If it has not been harmed or spoiled by some liquid coming from outside, thanks to its inherent lightness it is naturally borne to the heavenly heights by the slightest breath. But if it has been weighed down by a sprinkling or an outpouring of some liquid, not only will it not be borne off by its natural lightness and snatched up into

> the air, but it will even be pressed down to the lowest places on the earth by the weight of the liquid that it has taken on.
>
> Likewise, if our mind has not been burdened by the worldly vices and concerns that assail it and been spoiled by the liquid of a harmful wantonness, it will be lightened by the natural goodness of its purity and be lifted up to the heights by the subtlest breath of spiritual meditation. Leaving behind low and earthly places, it will be carried away to heavenly and invisible ones. Hence we are rightly warned by the precepts of the Lord: "See that your hearts not be weighted down by surfeiting and drunkenness and worldly concerns."
>
> Therefore, if we wish our prayers to penetrate not only the heavens but even what is above the heavens, we should make an effort to draw our mind, purged of every earthly vice and cleansed of all the dregs of the passions, back to its natural lightness, so that thus its prayer might ascend to God, unburdened by the weight of any vice (*Conf*. 9.3.4–4.3).

This long quote from Cassian tells us that by nature we are good. We have an inner quality of soul that is as light as a feather. Our "right effort" is simply and consistently to remove the obstacles to letting our inner nature rise. His is an optimistic view rather than a negative or harsh one. The practices he suggests actually work, and if we follow them, thoughts no longer obscure our awareness of God.

Just as our "thoughts matter," we see that "tools matter" too. Most beginners require tools to notice their

thoughts and start the inner work. Early on the journey, we notice that, when our thoughts are stilled, pure prayer arises. There are many books about prayer, and there are many books of prayer. This is a book about those tools we can take from the early Christian tradition to do this inner work so pure prayer happens. We are stunned before the burning bush and encounter God. We have teachings from our desert elders that help us remove our sandals, bow our brow before the ineffable, then listen to the directives for the journey.

Chapter 1

Thoughts: A Teaching from the Desert Tradition

When the hermits left their towns and dwelled in their desert caves, cells, or temporary shelters, they found that their physical environment intensified not only their desire for God but also their drag into sin. They couldn't sustain their resolve. One would think that leaving family, possessions, and occupations would free the body, mind, and soul for prayer. Not so. Leaving their previous modes of life reversed their external ways of being, but their internal ways of being—memory, imagination, and rational thinking— became only more aggravated in isolation. Therefore, in the desert these seekers took up a new inner work: thoughts.

Teachings on Thoughts and Practice

We who are contemplatives in the world can benefit from how the desert elders trained their minds. We need

to enter into their neoplatonic mind-set to understand the theory and then to translate it into contemporary terms.

Greek philosophers held that persons have a body, a mind that enlivens the body, and a soul that puts a life force in the body and the mind that is eternal and real. In the cosmos, they believed, there was a collective soul. Christian thinkers in late antiquity appropriated this grid and baptized it.[1] They said that the Holy Spirit, the soul of our soul, enlivens the body, mind, and soul given to each human person.[2] The cosmic Christ is the collective soul. The most exalted work that humans can aspire to is contemplation. No being of a lower life form can do that and know that they are doing it.

The gift of being human is a faculty or a capacity to be aware of our thoughts. In this awareness, we can observe that thoughts come and then go; we can distinguish ourselves from our thoughts. We are not our thoughts. We have thoughts, said our desert ancestors, over and over in many ways, beginning the long philosophical debate over objectivity and subjectivity. But even if we are not our thoughts, we must deal with them. Thoughts come again and again. But if a thought is not "thought about" or accompanied by another thought, the thought will go away. If another thought, sustained with attention, accompanies the first thought, then the thought thickens and forms into feelings or emotions. If those feelings and emotions coalesce into desires, they become dense and evolve into passions. Passions (still passive) rise strong, hard, and fast. They quicken the mind and pose a question: to consent or

not to consent? To consent to good thoughts or desires or passions becomes a virtue, the habit of doing good. To consent to bad thoughts or desires or passions becomes a vice or a sin, the habit of doing wrong. Virtues are beneficial to the soul, and vices are destructive to it. Some thoughts come into consciousness already as an emotion since they rise so quickly that we don't note the signals at their first "rising." Awareness of our thoughts allows distance from them, which is the first step in discernment.

Hermits were initiated into the nuances of the mind. They learned, sometimes the hard way, that to overcome a passion was more difficult than to overcome a thought. At the level of a thought, when an impression is young, new, just springing up, there is supple agility. At the level of desire, there is a struggle to reduce, redirect, or react to the feeling. At the intensity of a full-blown passion, the energies are so thick that holding one's own is almost impossible. Monastics put these insights into teachings about temptations, demons, and thoughts, but the patterns are universal and apply to all of us. The sooner we notice a thought and take appropriate action, the easier the response. We can see why the hermits challenged themselves to "keep vigilant." Practice is the work of attention, of keeping awake.

There are no isolated thoughts. The Greek word for "thought" is *logismos*, which means a "train of thoughts." Thoughts are like a comet that has a life of its own with a trail of little vapors in its tail. Therefore, the way to master thoughts is to notice them early, often, and

consistently and to respond to them deliberately. This is the underlying reason why a practice is helpful—some elders would say even essential—for the spiritual life.

It's helpful to beginners to see that thoughts cluster around eight themes: food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride.[3] Universally, it seems, we all have the same experience. These thoughts rise in everyone, at all times and in all places. Some traditions give these thoughts other names, but the content and even the progression are the same.

There is a system to our thoughts. The first three thoughts (food, sex, and things) are afflictions of the body, the second ones (anger and dejection) are afflictions of the mind, and the third ones (*acedia*, vainglory, pride) are afflictions of the soul. The system has a logical sequence and makes for sound teaching.

Thoughts have another degree of gravity when they become "second thoughts," or intentions. For example, though one might have an affliction about food, the thought is not usually about food; it is about self and one's motivation. We call these thoughts "second thoughts," and we say that our thoughts about thoughts matter more than the thoughts themselves. This gets tricky, but it makes a good deal of difference: to eat is a behavior we share in common with the animal world, but to be mindful while eating is contemplative work.

The Greeks also examined the sources of thoughts. Where do they come from? The elders soon sorted them from their fruits. Some thoughts rise from my own

memories, desires, or experiences that are stored in consciousness. Some thoughts are from God and are inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Other thoughts are from evil sources outside of myself. The demons seem to know us well and sink into any vulnerable crevice of weakness. We can look at our thoughts and recognize their source. If a thought is from God, we need to cultivate it. If it is from ourselves, we need to check it because we know we are by nature good, but we experience ignorance of the good, a weak will, and an inclination toward evil. This is the teaching stored in the myth of original sin.

Everyone can have the experience of being a contemplative. We must simply slow down our thoughts, still ourselves. When our thinking subsides, so does our consciousness of self, and when that happens, the "I" of the mind's eye mirrors God. We are at rest. This rest is the enjoyment of full consciousness, and when the "I" is not driving the self into ego-attention, God's action and God's direction can take over and enfold us. Whether this is for a split second or longer, this depth marks the soul indelibly. Often in our ordinary lives love springs up. St. Benedict talks about an enlarged or dilated heart. Work, he says, is prayer and prayer is work. The effort is effortless but the love abides forever. The practices we will present in this book are natural and sustain a lifetime of loving.

But I'm getting ahead of our story. To get to this point we must attend to our thoughts. Are we thinking about food, or sex, or things? Are we in various stages of anger or depression? Our way of thinking shows us

our consciousness. The contemplative prefers Christ. It's tragic to leave all, go to the desert, and then think about food for a lifetime. Not only in eternal life, but now, Christ promised, we can abide in God. We can become Christ conscious. We can't "think God," but what we can do is "unthink" other thoughts and let God spring up.

This unthinking is orthopraxis, or right practice, just as orthodoxy is right belief. In orthopraxis we do our interior work as individuals. Is this work too self-centered? Ought we to serve others as the best use of our time? Zeal is essential to a healthy group, but this health requires that each individual comes to the work of the group with readiness. Personal discipline has no substitute. Without good motivations and clear-sightedness, the group becomes simply a herd, and its actions can easily become oppressive, closed-minded, and even cultic. I can only change myself. To change a group each person must undergo personal transformation. The starting point for community growth is the individual. The locus of consent is my thoughts.

Thus, we are back to thoughts matter, and when I notice my thoughts I must practice redirecting any thoughts that remove and distance me from my personal experience of God.

John Cassian's Four Renunciations

We must resist any path that leads us away from our heart's desire. We are made for God and we have profound, ready-made inclinations toward God. The good

news is that this desire, when fulfilled, is an experience of peace and profound joy. The mysterious direction we must go, however, is through the door of the four renunciations; this teaching is from John Cassian. For those who don't know Cassian, I'd like to introduce you to him. John Cassian was born in the 360s in Dobrudja, a part of modern-day Romania. He was classically trained in Latin and Greek. He left for Palestine around 380 and settled in a monastery in Bethlehem. Like many seekers of his time, inspired by the lives of the desert fathers and mothers of Egypt, he was not content merely to hear stories about famous ascetics but went to meet them himself. In a wonderfully ingenious collection, he wrote down the teachings of thousands of solitaries in the early Christian era who lived in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. He left for Egypt in the mid-380s and spent about fifteen years there, settling as a monk at Scetis in the Wadi al-Natrum. He left Egypt around 399 or 400, perhaps because of the Origenist controversy, and ended up in Constantinople. Cassian was probably ordained to the deaconate in 405 when John Chrysostom was bishop. He traveled to Rome after St. John Chrysostom's exile on account of the Nestorian controversy. Between 415 and 425 he wrote his manuscripts. We do know that he founded two monasteries in Marseille in the mid-410s, one for monks and one for nuns. He died around 435.[4]

Because his work was in Latin and not in Greek his writings got a permanent place two hundred years later in the Rule of Benedict. John Cassian wrote two major

works and one minor treatise: twelve *Institutes* and twenty-four *Conferences* and seven books *On the Incarnation of the Lord, Against Nestorius.* His feast is celebrated on February 29 in the Orthodox Church.

Cassian was a student of Evagrius, a Greek scholar/mystic, who was in turn influenced by the great Scripture exegete, Origen of Alexandria. This important group of monastic theologians built on each other's teachings, frequently using the image of a journey to describe the spiritual life. This journey requires four renunciations.

The first: to transform our ordinary, external human journey into a spiritual one. This renunciation has two phases. The first phase is to follow our baptismal call to turn away from Satan, from works of evil, from any good that is not God and any self that is not for others. This first phase teaches us to imitate Christ and to belong to the ecclesial community described in the Acts of the Apostles. The second phase of the first renunciation encourages us to renounce "ways of life" that lead away from the spiritual or the hidden life.

Sometimes this first renunciation takes the form of entering a monastery or changing our job or making or breaking a relationship. It may include an effort to surround ourselves with a culture that supports our choices. This effort may include renouncing our family of origin, some of our friends, the joy of having children, status and rank, or entitlements that provide us desirable opportunities. We might renounce property, possessions, and even professions. We often are asked to renounce

a personal "mission" for the sake of a community mission or another selfless call. In short, we renounce our former way of life.

By our former way of life, we mean all the ways we have lived externally: our family, profession, status, class, possessions, education, identity-bound origins like being Irish, American, Hoosier, woman, Roman Rite Catholic. We could shift from using resources unconsciously to mindful eating and sensitivity to our environment and ecological connections on this planet. All of these culturally condition our being and must be renounced as controlling mechanisms. This conversion from the control of our former life for the sake of a noble call is what we call the first renunciation.

Notice that usually our former way of life isn't one of sin or decadence. It is a good surrendered for the sake of another good. It goes without saying that if we live a "bad sort of life" we would have to exercise great diligence to lay aside sinful ways and patterns before the first renunciation can even begin. The purpose of this renunciation is to begin to lift up our body, mind, and soul to God and to move away from controlling, self-willed projects. These works, no matter how beneficial they may be to others, simply shore up our ego and make our personality our main concern in life. This renunciation is required of all baptized persons. Over the centuries, this first renunciation became confused with giving up one's ways of sin, but the real burden of the first renunciation is more positive than negative—to shift into God's way.

From the outside, we often can't tell if our neighbor has made that first renunciation because it looks so ordinary. In fact, maybe he or she shifted from the single life to marriage and family or from self-employment in business to a service-oriented, working-class job because of God's prompting. Or maybe our neighbor has moved from a bedroom community of a large city to a housing district made up of lower-income families for explicit work with the underserved. This shift from our former way of life may have no external signs, yet internally it is a relinquishing of our old way for a new way of being toward God and others. We may embrace the facts of our former way because of necessity, such as a profession or external symbols of power, but we strive to do it with detachment and attention to our hidden spiritual journey.

Our path may simply be to "have no attachment" and to abandon ourselves to God's way, as St. Paul did after his conversion.

This leads to the second renunciation, which has two phases also. First we notice our thoughts, not just our external actions, deeds, or surroundings. In this phase of the spiritual journey, we decide to let go of attachment to any thoughts that controlled us in our former way of life. This second renunciation leads us to an interior life of chaste thinking. The second phase of this renunciation is to look not only at our thoughts but also at our motivations and intentions. We have tools for this work.

In John Cassian's third *Conference*, "On Renunciation," attributed to Abba Paphnutius, we read, "Therefore, if

we desire to achieve true perfection we ought to strive so that, just as with our body we have disdained parents, homeland, wealth, and pleasures of the world, we may also in our heart abandon all these things and not turn back again in our desires to what we have left behind, like those who were led out [of Egypt] by Moses" (*Conf*. 3.7.5).

The desert *abbas* and *ammas* discovered that it wasn't enough to leave their former way of life. They found that their thoughts, desires, and passions followed them to their caves. They remembered their relationships, diet, possessions, status, climate, and personal comforts. Their past hurts, when remembered years later, conjured up the same and even more intense anger and depression. Even the good that they did fed into their fantasies. Remembering their past with embellishment quickly became entangled with vainglory and waxed into full-blown pride when they took all the credit, and they even imagined doing lewd deeds because of anticipated pleasure.

All of this means that, though we leave behind our former way of life, there may still live in our hearts desires that are not in harmony with living toward God. We may not live exteriorly as we did before, but if that life is still held in the mind's eye, eventually we will take back what we've given up when, faced with temptations, we discover our weakness of resolve.

Most of us will be at work on this purgative stage for our entire lifetime. The interior life is not achieved by simply withdrawing physically from our former way of life. Perhaps the biggest danger is becoming stuck in our

new life with old patterns of mindless living, unconscious that we have thoughts at all! The classic eight thoughts follow us. If our former life is still living and breathing in our hearts, there is not only no benefit from leaving our former way of life but also the possibility of returning to it with renewed vigor and stubborn conviction. Renunciation of our thoughts about our former way of life is well worth every effort because its fruit is purity of heart. Once our thoughts are stilled and we have a mind "at peace," we wake up and experience God's presence.

The third renunciation is more difficult, but we also need to let it happen if we are serious about the spiritual journey. Since thoughts come and go but we are not our thoughts, we must let go of our thoughts, including our thoughts of God, who is known by unknowing. God is ineffable. We can know the face of Jesus through Scripture, but even there we must let Christ reveal himself to us without thought. We need to ask for the grace to detach ourselves from thoughts and let God be God for us. As difficult as this is, it is well worth the effort; in exchange for our fragile thoughts that come and go like clouds, we receive God who abides and unites us creatures with the whole of creation in a cosmic Christ consciousness.

Again, this third renunciation requires us to let go of all thought of God: "'Come to the land which I shall show you'—that is, not to the one which you can know of yourself or find through your own effort, but to the one which I shall show you not only when you are unaware of it but even when you are not looking for it" (*Conf.*

3.10.6). This third renunciation is best arrived at by an unthinking practice of contemplation. Language is tricky; conceptual thinking is not necessary in this renunciation. To prepare for passive recollection requires a contemplative practice of unthinking, not of discourse. This passive recollection leads to the experience of illumination, "such that once we have been led by his teaching and illumination we arrive at the perfection of the highest blessedness" (*Conf.* 3.10.6).

Our image of God is mediated through the senses. But through the practice of virtue, our hearts become purified and we are able to see God in a spiritual way, beyond our senses. In the fourth century there was already confusion about kataphatic prayer (with images) and apophatic prayer (without images). Abba Paphnutius says, "But the old man got so confused in his mind during the prayers, when he realized that the anthropomorphic image of the Godhead which he had always pictured to himself while praying had been banished from his heart, that he suddenly broke into the bitterest tears and heavy sobbing and, throwing himself to the ground with a loud groan, cried out: 'Woe is he, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address' " (*Conf.* 10.3.4–5).

This painful moment along the spiritual journey is what I think John of the Cross is referring to when he describes the dark nights of the "senses" and of the "soul." He is not talking about the grief of human loss that most

seekers experience during the first two renunciations. We need images of God and ways of praying to lead us to pure prayer, to contemplation. But once we've met God face-to-face, as it were, those images become obsolete or are totally transformed into a new way of seeing. The spiritual senses take over.

The third renunciation is a time when

> every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, will be God, when that unity which the Father now has with the Son and which the Son has with the Father will be carried over into our understanding and our mind, so that, just as he loves us with a sincere and pure and indissoluble love, we too may be joined to him with a perpetual and inseparable love and so united with him that whatever we breathe, whatever we understand, whatever we speak may be God. In him we shall attain, I say, to that end of which we spoke before, which the Lord longed to be fulfilled in us when he prayed: "That all may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they themselves may also be made perfect in unity." And again: "Father, I wish that those whom you have given might also be with me where I am." (*Conf.* 10.7.2)

I teach more about this third renunciation in my book, *Humility Matters*.

The fourth renunciation is seldom taught because most of us never reach this stage in our spiritual journey, but if

we know that the complete journey will also require this renunciation, we want to be aware of it. This renunciation requires us to renounce the thought of "self." The "I" in our mind's eye must go. As in all organized descriptions about the phases of the spiritual life, there may be some persons who experience these phases differently or in a different order, perhaps bypassing some of them. St. Therese of Lisieux, for instance, who was in her early twenties when she was teaching her new doctrine of the Little Way to her novices, probably was already in the fourth renunciation.

This renunciation requires us to lay down our very self and merge with Christ's own consciousness of the Father through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Cassian talks about the completion and perfection of purity (*Conf.* 3.10.6), free of the thorns and thistles of sins (*Conf.* 3.10.5), even while we are still in our body. Though walking in the flesh, one serves the Lord "not according to the flesh" (*Conf.* 3.6.4). Self-love is replaced by love of God. Self is reduced and renounced. Pure prayer springs up since all is God. Equanimity is possible. A mind at peace is the fruit of renunciation. Apostolic love abounds.

This fourth renunciation of "no self" might be what Buddhists speak of as "emptiness." But we'd never know since there'd be no self to report it! It seems to me to be not unlike the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ merging into One Divine Person, who himself is seamlessly a part of the God who is Three in One. As I continue to teach these four renunciations, it is more

and more complex because the earliest stage of the first renunciation is to renounce self-centeredness and to emerge from the baptismal waters and follow Christ. It would be unlikely that one could negotiate the first three renunciations without significant diminishment of an inordinate ego.

The four renunciations are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. All ascetical practices should be modified in the light of the goal: God.

Each of these renunciations has its benefits: Renouncing one's former life gives one the space, time, and energy to start the spiritual journey. Renouncing one's thoughts purifies the heart and lets light in to help one understand the God who is mediated through Scripture, or through beauty and goodness in nature, or in one's experience. Renouncing one's concepts of God brings one before God, unmediated by texts and barriers that are only descriptive, not an actual experience of the presence of God. Finally, when the self is rooted out, all illusion, ignorance, and warring passions are tamed and all is God. Emptiness and dazzling darkness become the transfiguration and (through the spiritual senses) a transformation. No words can capture this participation in Christ.

When talking "about" anything, we are playing a trick on ourselves. We are pretending that "we know." But we only "know" from the outside. To use our journey image, we are simply doing the work to seek God, but there isn't any way to know how we are doing. There is, however, a sign that encourages us that we are following

the tradition of those who have gone before us: that we have a "simple, one-pointed" good zeal. When we are aware of this kind of consciousness, we realize a joy and sense of inner freedom, much like a child.

These renunciations need not be dreaded. They are really the natural life cycle of birth to death. The requirements of each renunciation are what we call a vocation. We simply follow the call of grace no matter the obstacles. What is so welcoming about these teachings is that we are not alone. Others have gone before us and have done this inner work. They've discovered tools to apply to the work necessary at each of these four phases of renunciation.