

THOUGHTS 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*

# Thoughts Matter

*Discovering the Spiritual Journey*

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB



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*To my guardian angel,  
Brigid Funk,  
who shows up from time to time  
when it matters!*



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“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

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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*),<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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  
New Skete  
Cambridge, New York



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## Introduction

*Listen to the teachings  
and turn to them with the ear of your heart.*

—Rule of St. Benedict

God is our heart's desire. We may not have such a defining moment as did Moses, but we know that steady burning warmed by God's Presence. Like Moses, we too are on a journey. Each day we must put one foot in front of another. We can trust that deep-down place in our heart. There are people who have gone before us and can instruct us on the road.

This book is intended for a person who is looking seriously for the right path on the spiritual journey. According to John Cassian, a fourth-century monk, renunciations are required of us if we are on that journey. First, we must renounce our former way of life and move closer to our heart's desire, toward the interior life. Second, we must do the inner work (of asceticism) by renouncing our mindless thoughts. This renunciation is particularly

difficult because we have little control over our thoughts. Third, we must renounce our own images of God so that we can enter into contemplation of God as God.<sup>1</sup>

This book is about the second of those three renunciations: with thoughts, we grapple. Recurring themes or trains of thoughts run constantly through our consciousness. These thoughts—which can lead to desires and ultimately to passions—cluster in predictable ways: they are about food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia* (weariness of soul), vainglory, and pride. Some are as familiar as breathing in and out. Some are starkly revealing, self-made obstacles that stand between us and our deepest desire.

In a contemporary world with a mix of complex spiritual teachings, which require sophisticated knowledge and difficult study, Cassian's lessons are very direct. He simply invited his early Christian readers to seek God by knowing and stabilizing their thoughts. More than sixteen hundred years later, despite the insistent, chaotic hum of noise that surrounds us and occupies our minds, that same invitation is extended to us. When Thomas Merton was appointed novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1955, his first set of lectures was on John Cassian's writings: "Through Cassian I am getting back to everything, or rather, getting for the first time to monastic and Christian values I had dared to write about without knowing them."<sup>2</sup>

John Cassian was born in Dobrudja (present-day Romania) around the year 360 CE. He was fluent in both Latin and Greek. He traveled to Palestine and Egypt, where he spent as many as twenty years as a monk,

beginning his monastic life in a Greek-speaking *cenobium* (community of monastics) 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 those famous ascetics but went to meet them himself and remained with them until 399. He was ordained in Constantinople by St. John Chrysostom in 405. Between 415 and 425 we know he wrote his wonderfully ingenious collection: the teachings of thousands of solitaries of the early Christian era who lived in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. He has one other manuscript, *On the Incarnation, Against Nestorius*, that he wrote around 430. Finally, he took an excursion to Rome and Antioch and back to Bethlehem, which took him fifteen years. Toward the end of his life he founded two monasteries near Marseilles, in Southern Gaul, one for men and one for women. Cassian died around 435 and has a feast day celebrated on February 29 in the Orthodox Church. The Latin *ordo* (calendar of rituals) for 1997 has no listing of a day in honor of John Cassian.

For the purpose of his new monastic foundations, he wrote in Latin thirty-six books, twelve *Institutes*, and twenty-four *Conferences*.<sup>3</sup> These works are an insightful edited version of the teachings of many desert elders. Cassian uncovered a system that appears when these teachings are taken as a whole. The spiritual journey has a theory. This search for God requires renunciations. When I read these works when I was prioress in the mid-1980s, I felt I had found the theory of religious life.

This was my conceptual foundation of why I am a nun. I had a language to know it myself and to teach others. By this time I had been in the monastery twenty-five years without these teachings. I was thrilled!

The Rule of St. Benedict (RB), written one hundred years after the time of the desert fathers and mothers, was an extension of that same spirit. Benedict, in his short rule, refers 146 times to the *Institutes (Inst.)* and *Conferences (Conf.)*. Benedict's dominant motif was the same then as it is today. Like Cassian, he invites his monks and nuns to make the three renunciations, to leave all and follow Christ, not by going to the desert as the fathers and mothers did, but by dwelling in a monastery. We say today that lay practitioners can also enter into the same transformative experience by being faithful to inner work. It is up to each person to decide what it takes to let go of a former way of life: to remain outwardly in the same environment or to change his or her location or lifestyle. A change of exterior life for the sake of the interior life often happens at least once for some, many times for others. But no matter which environment is chosen, one must pay serious attention to the second renunciation: to let go of thoughts that are not toward prayer.

I have been prompted to write this book because, though there are many books on prayer, there is not much available for those of us working out this second difficult and important renunciation—where thoughts matter. When I was prioress from 1985 to 1993 I taught the Rule of Benedict to the 103 sisters in my community.

I discovered Benedict's favorite teacher cited in the Rule, John Cassian. In my work with the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Board, I had privileged conversations with Buddhist and Hindu practitioners. In listening to learned and wise Eastern teachers, I understood our attraction to the East. The Christian counterpart to those teachings I found in the writings of the desert tradition of John Cassian. It was comforting to know that all the major religious traditions teach about the mind, that a serious seeker must undergo training to redirect the mind in order to follow a spiritual path.

To renounce one's thoughts may seem out-of-date to a casual observer—harsh, foreboding, even unrelenting. Yet the theory about this, developed over two thousand years ago, is being rediscovered and reappropriated in our time by both mystics and scholars. A mind at peace, stilled, available for conscious thinking at will is of major value for those of us who confront chaos, confusion, noise, and numbness as our pace of life quickens with the ever more of things.

Hopefully this book will help us reclaim the spirituality of the desert for our times so that we can integrate such teachings into our own contemporary lives. More important perhaps, this book will enable other serious seekers to name what they have already experienced.

A caution: The instructions regarding thoughts as presented by John Cassian constitute a system. To understand how thoughts and practices are linked, the reader needs to follow this presentation sequentially, chapter by chapter.

The instructions here require us to enter into the mind-set of wisdom from late antiquity. Renouncing our thoughts may seem very difficult and somewhat strange to minds accustomed to cultivating and expanding thoughts of our logical thinking mind as a positive action. In the text here I have attempted to spell out my understanding of these ancient writings, but for your own *lectio*, you may want to refer to the primary literature listed in the bibliography.

Another caution is that while these teachings are foundational, they are pointed toward God. All the thoughts are in service of our relationship with God, not primarily about the wise use of food, sex, things, etc. The teachings are for using the thoughts as a skillful means on the spiritual journey. These teachings were given to individuals for the training of the person's mind. The starting point to change a group, a system, or an institution is the change of heart of the individual. As we know from our dialogue with other religious practitioners, one person who is awake can transform the whole world community. Through the practices taught from this early monastic tradition, we can learn to root out our afflictions and replace these dissatisfactions of anxiety and dread with our own experiences of peace and equanimity.

Finally, you may resist this middle renunciation as not right for you, not a direction in which you wish to go. Nonetheless, perhaps this little book will lead you to your next step, whatever it may be.

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## Chapter 1

### About Thoughts

If God is our heart's desire, then the heart knows. We feel the magnetism of this journey. We know from the early Desert Christians that this mystical relationship is not delayed until the next life but can be our experience in this earthly one. We need not invent a new way but can learn from those who have gone before us. The door only we can open from the inside is to observe our thoughts. While we are not our thoughts, we can direct our thoughts toward our heart's desire, God. This is called prayer. We find this tradition, of training our thoughts, in the desert fathers and mothers. The lives of the more than two hundred desert fathers and mothers that John Cassian speaks about in his *Institutes* and *Conferences* show clearly that it isn't enough to make a good resolution about one's intentions; deeds must follow.

Nevertheless, it isn't that simple either. Deeds must be accompanied by right intentions. Serious seekers

must train their minds to keep their goal ever before their consciousness. This interior work—this training of the mind—takes practice, a practice tradition calls the “ascetical life.”

I remember when I first discovered that the primary work of the monastery wasn’t apostolic service. It took me a few years after final vows to understand that I wasn’t called to the monastery simply to do ministry of teaching, nursing, or pastoral services. I discovered that the primary purpose of the Benedictine culture was to train one for the inner life. This ascetical life, this life of prayer, would naturally evolve toward hospitality and selfless service.

## **The Work of the Monastery**

The inner life, I would come to know, was my work and the work of the monastery. Only when I sensed the power of my thoughts and was able to renounce them could I hear the ever so small voice of God deep inside. And when I came to know God deep inside, I tasted something far greater than expectations. Is this experience of knowing God universal, everyone’s deepest story? Is this voice of God reserved only for a few or is this the same call to all seekers? No, there is a monk or a nun in every one of us, just as there is a desert hermit in every monastic. The work of every one of us is interior work, the practice of training our thoughts.

The desert tradition of early Christianity provides a common language to express a shared religious

experience, and John Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* provide an extremely clear description of practice in the Christian tradition, perhaps the clearest there is. The golden era lasted only two hundred years, from about 250 to 450 CE, and during this time a spontaneous movement led people to the desert to live out a radical form of the Gospel: "To leave all and follow Christ."

## **The World Comes with You**

Immersed in the stillness of the harsh desert, intending to totally renounce the world by dwelling alone, these hermits first experienced only raw emotions.<sup>1</sup>

In the old, oft-told story of Abba Anthony, we hear him tell about the vicissitudes of renouncing wealth, honor, status, relationships, and comfort, only to find that the thoughts of wealth, honor, status, relationships, and comfort had followed him into his solitude. Rather than moving into a mystical experience with God, his mind kept his previous life before him. Prayer was very difficult because, although he was in the desert, his mind was back home.

He had a second renunciation to undergo. He realized that his thoughts mattered and that they had to be taken seriously, because if he did not take them seriously, he could not pray. He began to train himself to notice his thoughts, laying them out rather than resisting them. This holy father of monasticism then learned to redirect his thoughts, either by rethinking them or by placing a prayer alongside the thought.

#### 4 *Thoughts Matter*

Thinkers many years before Anthony had discovered that there were clusters of themes that recurred over and over in the silence of their hearts: thoughts about food, sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. The wrestling with these thoughts they considered the negative part of the practice of controlling them; the alternate, positive action was to fill their minds with inspired and traditional prayers. Cassian used the term *lectio* and Benedict used both *lectio* and *lectio divina* to recommend the practice of this traditional form of prayer for Christians. This particular method of sacred reading provided a way to listen to the Scriptures with the ear of one's heart.

### **Revelatory Text**

We need to reclaim that tradition that served the desert elders so well. They literally entered into the text that revealed God to them. The wisdom of a later tradition, made popular by St. Hugh, taught that this *lectio divina* has three books: the book of nature, the book of experience, and the book of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

For the first few centuries of the Christian era, Scripture was the prevailing prism for the wisdom of the Christian culture. There was no split of the secular from the sacred as we have today. It is important to understand Scripture because that revelatory text mediates faith handed on from one generation to the next. Early monks memorized the gospels, the psalms, and many other books of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> The training of the mind was

to put on the Scriptures as one's own way of walking with God.

## **Spiritual Direction**

Newcomers or travelers who heard of the desert fathers and mothers went out to the desert and asked how they too could establish a mystical relationship with God. In this, the earliest form of spiritual direction, the *amma* or *abba* had already experienced God and was able to see into the hearts and thoughts of the seeker. She or he would give that seeker a word, a "saying," or a story that would help the hearer move toward his or her own salvation. Such a transmission was based on an honest exchange between an enlightened teacher and a disciple who was ready not only to hear the word but also to do the word. Many of these more than six thousand sayings are about the eight thoughts. Cassian, using many of these sayings, wrote conferences or long discourses for novice monastics. But before we examine those actual teachings, we need to have an understanding of how to talk about the body, mind, and soul and of how thoughts, desires, and passions emerge.

## **Philosophy from Early Christian Times**

In late antiquity Christian thought was influenced by neoplatonic and Stoic thinkers. Christians baptized Plato's philosophy. While Platonic thought seems

## 6 *Thoughts Matter*

otherworldly in its synthesis, ideals, and goals, Greek thinking is actually very down to earth. Experience is considered the basis of self-reflection. Neoplatonists had a sophisticated understanding about the chatter in one's inner life. Today we have moved past Greek thinking and prefer more immediacy toward God without a philosophical system that has a metaphysic, but we can learn much from the best of the Hellenistic tradition that shaped much of our history. Early desert fathers and mothers of the third to fifth centuries noticed that thoughts and an awareness of thoughts was the key to insight into the body, mind, and soul.

The body was considered a vehicle for the soul. The mind enlivens the body and gives it the ability to be reflective about its own being. When the mind leaves the body, the body is dead. The soul enlivens the body and the mind and unites the body-mind into a person that transcends time and space. The soul, which will live beyond the lifespan of the body and the mind, is the ideal state for experiencing happiness. During earthly life, although the body and the mind are afflicted with limitations, the soul is not. The soul can, however, be diminished if the free will of the person makes poor choices.

### **Thoughts Matter**

In making use of this body, mind, and soul paradigm, Christian desert wisdom said that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the soul who enlivens the total human person.

This divinization is total, pervasive, and operative if the obstacles due to sin are removed. The major obstacle is sin, or turning away from our Creator who made us to be in the likeness of God. Sin is the end stage of wrong thoughts, desires, and passions. Sin promotes a vicious life of evil. We can reverse this tendency by using our thoughts, desires, and passions for good. This is a virtuous life of grace.

Today we resist dualist models that make simplistic assumptions by contrasting opposites. We consider it dangerous to judge some things good and some things bad when most reality is a mixture of good and bad and it is not certain that the bad isn't really a benefit and the good an illusion. Most postmodern believers embrace a spirituality that is charged with the cosmic divinization that was made so attractive by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Many of us can no longer see salvation as a private affair between the soul and God. We are social beings striving for a universal and cosmic consciousness that espouses the all of us in each one of us. We cannot get to that sacred dimension, however, without training of the mind. The desert wisdom had a sense of the unity of all persons and the impact of each of our thoughts on that unity. Furthermore, the desert elders give us practical insights and simple teachings about how thoughts function.

## **Sequence and Content of Thoughts**

Thoughts, these teachers said, rise in the mind. They come in a sequence, a train of thoughts. We are not our

thoughts. Thoughts come and thoughts go. Unaccompanied thoughts pass quickly.

Thoughts that are thought about become desires. Desires that are thought about become passions. Good thoughts become virtues. Bad thoughts become bad desires; bad passions or habits of action become sins. The passions are acted upon us when we consent; then the passions move from passive to active engagement.

We can redirect our thoughts. We do this by noticing our thoughts rather than thinking our thoughts. When thinking pauses we are at peace.

First thoughts beget second thoughts, which become intentions. Intentions constitute motivations and indicate where the heart resides. Motivation moves us to decide and act on the thought. Decisions give voice to the choices we intend to act upon.

Attention to our thoughts reveals our intentions. Right deeds must be accompanied by the right reason, or the deed becomes wrong for us in that particular situation. Discernment is our ability to do the right deed with the right intention or motivation.

The thoughts that we find in our interior chatter cluster into eight themes that recur constantly. These eight thoughts are manifested to the self in solitude because our exterior life follows us into the private chambers of our heart. These thoughts are classic since they recur in every person of every era and cycle continuously.

## Training in Thoughts

In the desert literature the training of a novice first focuses on external concerns such as what to eat, what to wear, what to do all day long, and how to live in the desert environment. The second set of instructions is about how to deal with the eight thoughts: about food, about sex, about things, about anger, about dejection, about *acedia*, about vainglory, and about pride. The sequential order of these thoughts makes a difference, because they move in a pattern from simple to complex. These teachings reveal that while our life choices govern what we eat, wear, and do with our time all day, all persons, no matter what their way of life, are subject to the eight thoughts. We make choices about our food and drink, about how we express ourselves sexually, and about how to get things that we need. None of us has had a week without angry feelings and thoughts of dejection and elation. We become weary and tired of the spiritual struggle some days, perhaps, even for years. And finally, who of us has not felt the surge of pride that is pervasively behind every one of our accomplishments and underneath our every failure?

When we think of the eight thoughts, we are immediately reminded of the seven capital sins. Gregory the Great (d. 604) was known to have reduced the list from “eight thoughts” to “seven capital sins.” (Vainglory was usually deleted and, if treated at all, it was under the label of pride.) Though this terminology of capital sins found its way into every catechism, the impact of the thinking,

which generates our acting, was often ignored. The emphasis on sin, which this change in terminology both affected and effected, tended to distort the earlier emphasis on training the thoughts for the benefit of the interior life of a serious seeker who, by striving toward purity of heart, longs intensely for a significant relationship with God.

## **Renunciation**

This relationship requires renunciation: First, we must renounce our former way of life. We follow our calling or accept our chosen “vocation.” Notice the language: we accept our given vocation. The vocation is a calling from God. The choice is not to select from a menu but to accept the invitation calling us to this awesome way of life. We didn’t create it for ourselves. We are responding to a longing embedded deep in our hearts.

In the early desert tradition this renunciation was of family, profession, wealth, status, and children. The seeker went to the desert to pray, creating the earliest form of what we now call “religious life.” Today, seekers renounce their former way of life through many choices. Some choose to join a religious community or go to a seminary. Some renounce their former way of life of being single, of owning property, of following a particular profession, or of being socially prominent.

I’ve seen both nuns and lay seekers become serious enough about their interior practice to rearrange their schedule or make a special space for prayer in their

bedrooms, houses, or apartments. I've seen them begin to stop at a sacred shrine or chapel on a daily basis, change previous interests, relationships, hobbies, and patterns in order to take up a serious meditation practice that requires time, silence, and solitude. It seems that the first step to an ongoing practice is this first renunciation, the renunciation of our former way of life. Even though the work is interior, we mortals require formal space and time to attend to the heart and training of the mind. We are always beginners, novices, and students.

Many people try to avoid this renunciation of their former way of life by trying to live two or three parallel lives. A nun in a convent, for instance, may try to keep up all of her former relationships, especially family obligations, or a lay seeker may keep up a life of business travel that precludes any spiritual practices. The serious seeker, on the other hand, gives up her former way of life because she realizes that the single-minded pursuit of the spiritual life takes total energy. One forsakes earlier patterns. One exercises control to keep one's eyes on the new goals. One seems to have a natural inclination and eagerness for the new way of life. One is like a person in love. It isn't as hard to leave home when another passion draws you to your beloved, whose voice is persistent and utterly alluring. It whispers softly, inviting to intimate conversation, friendship, reading, art, music. God the lover is real and forgetfulness is not an option.

This renunciation may be described in many ways: flight from the world, conversion of lifestyle, change

of heart, repentance, *xeniteia* (flight from humankind, which in desert times resulted in entering the monastery or becoming a hermit). This flight, rather than an attempt to escape from someone or something, is for the sake of knowing oneself by knowing one's thoughts. To know our thoughts is an essential step in redirecting our heart to God in prayer. And whether flight is to monastery or desert cave, the key practice leading us to know our thoughts, and to renounce our thoughts, is silence. Wisdom tells us that silence will teach us everything.

A certain brother went to Abbot Moses in Scete and asked him for a good word. And the elder said to him, "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." The Evangelist says that the kingdom of God comes not with observation, nor here and there, but from within. But nothing else can be within you (*Conf.* 1.13).

To get to the place of silence, the serious seeker must make that renunciation: her former way of living, her exterior life. Our exterior life must be ordered for the work of the soul. At the most elementary level, silence allows us to know ourselves, because we move against the automatic chatter of unconscious living.

Then a second renunciation requires us not only to renounce our thoughts but also to renounce our attachment to our thoughts. If I take up a new exterior environment and still retain all the thoughts of my former way of life, then I, as a seeker, am not present to my vocation. I miss the benefits of the commitment to religious life or to a marriage. In the cell I must learn the silence that

becomes calm stillness, which allows me to renounce the tyranny of thoughts.

As I said earlier, the theory about thoughts postulates that there is a systematic order to our thoughts, from food through sex, things, anger, dejection, *acedia*, vain-glory, and pride. But psychologically, in practice, each of us must keep in mind Abbot Serapion's teaching (*Conf.* 5.13) that we must know that our battles are not all fought in the same order, because the attacks are not always made on us in the same way. Each one of us ought to battle against the thought that vexes us, whether it's first or third or eighth on the list. We must see what's in our eyes, as in a mirror, and start there.

## Silence and Prayer

Did the early monks rise above their passions? According to Thomas Merton, it seems that the praise of monks as "beyond all passion" came from tourists who passed briefly through the deserts and went home to write books about what they had seen, rather than from those who had spent their whole lives in the wilderness. These monks tell of themselves that they used this very struggle as the path. It does seem, however, that a state of quiet did emerge for many of them. The goal was prayer, not freedom from the work it takes to pray.<sup>4</sup>

There is a further renunciation—after renouncing one's former way of life and then renouncing one's thoughts—that is more difficult than either of the previous ones. It

is to renounce our very idea of God. Since God is beyond all images, thoughts, and concepts, we must renounce our cherished beliefs for the sake of loving and knowing God as God. This renunciation is a natural fruit of years and years of prayer and meditation and/or is God's gift. If we persist in the spiritual life, we experience dark times of doubt and nothingness as we are weaned from an immature self-made piety. Through *lectio divina* we move naturally from image to image and finally become "at home" in imageless prayer, pure prayer.<sup>5</sup> St. Anthony said that the prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer realizes that he is praying (*Conf.* 9.31).

This deepest form of prayer, contemplation, is described as a fire that burns without consuming, drawing the soul into total absorption into God, hence the burning bush icon on the cover of this book. This deepest experience of prayer is celebrated and described in the rich literature of the desert tradition, of which John Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* form only a portion. His catechesis on prayer is so outstanding that his sections on the thoughts are overshadowed. Perhaps that is another reason why little attention has been paid to the renunciation of thoughts.

Pure prayer is beyond thoughts. All thoughts are renounced. Peace prevails, *apatheia* (passionlessness) floods the soul, and the mind is profoundly stilled. Mystery!

As we become detached from the ego, we shed the biases of our culture and we move toward pure prayer. Ego is the pseudo voice of the self. The I-thought in free-fall

tends to serve the ego. We cannot proceed from step one, leaving our former way of life, and jump into pure prayer without this middle asceticism (practice) of relinquishing thoughts. We must seek God and not our own thoughts. If we have not renounced our thoughts, it is easy to think that our thoughts are God. God is both beyond our grasping—not our next thought after this one—and also not a thought at all! It is very difficult to undergo the first two renunciations, to let go of our former way of life, and also to let go of our interior thoughts, but these are only steps, and necessary ones, for the deepest conversion toward God as God and the experience of pure prayer (contemplation).

## **Instruction**

In this book we will take each of the eight classic thoughts and study the teachings for this early Christian tradition. Thoughts, John Cassian says, matter. There are three thoughts that afflict the body: food, sex, and things. There are two thoughts that afflict the mind: anger and dejection. Finally, there are three thoughts that afflict the soul: *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. The first thought that matters most for beginners is the one “about food.” Why shouldn’t that universal experience of food be the mother of all teachings in the spiritual life?