

PART ONE

PURIFICATION

A. The Passions

7. The Essence of the Passions

The passions represent the lowest level to which human nature can fall. Both their Greek name, *pathi*, as well as the Latin, *passiones*, show that man is brought by them to a state of passivity, of slavery. In fact, they overcome the will, so that the man of the passions is no longer a man of will; we say that he is a man ruled, enslaved, carried along by the passions.

Another characteristic of the passions is that in them an unquenchable thirst is manifested, which seeks to be quenched and can't be. Blondel says that they represent man's thirst for the infinite, turned in a direction in which they can't find their satisfaction.¹ Dostoevsky has a similar idea.²

Neilos the Ascetic writes that the stomach, by gluttony, becomes a sea impossible to fill—a good description of any passion.³ This always unsatisfied infinity is due both to the passion in itself, as well as to the object with which it seeks satisfaction. The objects which the passions look for can't satisfy them because objects are finite and as such don't

¹ "Hence human needs and appetites, as analogous as they are to those of the brute, differ from them profoundly. The animal has no passion; what is animal in man, on the contrary, lays claim to all that reason and will require, an infinite satisfaction. Human sensuality is insatiable and unreasonable only because it is shot through with a force alien to and higher than the senses; and this reason immanent to passion itself acquires such ascendancy that it can take the place of reasonable reason (*la raison raisonable*), that it confiscates its infinite aspirations and that it usurps the inexhaustible resources of thought." Maurice Blondel, *Action* (1893), Notre Dame, IN, 1984, p. 297.

² "All evil," says Simon Frank, "which in Dostoevsky always has a spiritual origin: arrogance, vainglory, vindictiveness, cruelty, hatred, pleasure itself, for him comes from the aspiration of the soul to fight against suffocated and humbled holiness, or of imposing and of affirming its rights, even in an insane and perverse way." *The Crisis of Humanism, A Contemplation According to the View of Dostoevsky* [in German], 28th year, 10, p. 295; cited by L. Binswanger, *Basic forms and Knowledge of Human Existence* [in German], Zurich, 1942, p. 580, note 12. In the same place Binswanger also gives the following quotation from Simon Frank: "Faith persists in the fallen, degenerated, perverted person, too, yes, even in his fallen condition one can still see the features of his likeness with God; see the unique and nevertheless corresponding trait of the nature of Christianity, of Dostoevsky's conception of man."

³ The nature which has become the slave of passion "...sends to the stomach through the deep canal dug by gluttony food prepared for it, as into a sea which can't be filled." Neilos applies the words of Solomon to the stomach: "Into the sea all the rivers go, and yet the sea is never filled" (Ecclesiastes 1.7), "for the stomach and the sea are alike: They absorb the rivers that pour into them without being filled; the one consumes by digestion, the other by saltiness, the things that empty into them; they are never full and never shut their mouths." *Peristeria* 4, PG 79.821.

correspond to the unlimited thirst of the passions. Or as St. Maximus puts it, the passionate person finds himself in a continuous preoccupation with nothing; he tries to appease his infinite thirst with the nothingness of his passions, and the objects which he is gobbling up become nothing, by their very nature. In fact, a passion by its very nature searches for objects, and it seeks them only because they can be completely under the control of the ego, and at its mercy. But objects by nature are finite, both as sources of satisfaction and in regard to duration; they pass easily into nonexistence, by consumption. Even when the passion also needs the human person in order to be satisfied, it likewise reduces him or her to an object, or sees and uses only the objective side; the unfathomable depths hidden in the subjective side escape him.

Now the infinite thirst of the passions in themselves is explained in this way: The human being has a spiritual basis and therefore a tendency toward the infinite which also is manifested in the passions; but in these passions the tendency is turned from the authentic infinite which is of a spiritual order, toward the world, which only gives an illusion of the infinite.⁴ Man, without being himself infinite, not only is fit, but is also thirsty for the infinite and precisely for this reason is also capable of, and longs for, God, the true and only infinite (*homo capax divini*—man capable of the divine). He has a capacity and is thirsty for the infinite not in the sense that he is in a state to win it, to absorb it in his nature—because then human nature itself would become infinite—but in the sense that he can and must be nourished spiritually from the infinite, and infinitely. He seeks and is able to live in a continual communication with it, in a sharing with it. But man didn't want to be satisfied with this sharing in the infinite; he wanted to become himself the center of the infinite, or he believed that he is such a center; he let himself be tricked by his nature's thirst for the infinite.

The human being then, didn't understand that the infinite thirst of his nature isn't an indication of the infinity of that nature, because the true infinite can't be thirst. It's only a sign of its capacity to communicate with the infinite, which isn't a property of his nature. So the human being, instead of being satisfied to remain in communication with the true infinite, and to progress in it, wanted to become himself the infinite. He tried to absorb in himself or to subordinate to himself

⁴ Evil is the irrational movement of the spiritual faculties toward something else than toward their final goal, because of a mistaken judgment. Now the final goal I call the Cause of things, toward which all things move in a natural way; even if evil, covering its envy under the image of goodness, by cunning persuades man to turn his longing toward something else than the Cause of all things, creating in him the ignorance of the Cause." St. Maximus, *Questions to Thalassios*, The Introduction, PG 90, 253.

everything that lent itself to this relation of subordination: dead objects, finite things. Instead of quenching his thirst for the infinite, he sought to gather everything around himself, as around a center. But because man isn't a true center in himself, this nature of his took revenge; it made him in reality run after things, even enslaving him to them. So passion, as a tireless chase after the world, instead of being an expression of the central sovereignty of our nature, is rather a force which carries us along against our will; it's a sign of the fall of our nature into an accentuated state of passivity. Our nature, whether it wants to or not, still has to express its tendency for a center outside of itself. By the passions, this center was moved from God to the world. Thus the passions are the product of a tortuous impulse of our nature, or of a nature which has lost its simplicity and tendency to move straight ahead. In it two tendencies meet; or there is a tendency which can't fulfill its purpose, but is turned against nature. Passion is a knot of contradictions. It's the expression of an egotism which wants to make all things gravitate around it; it's the transformation of the world exclusively into a center of preoccupation as well. Passion is a product of the will of egocentric sovereignty; it's also a force which pushes man down to the state of an object carried here and there against his will. Sometimes it seeks the infinite; other times it chooses nothingness.⁵

The spirit [of man] has no exact limits and is capable of being filled with the infinite and thirsts to receive it; yet instead of looking for the relationship with the infinite Spirit, it seeks to fill itself with finite and passing objects. So it is left with nothing and its thirst is never quenched.

Passion is something irrational. Everything in the world is rational according to St. Maximus the Confessor, with its basis in divine logoi; only passion is irrational. Note its supreme irrationality: The passionate man realizes more and more that finite things can't satisfy his aspiration for the infinite, and this bores and discourages him. Even so the next moment he let's himself be carried away by his egocentric passion, as if by it he is going to absorb the infinite. He doesn't realize that the true infinite is a free Spirit which can't be absorbed without His will, because He is a subject which one must freely enter into communion with. For example, the glutton knows that no kind of food is ever going to satisfy his gluttony. Likewise he who hates his neighbor, feels that this animosity can't put out the fire of hatred even if the neighbor is totally consumed by it. The logic should be that neither the glutton nor the

⁵ "That which is sensible and affective in us, isn't, as in animals, good because of the instinct for the satisfaction of finite and passing necessities. Our spontaneous energies are themselves effected by the desire for infinitude; from it can come the paradoxical risk of the insatiable passions and of the irrational reason of infinitely wanting the finite." Blondel, *L'Action* 2.192.

hater should let himself be tortured by these passions. But neither one does anything about it, and continues with his irrational tortures.⁶

By their irrationality, by their deceptive character, by turning man away from his true goal, the passions keep man in the darkness of ignorance. By the struggle against the passions the human being escapes ignorance; he returns to the true infinity of God, as a goal of his life and as a liberation of his spirit from the slavery of the world and from the tyranny which the passions represent. This is the meaning of dispassion.

In early Christian spiritual literature, the passions are considered to be eight in number; when vainglory is joined with pride, seven. They are gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, self-esteem and pride.⁷ Basically, they coincide with the seven capital sins: gluttony, debauchery, avarice, anger, envy, sloth, and pride, if we identify envy and listlessness.

Some of the passions are of the soul, others of the spirit. But the close unity of the body and soul cause the bodily passions to be interwoven with those of the soul, or to have an inter-influence. The ascetical writers tell us that among the young, gluttony produces all the others, because it leads to unchastity—both of them need money to satisfy them, while he who finds himself lacking objects to satisfy these three passions, that is gluttony, unchastity and avarice, becomes dejected; and if someone wants to take things away from him or put their hand on them before he does, he becomes angry.⁸ For older people, however, the main passion is pride. So vainglory and pride could also be an effect of gluttony and of accumulated wealth. But just the opposite could happen too: By love of glory and by pride man could seek wealth to live in luxury, which would bring him the praise of men

⁶ Blondel presents the contradiction of passions in this way: “On the contrary he who falls under the influence of egotism and the vainglory of rebellion doesn’t in this way suppress the power of the infinite and of eternity, which constitutes his spiritual nature. If his desire to be everything and have everything for himself fails, this isn’t and can’t be the total loss which is talked about all the time; he’s got what he wanted; and in realizing against himself this joy of self and of passing things, he didn’t do anything but consecrate his isolation.” *L’Action* 1.245. In the same place he also writes: “In opposition to this, the ascetic puts much more energy into his action: A truly personal act of meritorious energy is necessary then to prefer the invisible reality of the eternal good to the attraction of the curiosities of immediate desire, of ambition, of independence. In this asceticism an action is used, which, negative in appearance, has within itself the maximum of power and of faith, because this confidence in that which has no perceptible charm at all, and as the psychologists would say, no dynamogeny [no production of increased nervous activity], means a victory over the whole universe and over all the concupiscence of nature.”

⁷ John Cassian, *On the Eight Vices*, *Phil* 1, pp. 73-93.

⁸ Evagrius, *Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts* 1: “Because it’s impossible for someone to fall into the hands of the spirit of unchastity, if he hasn’t been first brought down by the stomach’s gluttony, just as anger can’t trouble the one who isn’t fighting for food, possessions or glory. And it’s impossible for a person to escape the spirit of dejection if he hasn’t given all these things up.” *GrPh* 1.44; *of Phil* 1.38.

and cause him to look down on others; or he would be dejected or angry when he isn't honored enough.

Precisely this interaction of the bodily passions, prompted by the gluttony of the stomach, and those of the soul, instigated by pride, make these same spiritual writers declare gluttony as the first passion and then later "pride as the first chick of the devil."⁹

Someone can be proud without being stuffed with food, just as there are plenty of ascetics who are proud of their asceticism. It could be said then that there is a double circuit which leads from gluttony to all the passions—including those of the soul—and again from pride, to almost all of the passions, including some of the bodily ones. Gluttony and pride represent one and the same egocentric thirst of man, under the double aspect of his psycho-physical nature. There is a close interconnection between the biological and the spiritual; one realm influences the other both in the decline and in the restoration of man. Here a vast field of research is possible on the details of the interdependence between the biological and the spiritual.

Both gluttony and pride have their root in *philautia*, egotistic love of self as an autonomous and independent absolute. "It's clear" says Maximus the Confessor, "that he who is egotistic has all the passions."¹⁰ But egotism represents a rupture with God, as a center distinct from me, from my existence; and since man can't exist by himself, no matter how much he tries to create that illusion, egotism represents a gravitation toward the world.

Thus, since the forgetting of God is the ultimate cause of the passions, their healing must begin with faith: by a return to the most frequent remembrance of Him possible. By it, the first brake will be put on egotism. The former will be manifested in a practical way by restraint in a general way: the restraint of fleshly appetites and the restraint of pride, by humility.

The passions subordinate our spirit to the baser tendencies, but don't succeed in completely quieting it; they produce a tearing and a disorder in it and consequently, its weakening. But they don't have this effect only on their subject, on one person. They also create disorder in the relations of that person with his neighbor. Many times passion extends from one individual to the life of another. One person's greed provokes that of another, as a defense mechanism. Almost any passion tries to reduce the people around it to the inferior level of objects. They try to defend themselves, and this gives birth to a struggle, which many times doesn't stop at a simple defense but goes so far as to treat the first

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Chapters on Love* 3.8. *GrPh* 2.29; cf *Phil* 2.84.

subject of the passions as an object. The egotism and narrowness of the subject of the passions awakens, in defense and revolt, the egotism, narrowness and poverty of others. The passionate person doesn't only hurt himself, but others too. The passions have as victims their own subjects, and their neighbors as well.

Passion doesn't show its effect of weakening, of destroying and of havoc only in the passionate, but in others too. It hits them and most of the time they react in the same way. The dissolute uses other persons as objects for his pleasure; but in so doing he makes them dissolute too and they in turn try to use other persons as objects.

The proud person awakens, by imitation or by reaction, pride in others; and the relations of pride which are thus created between people are contrary to normal harmonious ones; the human community is fragmented. It's members devour each other as reptiles, as St. Maximus puts it.¹¹ All the passions are opposed to true love, which alone can reestablish normal harmony between men.

Thus the passions produce and maintain chaos between people. So Christ, founding the Church, seeks by it the reestablishment of human unity and conciliarity. But this isn't possible without the weakening of the passions.

One method for cleansing the passions is twofold: First, the one who is habitually their prime subject in relation to others, bridles them; secondly the latter restrain themselves from responding through their passions. They put up with and persist in loving him who is acting in a passionate way. This protects them not only from being infected by the passions, but also has a healing effect on him who wants to make them the victims of their passions. It also stops a more accentuated deterioration of the relations between the members of the human community. This is why Jesus told us not to answer evil with evil, but to love our enemies too. St. Isaac the Syrian says:

Don't distinguish the worthy from the unworthy, but let all be equally good for you, for in this way you can also attract the unworthy to the good.¹² [Or:] Force yourself, when you meet your neighbor, to honor him more than he deserves. Kiss his hands and feet and put his hands over your eyes, and praise him too for the things he doesn't have....Love sinners and don't despise them for their sins....By this and similar things you will bring them to the good.¹³

¹¹ *Second Letter to John the Valet*, PG 91.396.

¹² *Ascetical Homilies* 23, [in Greek], Athens, 1961, pp. 86-7.

¹³ *Homily* 6. This reference wasn't found in the place cited. *trs*

Just as love binds people together, so the passions destroy the ties between them. They are the fermentation of inner and interpersonal disorder. They are the thick wall put between us and God, the fog covering our nature made transparent for God.

