

ON THE EIGHT DEADLY SINS,

From St. John Cassian, "The Conferences," (New York: Newman Press, 1997), pp. 183-196

Our venerable and God-bearing Father John Cassian was a 4th/5th century monastic saint known for his writings on the monastic life and for his correctives of the anti-Pelagian writings of St. Augustine of Hippo. His feast day in the Orthodox Church is February 29th (celebrated on February 28th in non leap years), and it is also kept locally in Marseilles, France, on July 23rd.

St. John was born in the Danube Delta in what is now Dobrogea, Romania, in about 360. In 382 he entered a monastery in Bethlehem and after several years there was granted permission, along with his friend St. Germanus of Dobrogea, to visit the Desert Fathers in Egypt. They remained in Egypt until 399 except for a brief period when they returned to Bethlehem and were released from the monastery there. Upon leaving Egypt they went to Constantinople where they met St. John Chrysostom, who ordained St. John Cassian as a deacon. He had to leave Constantinople in 403 when St. Chrysostom was exiled, and eventually settled close to Marseilles where he was ordained priest and founded two monasteries, one for women and one for men.

*St. John's most famous works are the *Imtitutes*, which detail how to live the monastic life, and the *Conferences*, which provide details of conversation between St. John and St. Germanus and the Desert Fathers. He also warned against some of the excesses in St. Augustine of Hippo's theology whilst refraining from criticizing him by name. For this reason he has sometimes been accused of Semi-Pelagianism by the Latin and some Protestant commentators. St. John died peacefully in 435.*

In a community of very old men there was a man by the name of Serapion who was particularly adorned with the grace of discretion and whose conference I think is worth the effort to put down in writing. When we had begged him to say something about the assault of the vices that would cast light on their origins and causes, he began in this way:

There are eight principal vices that attack humankind. The first is gluttony, which means the voraciousness of the belly; the second is fornication; the third is filargyria, which is avarice or love of money; the fourth is anger; the fifth is sadness; the sixth acedia, which is anxiety or weariness of heart; the seventh is cenodoxia, which is boastfulness or vainglory; and the eighth is pride.

Of these vices there are two kinds. They are either natural like gluttony or unnatural like avarice. But they have four kinds of operation. Certain ones cannot be consummated without bodily action, such as gluttony and fornication. Certain others, however, can be completed without any bodily action whatsoever, such as pride and vainglory. Some take their motivating causes from without, such as avarice and anger. Others, however, are aroused from within, such as acedia and sorrow.

Let us make this still clearer not only by a short discussion as well as we are able, but also by scriptural texts.

Gluttony and fornication, although they are in us naturally (for sometimes they

also arise without any provocation from the mind but solely due to the instigation and itching of the flesh), nonetheless require external matter in order to be consummated, and thus they operate through bodily action. For everyone is tempted by his own lust. When lust has been conceived it gives birth to sin, but when sin has been consummated it brings forth death - "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." (James 1:14-15)

The first Adam would not have been able to be deceived by gluttony had he not had something to eat and immediately and lawlessly misused it, nor was the second tempted without the enticement of some substance, when it was said to him: "And when the tempter came to him, he said, if thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." (Matthew 4:3). It is clear to everyone that fornication also is not committed except by means of the body, as God says to the blessed Job with reference to this spirit : "Lo now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly." (Job 40:16).

Therefore these two in particular, which are exercised by means of the flesh, more especially require not only the spiritual concern of the soul but also bodily abstinence, since the mind's attentiveness is not enough of itself to check their urgings (as it sometimes does in the case of anger or sadness and other passions, which it can expel by mental effort alone and without chastising the flesh). Bodily discipline must come to its assistance, and this is accomplished by fasting, vigils, and works of penance, and to these is added living in a remote place, because just as they are generated through the fault of both soul and body, so they cannot be overcome except by the toil of both.

Although the blessed Apostle has declared that all the vices in general are carnal, since he has numbered enmity (hostility) and anger and heresies among the other works of the flesh (Galatians p8-21 - "But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."), nonetheless we make a distinction based on a twofold division for the sake of a more refined understanding of their remedies and their natures. For we say that some of them are carnal, while some others are spiritual.

The carnal ones pertain especially to the enjoyment and feelings of the flesh; by them it is so delighted and gratified that it sometimes even arouses peaceful minds and drags them reluctantly to acquiesce in its will. About these the Apostle says: "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." (Ephesians 2:3).

But we call spiritual those that, having arisen at the prompting of the soul alone, not only give no pleasure to the flesh but even inflict it with serious sufferings and merely provide the sick soul with the food of a miserable enjoyment. Therefore these have need of the medicine of a simple heart, whereas those that are carnal are only remedied by a twofold cure, as we have said. Hence it is important to those who strive for

purity first of all to remove from themselves the very stuff of these carnal passions, by which either an occasion for or the memory of those same passions can be aroused in the soul that is still sick.

For a twofold sickness necessarily requires a twofold cure. Seductive images and matter need to be removed from the body, lest lust attempt to break out into deeds, and by the same token a more careful medication on Scripture, constant

watchfulness, and solitude must be applied to the soul, lest it so much as conceive this In thought. In the case of the other vices, however, human companionship is of no harm, and indeed it is even of great help to those who really want to be rid of them, since they are frequently rebuked by the presence of other people, and although aggravations more readily appear, they are quickly remedied.

Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ, although he was declared by the Apostle to have been tempted in every respect as we are, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."(Hebrews 4:15). That is, he was without the contagion of this passion, having had no experience whatsoever of the pricks of fleshly lust by which we are inevitably stung, even unwittingly and unwillingly, for in his regard there was nothing like our own insemination and conception, as the Archangel said in announcing how his conception would take place: "And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Although these eight vices, then, have different origins and varying operations, yet the first six -- namely, gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, and acedia (anxiety, or weariness of the heart) -- are connected among themselves by a certain affinity and, so to speak, interlinking, such that the overflow of the previous one serves as the start of the next one. For from an excess of gluttony there inevitably springs fornication; from fornication, avarice; from avarice, anger; from anger, sadness; and from sadness, acedia. Therefore these must be fought against in a similar way and by the same method, and we must always attack the ones that follow by beginning with those that come before. For a tree whose width and height are harmful will more easily wither up if the roots which support it are exposed and cut beforehand, and pestilential waters will dry up when their rising source and rushing streams have been stopped up with skillful labor.

In order to conquer acedia, sadness must first be overcome; in order to drive out sadness, anger must be cast out beforehand; in order to extinguish anger, avarice must be trampled on; in order to eradicate avarice, fornication must be repressed; in order to overthrow fornication, the vice of gluttony must be disciplined.

But the two remaining ones, vainglory and pride, are linked in similar fashion, like the vices that we have spoken of, such that growth in the first becomes the start of the second, for an overflow of vainglory begets the beginnings of pride. But these differ wholly from those first six vices and are not leagued with them since they are not only not generated by them but even arise in a contrary manner and order. For when the former have been rooted out these sprout forth all the more, and at the death of the former these spring up and grow more vigorously.

Hence we are also attacked by these two vices in a different way. We fall into one of those six vices when we have been seduced by the one that comes before it, but we are in danger of falling into these two when we are victorious and, indeed, particularly after triumphs. Each vice, then, since it is begotten by an increase in the one that comes before it, is purged away when the one before it is diminished. Therefore vainglory must be suffocated in order for pride to be driven out. Thus, whenever the preceding ones have been overcome, those that follow fall idle, and, with the extinction of the ones that go before, the remaining passions wither away without any effort.

And although the eight vices that we have spoken about are connected and joined among themselves according to the scheme that we have mentioned, yet they are divided more particularly into four couplets. Fornication is allied by a special relationship to gluttony, anger is closely yoked to avarice, acedia to sadness, and pride to vainglory.

The First Evil Pair: Gluttony and Fornication.

Now let us discuss individually the different kinds of each vice. There are three kinds of gluttony. The first impels a person to hasten to eat before the fixed and lawful hour. The second is pleased with a full stomach and with devouring any edibles whatsoever. And the third desires more refined and delicate foods. These three entail no small loss for a person unless he struggles to extricate himself from all of them with equal diligence and care. For just as breaking the fast before the canonical hour is never to be dared, so likewise filling one's stomach and the preparation of costly and choice dishes must be avoided. From these three causes different and very bad states of health of the soul are produced.

We notice that the traces of this passion are in us when perchance, having been invited to eat by one of the brothers, we are not content to eat the food with the condiment with which it was seasoned by our host but demand with importunate and unbridled boldness that something be poured on it or added to it.

There are three reasons why this must never happen. In the first place, because the mind of the person must be practiced in the discipline of endurance and moderation and must, according to the Apostle, learn what a sufficiency consists in. For whoever takes offense at a slightly unpleasant taste and is unable to restrain the pleasure of the palate even for a moment will be completely incapable of controlling the hidden and greater desires of the body. Secondly, because it sometimes happens that the particular thing that we are asking for at a given moment is lacking and we would shame our host in his need and frugality by making known this poverty, which he would prefer to be known to God alone. Thirdly, because occasionally the condiment that we ask to have added is unpleasant to others, and we discover that we are annoying many people in trying to cater to our own gormandizing and desire. Therefore this boldness in us is to be disciplined in every respect.

There are three kinds of fornication. The first takes place in the union of the sexes. The second occurs without touching a woman, and for it we read that Onan, the son of the patriarch Judah, was struck down by the Lord (Genesis 38:9-10). This is called impurity in Holy Scripture. About this the Apostle says: "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." (I Corinthians 7:8-9). The third is that which is conceived in the soul and in the mind, and about which the Lord says in the Gospel: "But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matthew 5=28).

"The blessed Apostle declares that these three kinds must all be extinguished in the same way when he says: "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (Colossians 3:5). And again he speaks of two of these to the Ephesians: 'Fornication and impurity should not be mentioned among you' (Ephesians 5:3). And again: "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." (Ephesians 5:5). Just as we should guard against these three with equal care, so one is enough to keep us out of the kingdom of Christ.

The Remaining Vices: Avarice, Anger, Sadness, Acedia, Vainglory and Pride

There are three kinds of avarice. The first does not permit renunciants to be deprived of their wealth and property. The second persuades us by a still greater covetousness to take back what we have dispersed and distributed to the poor. The third demands that we long for and acquire what in fact we did not possess before.

There are three kinds of anger. One blazes up interiorly. . . Another breaks out in word and deed and effect... About these the Apostle says: "But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth." (Colossians 3:8). The third, unlike that which flares up, is not finished in a short space of time but is held over for days and seasons... All of these must be condemned by us with an equal horror.

There are two kinds of sadness. The first is begotten once anger has ceased, or from some hurt that has been suffered or from a desire that has been thwarted and brought to naught. The other comes from unreasonable mental anguish or horn despair. There are two kinds of acedia (anxiety or weariness of heart). One makes those who are seething with emotion fall asleep. The other encourages a person to abandon his home and to flee.

Although vainglory is multiform and multifarious and exists in many subdivisions, nonetheless it is of two kinds. The first is that by which we are uplifted because of carnal and external things. The second is that by which we are inflamed with the desire for empty praise because of spiritual and hidden things.

Yet in one way vainglory is beneficial for beginners, for those who are still stirred up by carnal vices. If, thanks to a word spoken at the time when they happen to be harassed by the spirit of fornication, they should think of the dignity of the priestly office or of the opinion of people who might believe that they are holy and blameless, and if only because of this consideration they should reject the impure urges of desire, judging them as base and unworthy either of their own good name or of that rank, they are restraining the greater evil with a lesser one. For it is better for a person to be troubled by the vice of vainglory than for him to fall into the fire of fornication, from which he could not or could barely be saved once he had been ruined.

One of the prophets expresses this sense very well when he speaks in the person of God: "For my name's sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off" (Isaiah 48:9). That is to say: As long as you are shackled by the praises of vainglory, you will never rush into the depths of hell and sink irretrievably by the commission of deadly sins.

It is not surprising that this passion is so strong that it can hold back someone who is hastening to the destruction of fornication, since the frequent experience of many people shows that once someone has been poisoned by this disease he becomes so tireless that he does not even feel fasts of two or three days.

Even in this desert we have often seen some people admit that when they were living in the cenobia of Syria they were easily able to go without eating for five days, whereas now they are so hungry at the third that they can hardly keep the daily fast until the ninth hour. When someone asked why, after having lived in a cenobium where he felt no hunger and often disdained to eat for whole weeks, he should now be hungry at the third hour. Macarius replied pointedly: "Because here there is no one to see you fasting and to support and sustain you with his praises. But there the attention of others and the food of vainglory filled you to repletion."

The Eight Principal Vices: How to Fight Them

Although these eight vices, then, disturb the whole human race, nonetheless they do not assail everyone in the same way. In one person the spirit of fornication is dominant, in another wrath rides roughshod, in a third vainglory tyrannizes, and in still another pride holds sway. And although it is evident that we are all attacked by all of these, yet we each suffer in different ways and manners.

Therefore we must so join battle against them that everyone spies out the vice by which he is particularly besieged and struggles chiefly against it, fixing all the care and attention of his mind on fighting it and keeping watch on it, brandishing the sighs of his heart and the many darts of his groans against it at every moment, employing the effort of his vigils and the meditations of his heart against it, pouring out the unceasing tears of his prayers to God, and insistently and continually demanding an end to the assault on him.

For it is impossible for a person to deserve to triumph over a passion before he has understood that he is not able to obtain victory in the struggle by his own diligence and his own effort, even though in order to be cleansed he must always be careful and attentive, day and night.

When he finds himself freed from it, he should once again and with similar intensity shine light on the hidden places of his heart, locate for himself whatever is still more horrible that he notices remaining, and move against it in particular with all the arms of the Spirit. Thus, when he has consistently overcome more powerful foes, he will have a quick and easy victory over the ones that remain, because the mind too becomes stronger through a succession of triumphs, and subsequent struggles with weaker foes make for readier successes in the battle. So it is with those who are accustomed to fight for prizes against all sorts of beasts in the presence of the kings of this world.

These persons, I say, make their first attack against the beasts that they have noticed are stronger and fiercer, and when these have been killed they more easily destroy the ones that are left, which are less terrible and less aggressive. Likewise, it is always the case that when the more powerful vices have been overthrown and are succeeded by weaker ones we shall obtain a perfect victory without any hardship. Yet it must not be thought that whoever struggles chiefly against one vice and seemingly does not pay much heed to the darts of others can be more easily wounded at an unexpected moment.

This will never happen. It is impossible for one who is concerned about the purification of his heart and has armed the attention of his mind for fighting any given vice not to have a certain fear of all the other vices and a similar watchfulness with respect to them as well. How indeed will a person deserve to obtain victory over the passion from which he yearns to be freed if he makes himself unworthy of the prize of cleansing by being contaminated with other vices? But when our heart's chief concern has been directed to fighting against one passion in particular, so to speak, we shall pray more intently about it and be especially careful and assiduous in our supplication, so that we may be worthy to watch out for it more diligently and thus obtain a swift victory.

The Lawgiver himself teaches us that we must keep to this plan of battle and not trust in our own strength in these words: "You shall not fear them, because the Lord your God is in your midst, a God great and terrible. He himself will consume these nations in your sight, little by little and by degrees. You will not be able to destroy them all at once, lest perhaps the beasts of the earth multiply against you. And the Lord your God will deliver them over in your sight, and he will slay them until they are completely destroyed."

But he likewise warns that we must not be proud of our victory over them: "Lest when thou hast eaten and art full," he says, "and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein. And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied, then thine heart be lifted up,

and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint (Deuteronomy 8:12-15). Solomon also says in Proverbs: "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him." (Proverbs 24:17-18) -- that is, lest seeing your proud heart he cease to assail him and you be forsaken by him and begin to be troubled once again by the passion that you had previously vanquished by the grace of God.

For the prophet would not have prayed and said: "O deliver not the soul of thy turtledove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor for ever" (Psalms 74:19), unless he had known that, because of their pride of heart, some would be delivered over again to vices that they had overcome, so that they would be humbled.

Therefore we should be certain from experience and have learned from innumerable scriptural texts that we cannot conquer such great enemies by our own strength but only with the support of God's help, and that every day we must attribute to him the sum of our victory. This is recalled thus by the Lord speaking through Moses: "Speak not thou in thine heart, after that the Lord thy God hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the Lord hath brought me in to possess this land: but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord doth drive them out from before thee. Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that he may perform the word which the Lord swore unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." (Do not say in your heart, when the Lord your God has destroyed them in your sight: Because of my righteousness the Lord has led me in to possess this land, while those nations were wiped out because of their sins. For it was not because of your righteous deeds and the uprightness of your heart that you were led in to possess their land, but because they acted wickedly they were destroyed as you entered in. . .) (Deuteronomy 9:4-5).

I ask, what could be said more dearly against that pernicious opinion and presumption of ours, by which we want to attribute everything that we do to our free will and to our own effort? "Do not say in your heart, when the Lord your God has destroyed them in your sight: Because of my righteousness the Lord has led me in to possess this land."

Did he not express himself dearly to those whose souls' eyes are open and whose ears hear? Namely, when you have enjoyed a notable success in warring against the carnal vices and you see that you have been freed from their filthiness and from this world's way of life, you should not be puffed up with the success of the struggle and the victory and ascribe this to your own strength and wisdom, believing that you were able to obtain victory over evil spirits and carnal vices through your own efforts and application and free will. There is no doubt that you would never have been able to prevail over these if the Lord's help had not fortified and protected you.

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