

House of St Michael the Archangel
So That Your Hearts Will Not Be Weighted Down

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O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk, but give to me Thy servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother: for blessed art Thou to the ages of ages. Amen. O God, cleanse me a sinner.

- The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian¹ -

“Drunkenness.” The word surprised me. I got defensive. “But, but it’s not like I go out and get hammered. I don’t drink to get drunk,” I said. “No, but you do have two beers when one is enough. And you have three when two is plenty,” I heard in response. I was silent. The Voice speaking to me knew me better than I knew myself.

It was two o’clock in the morning, the middle of the House of St. Michael’s 2011 All Saints Day Prayer Vigil. Each hour of our vigil that year had been designated for a particular theme of prayer. The hour between two and three was for repentance. Tim Becker, director of the House of St. Michael, had instructed those of us who were keeping the vigil together to each take a piece of paper and write on it the sins of which we were called to repent and the passions from which we needed to be delivered.

I had begun by writing my usual triumvirate of temptations: anger, greed, and lust. They were three familiar sins, each having exercised more or less influence upon me for years. But when listed on paper, they felt artificial. What is familiar is often comfortable, and

¹ As printed in Sebastian Brock’s “Introduction” to St. Ephrem the Syrian’s *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1990) p. 7.

I was quite comfortable acknowledging the presence of these sins. They were easy to confess, safe sins that I could even admit publicly without shame.

Genuine repentance, however, is received as a calling and gift from God. We cannot understand the depths of our hearts alone. Only the Holy God who both dwells within us and remains wholly Other can see us in truth. As God says through the Prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind.” (Jer. 17:9-10).² That is why the call to true repentance – the accurate diagnosis of our sin - comes from outside of us. The voice calls to us from the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Jesus confronts us, saying as he comes from the wilderness, “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

So I prayed, “Lord, is there something else you want me to confess, somewhere else you’re calling me to repent?” And that’s when I heard, “Drunkenness.” As the Lord’s word to me sank in, my mind was stirred with memories of recent times when I had indeed consumed more alcohol than was good for me. From dinners out with friends to a craft-beer festival I had attended with my father, having “one too many” was not an infrequent occurrence in my life.

The vigil ended early on Sunday morning. That night, my wife Eileen and I went out to eat at a restaurant with a covetable beer selection. I ordered one and nursed it through the meal. When we left the restaurant, I left my beer unfinished, a third of it still sitting in the glass. It was the beginning of an ongoing journey of repentance, and a slow awakening in watchfulness.

² Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update, or the New International Version, 2011 Update.



Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

- Luke 21:34-36 -

Repenting of drunkenness has not led me to give up alcohol entirely. As Psalm 104 says, God causes plants to grow so that people “may bring forth food from the earth” and “wine that gladdens human hearts.” Jesus drank wine with the Apostles, and even with those to whom He ministered. Paul advised Timothy to drink a little wine for his health. Drunkenness is the enemy, not alcohol in and of itself. It is the state of mind and heart that results from over-indulgence in alcohol that is sinful. So I initially received the Lord’s rebuke during the vigil as a call to reduce my consumption of alcohol, not to eliminate it completely. Through that reduction, though, God has opened my eyes to new insights, including the fact that drunkenness is about much more than alcohol.

Much in our modern lives leaves us figuratively drunk, even things which have nothing to do with alcohol. Hectic schedules, undisciplined diets, cluttering possessions, distracting voices, noises and sights – these and myriad other elements of everyday life conspire to create disorder in our minds. Their effects can be as severe as drunkenness. If we remain conformed to the patterns of the world around us, we will live in a stupor of busyness and noise with hearts ruled by our stomachs and eyes so saturated with earthly

images that they are incapable of perceiving heavenly glory. These distractions work together to prevent our hearts from ascending to the heights which God desires for us.

It has taken me a year and a half of repenting of various forms of drunkenness to learn these lessons. I believe the path I've walked to this point is worth recounting here, so that, as the Lord says, "your hearts will not be weighted down with drunkenness and dissipation and the worries of life." Our hearts are meant to ascend to union with Christ, to rise into the Lord's presence and bask in the Father's love. The parts of my story which I share here relate how Christ called me to leave behind that which hinders my ascent. I offer this writing with the prayer that the Lord will use it to cut away whatever weighs your heart down, so that together we may grow in the watchfulness of ascending hearts.

In the weeks and months following the vigil, I began praying for a hatred of drunkenness. I was following the advice of Evagrius the Solitary, a fourth century monk who wrote that "hatred against the demons contributes greatly to our salvation and helps our growth in holiness."³ The spiritual writers of the early Church believed that God had purposefully given us the ability to become angry. This ability, which they called the "incensive power," makes us capable of angry outbursts, violence, and a host of other malicious actions. But God intended this ability to become angry to be used for good. We have the incensive power so that we can become angry at sin. More precisely, the incensive power is a capacity for repulsion, an ability to reject and drive away that which is evil. We should not merely become upset by the presence of evil in or around us. We should decisively refuse and rebuff that evil. Such decisive rejection is necessary for our growth in holiness.

³ Evagrius the Solitary, "On Discrimination" in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, trans. & ed. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber 1979) p. 44.

Thus *The Philokalia*, an influential collection of spiritual writings from early Church monks and saints, begins with an exhortation from St. Isaiah the Solitary to use our incensive power rightly: “Without anger a man cannot attain purity: he has to feel angry with all that is sown in him by the enemy.”⁴ To obey the Lord and repent of drunkenness, I had to cultivate anger toward that sin within me.

As I prayed regularly for hatred of drunkenness, God answered by providing startlingly clear reasons to hate drunkenness. When visiting a friend in New York, I attended a meeting of his chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was convicted by the stories the participants shared of their battles to overcome addiction. These men displayed the sort of humility that early Christians praised as the highest virtue. Their high stakes struggle for freedom from alcohol conveyed a sense of urgency and gravity. We were discussing matters of life and death. A similar urgency motivated the monks whose writings are cited throughout this work to relentlessly pursue purity and holiness. Our struggle for sanctification is a matter of spiritual life or death, but few of us pursue Christ with the vigor of an addict fleeing an addiction. I left that AA meeting convinced that the men gathered in that drafty community center that day both desired holiness and were willing to fight for holiness much more than people in my church at home.

Visiting that AA meeting also stirred up memories for me of my half-sister Natalie. Because she was twelve years older than me and lived elsewhere during much of my childhood, I did not know her well. In general, I know she was extremely intelligent. She was also a runner, setting school records in many track events in our town. Later and more specific memories are less pleasant. There was the time my mom and I took Natalie birthday

⁴ St. Isaiah the Solitary, “On Guarding the Intellect: Twenty-Seven Texts” in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 22.

cake while she was in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. And there was the time I saw Natalie stumbling around drunk on mouthwash as she tried to care for her young son. Mental illness, abuse, and other traumas had come together and led her into alcoholism. Seeing the toll Natalie's drinking took on our mother, I would sometimes fantasize about confronting Natalie. I even imagined taking her bottles of liquor and throwing them against walls until they shattered, as though that would be enough to conquer her demons. When I was a junior in high school, she died in an incident related to her alcoholism. If I needed reason to hate drunkenness, I did not have to look farther than my own family.

I had prayed for hatred, and God had made me aware of strong reasons to hate drunkenness with perfect hatred. Yet fruitful as this prayer was, it was incomplete. When I pray for hatred of particular sins or passions, I try also to pray for love of the opposite virtues. For example, I pray daily for a hatred of anger, *and a love of peace and gentleness*. When first praying for hatred of drunkenness, I wasn't sure what to name its opposite. *Sobriety? Moderation? Temperance?* None of these words seemed to fit.

Eventually the Lord gave me the right word by focusing my attention on Luke 21:34-36. There Jesus commands his disciples, "Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Then He continues, "But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength" Here Jesus contrasts a heart that is weighted down by drunkenness with a heart that is alert, on guard, and constantly praying. The drunken heart is imperceptive, heavy, and slow to respond, but the alert heart is light, attentive, and quick to react appropriately.

To describe the difference even more strongly, the person who is drunk, literally or figuratively, is unable to act intentionally with freedom in the world. Proverbs 23:35

envisions the drunkard complaining of the world's actions against him during his state of diminished consciousness, yet denying his pain: "They struck me . . . but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink" (RSV). Allowing its victim to be stricken and beaten, drunkenness indicates an orientation of passivity toward the world. When we are drunk, whether on food and drink or the distractions of noise and images around us, outside influences act upon us and we live in ignorance and denial of their impact. To repent of drunkenness is to refuse to passively receive the subtle spiritual attacks of the world.

The person who is not drunk, however, responds to these spiritual attacks actively.

In the words of Psalm 118:10-14,

All nations surrounded me;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
They surrounded me like bees;
They were extinguished as a fire of thorns;
In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.
You pushed me violently so that I was falling,
But the LORD helped me.
The Lord is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation.

While the drunkard is unaware of those who strike him, the hero of Psalm 118 is fully aware of his enemies and rebukes them before they strike, conquering them in the Lord's name and power. Applied inwardly, the sober-minded person recognizes harmful or tempting thoughts as they arise in the mind, and cuts them off before they grow into sin. This is the right use of the incisive power, when a person "becomes angry with all that is sown in him by the enemy." It was that attentiveness which Jesus called his disciples to cultivate, saying "be on guard," "keep on the alert," and "pray at all times."

This alert and prayerful state of active self-defense, which is thus the opposite of drunkenness, is what the fathers and mothers of the Church called *watchfulness*. The glossary of *The Philokalia* even defines watchfulness as “literally, the opposite to a state of drunken stupor; hence spiritual sobriety, alertness, vigilance.”⁵ The definition goes on to say that watchfulness “signifies an attitude of attentiveness . . . whereby one keeps watch over one’s inward thoughts and fantasies.” Similarly, the Greek word translated as “sobriety” (*sōphrosynē*) in the version of St. Ephrem’s prayer at the opening of this work has connotations of watchfulness. It means “sound judgment,” the sort of rational thinking that leads to moderation and self-control.

St. Hesychios, an eighth or ninth century priest who served as abbot of a monastery on Mt. Sinai, wrote one of the early Church’s sharpest and most influential works on such sober-minded watchfulness. In it, he distinguished between differing forms of watchfulness, all of which “gradually cleanse the intellect from impassioned thoughts.”⁶ These types of watchfulness include scrutinizing the images which come into our minds, freeing the heart from all distracting thoughts, continually invoking the name of Jesus in prayer, meditating upon death, and lifting one’s gaze above material things to heavenly realities. Because the power of the name of Jesus is the foundation of watchfulness, St. Hesychios recommended praying the Jesus Prayer.

The Jesus Prayer is a relatively simple yet exceedingly powerful and beautiful prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Some versions of the prayer end with “mercy upon me *a sinner*.” Other variations shorten the prayer, calling out “Jesus Son of God

⁵ *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 367

⁶ St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness” in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 164.

have mercy” or a similar variation. One repeats the prayer, sung or spoken, in order to cleanse the mind and heart by internalizing its words. Sometimes those who pray unite the words of the prayer to their breath, as Hesychios advised. We breathe in, “Lord Jesus Christ . . .” We breathe out, “Son of God . . .” Others have sought to pray the prayer in time with the beats of their hearts, so that with every heartbeat they would be reminded to pray without ceasing. Many books have been written about the Jesus Prayer, and they can be profitable to study. But as Orthodox priest and scholar John McGuckin writes, to pursue this form of prayer “is to leave all books behind except the script the Spirit writes on the pages of the heart.”⁷ We learn to pray the Jesus Prayer by praying the Jesus Prayer. We learn to love the name of Jesus by praying the name of Jesus. Eventually, the heart upon which the Spirit writes will ceaselessly call upon Jesus as Lord, praying for mercy, cleansed of all distracting thoughts.

Anyone who sets out on this path faces an uphill battle. The untrained mind is simply incapable of resisting the allure of its own thoughts. Silence outside will be pierced by the deafening roar of voices within. Stillness of mind requires an ability to silence those voices, to choose to reject the thoughts which bubble up within the mind and to rest solely in the name of Jesus. The Jesus Prayer helps us learn to do this by building an internal wall, adding the distance between our souls and our thoughts that is necessary to scrutinize and objectively respond to such thoughts. As Lisa Sayre, a member of the House of St. Michael, has written, we must learn to “put the name of Jesus between” our thoughts and our inner selves:

Close your eyes and empty your mind that it might be filled with the name and presence of Jesus Christ. When your thoughts show up, put the name of Jesus between

⁷ John A. McGuckin, *Prayer Book of the Early Christians* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press 2011) p. 194.

those thoughts and your heart. No thought should ever be nearer your heart than Jesus Christ. And at the presence of Jesus, those thoughts that cannot bear His gaze will flee, those thoughts that cannot be molded to fit the image of His name – which is the image of the indivisible God – will be broken, and only that which is Himself and of Himself will remain.⁸

Such watchfulness, such deliberate thinking about our thinking, such focus on Jesus, requires a heightened level of awareness and alertness. This is the precise opposite of drunkenness. When alcohol numbs the senses and distorts our perception, such awareness becomes unfeasible. This is why we see a frequent correlation in Scripture between abstinence from alcohol and deepened awareness of the Spirit's presence and power. John the Baptist's conception was announced with an angelic directive that he would "drink no wine or liquor" but would "be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). The Apostle Paul advised the Ephesians, "do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, . . . making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father" (Eph. 4:18-20). Wine and the Holy Spirit are not mutually exclusive, but they both share a controlling and intoxicating power. The mind under the control of alcohol perceives dimly. The mind under the control of the Spirit perceives with ever-increasing clarity.

⁸ Lisa Sayre, "Prayer Without Thoughts" <http://houseofstmichaelthearchangel.org/2012/02/prayer-without-thoughts/>.



When watered in due measure the earth yields a good clean crop from the seed sown in it; but when it is soaked with torrential rain it bears nothing but thistles and thorns. Likewise, when we drink wine in due measure, the earth of the heart yields a clean crop from its natural seed and produces a fine harvest from what is sown in it by the Holy Spirit. But if it is soaked through excessive drinking, the thoughts it bears will be nothing but thistles and thorns.⁹

– St. Diadochos of Photiki –

Jesus repeatedly said that we will *know the tree by the fruit it bears* (Matt. 7:20, 12:33; Luke 6:44). As the fifth century monk and bishop St. Diadochos wrote, an appropriate amount of wine yields a fine harvest of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. But excess, drunkenness, bears the fruit of thistles and thorns. In the months following the vigil, God revealed to me the thistles and thorns which were growing in my life, choking out the fruits of the Spirit which He desired to grow within me. Rather than the fruit of peace, I was bearing anxiety and anger. Instead of the fruit of joy, I felt dejection and discouragement. In the Lord's great wisdom, He revealed that these thorns and thistles had their roots tangled with those of the same triumvirate of temptations I had first confessed at the vigil: anger, greed, and lust. I had asked the Lord what else He wanted me to confess, and He had answered by revealing the literal and figurative drunkenness that made the roots of those three chief passions so hard to remove.

⁹ St. Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge" in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 267.

The Lord shined this light into my dim mind gradually. First I noticed that the less I drank, the less often I became angry. In retrospect I could see how many of the arguments my wife and I had were exacerbated by having consumed just one or two beers. Instead of the relaxation I wanted, a beer with dinner led to tiredness, irritability, and impatience. Less alcohol meant less irritability and thus greater peace. On one level this sounds like common sense. On a deeper level, this confirmed the generally acknowledged principle among the spiritual masters of the early Church that over-consumption of food or drink leaves one vulnerable to a host of temptations.

In addition to anger, the monks of the early Church saw that gluttony and drunkenness were closely connected to lustful temptations. The fifth-century monk St. Mark the Ascetic wrote,

For the flesh of youth, gorged with food and wine, is like a pig ready for slaughter. The flames of sensual pleasure kill the soul, while the intellect is made a prisoner by the fierce heat of evil desire and cannot then resist such pleasure. For when the blood is heated the spirit is cooled. Young people should particularly avoid drinking wine, and even getting the smell of it. Otherwise the inward action of passion and the wine poured in from outside will produce a double conflagration; the combination of the two will bring the flesh's sensual pleasure to a boiling point, driving away the spiritual pleasure that accompanies the pain of contrition, and producing confusion and hardness of heart.¹⁰

Twenty-first century American culture glamorizes this connection between alcohol and human sexual desires: television shows and movies frequently portray couples dining richly and drinking heavily before indulging their sexual appetites, as though this pattern was the normal script for human sexuality. This is normal only in the sense that it reveals the real connection between drunkenness and gluttony with fornication and lust.

¹⁰ St. Mark the Ascetic, "Letter to Nicolas the Solitary" in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 154.

The fact that gluttony, the over-consumption of food, was tied by these wise monks to the same sins as drunkenness also became my first hint that one could be “drunk” on substances other than alcohol. As I started to monitor my consumption of other items, I saw more clearly the connection between caffeine and anger. In my work at a neighborhood café, it was easy for me to consume multiple cups of coffee over my regular morning shift. Not surprisingly, the heightened arousal sparked in my body by caffeine made me anxious at times. Anxiety led to irritability, which led to anger. Soon I began to ask myself, “Was the reason I left each shift at the café feeling irritable and anxious simply because I was drinking too much coffee?”

Again, this connection on one level seems like common sense. There is nothing spiritually profound about recognizing that some substances affect our bodies and minds in certain ways. The challenge is to cultivate the sort of watchfulness that rises above the physically perceptible elements of our diet to consider the impact of what we consume upon our spiritual health. For years, I decided what to eat based on the flavor I wanted and the nutritional value I believed my food of choice had for me. Once I noticed the spiritual effects of substances like alcohol or caffeine, though, I realized that everything else I ate could be evaluated based on the spiritual fruit it bore in my body. Ways of eating that satisfy my soul now seem much more valuable than those that merely satisfy my tongue.

The standard American diet of highly processed foods is not the optimal fuel for watchfulness. Anyone who has experienced the irritability and mood swings that accompany low blood sugar knows that what we eat affects our emotions. Yet many of us willingly allow myriad forms of sugar to daily deceive our taste buds while fogging our minds. More substantial whole foods take longer to digest, giving us a more even supply of energy and

thus more control over our own emotions and thoughts. Of course, such a style of eating requires patience, and easy access to instantly “gratifying” food does little to cultivate such patience. There is a time and season for everything, but not every food is always in season. If we cannot wait patiently for food in its appropriate season, how can we patiently endure much more trying temptations?

The monks of the early Church recommended fasting as a discipline for both controlling our physical appetites and teaching us patience. But they were just as concerned about the *immediate mental effects* produced by gluttony. St. John Cassian, a monk from the late fourth and early fifth century who left an enduring mark on western monasticism, wrote that “whatever the kind of food with which it is filled, the belly engenders the seed of profligacy. It is not only too much wine that besots our mind: too much water or too much of anything makes it drowsy and stupefied.”¹¹ Our culture has affectionately and flippantly dubbed the mental effect of overeating as the “food coma.” Cassian’s words, however, carry a much more serious connotation. For him, the words “drowsy and stupefied” condemn, rather than exalt, the heart weighed down by the malnourishment of gluttony. In contrast, a proper relationship with food yields the fruit of alertness and lucid thought.

¹¹ St. John Cassian, “On the Eight Vices” in *The Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 74.



*The fruit starts in the flower; and the guarding of the intellect begins with self-control in food and drink, the rejection of all evil thoughts and abstention from them, and stillness of heart.*¹²

- St. Hesychios the Priest -

To Hesychios, self-control in food and drink is the bud or blossom which, when properly cultivated, will grow into the fruit of watchfulness. The next step in this cultivation of watchfulness is to reject evil thoughts. Though Hesychios is referring to the interior rejection of evil thoughts from within one's mind, we cannot achieve this unless we first recognize the exterior seeds of such thoughts. Our minds receive thousands of such seeds each day, in the words and images which assault us through the media and our simple interactions with others.

Strange as it may sound, we live in a culture which is drunk upon idle talk. In the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, quoted at the opening of this essay, we ask God to "give us not a spirit of idle talk." The Apostle James says that the "tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). The difficult task of taming the tongue is not merely about putting aside cursing or gossip or slander. The tame tongue

¹² St. Hesychios, "On Watchfulness and Holiness" p. 191.

is also free of purposeless chatter and uncalculated words which serve only to distract their speakers and hearers from higher matters. Such discerning tongues are rare in our culture because we live in a world which prizes making one's voice heard, even when one has nothing meaningful to say. Yet unnecessary words produce in us many of the same effects as drunkenness: distorted perceptions, confusion of purpose, and vulnerability to temptation.

For a practical example of this, consider the effects of news or talk radio. For years I began my early morning shifts at a local café by listening to news on the radio. While awareness of certain newsworthy events may be good, the manner in which such "news" is conveyed in this medium is hardly edifying. In recent months, I've realized just how much this habit was merely an exercise in imbibing idle talk. Reports of the stock markets – one day rejoicing in sudden fortune, the next day wallowing in fears of scarcity – set my mind upon making money, not upon the Lord's provision. Hearing hopeless speculations about ever-increasing wars in the world set my mind upon violence, not the peace of Jesus Christ. The fruit such "news" bore in me was greed, despair, discontentment, and anger. Removing such idle talk from my life and replacing it with either silence or holy music was a simple but powerful step towards living with a more sober mind.

Unfortunately, the technological advances of recent decades have added illustrative images to all of this idle talk, multiplying its distracting and confusing influence upon us. Much of this is motivated by greed and aims to cultivate within us dissatisfaction and discontent so that we will seek to buy whatever sources of false satisfaction are being marketed to us. Billboards, television advertisements, magazine covers, and a host of other image-laden messages attack the undefended mind each day. Because images communicate without words, their power is even more insidious, as advertisers know and use to their

profit. The result is that we live in a world drunk upon images of its own distorted glory. This is especially true of the sexually suggestive imagery which is ubiquitous in our media. Neurologists are discovering that regularly viewing pornography rewires the brain to seek after and respond more powerfully to explicit images.¹³ As these images embed themselves in our minds, they become the lenses through which we see other people, and the blinders that prevent us from seeing true beauty.

Having chosen years ago to secede from our culture's preoccupation with television, I've discovered that the internet is now my most challenging venue for maintaining soberness of sight. And I'm not even referring to the dangers of sexually explicit images. Simply opening up Facebook is an invitation to become drunk upon the images of others' lives. What begins as innocent curiosity about friends or acquaintances can quickly become an endless source of distraction, unfruitful comparisons, covetousness, or gossip. When pictures are added to the idle chatter that is already present in such media, the content gains even more power over our minds.

Recognizing the dangerous power of images sixteen centuries ago, St. Diadochos of Photiki wrote that we should "always be looking into the depths of our heart with continued remembrance of God, and should pass through this deceitful life like men who have lost their sight."¹⁴ Deliberate under-indulgence in social media or other facets of the Internet is a simple and beneficial way to become blind for the sake of the glory of God. The purpose of such figurative blindness to the world is to cultivate spiritual sight. Diadochos directs the attention of our sight away from the images of the world and toward "the depths of our heart

¹³ See *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* by William M. Struthers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsityPress 2009).

¹⁴ St. Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge" p. 269.

with continued remembrance of God.” This attentiveness to the interior state of our hearts is another manifestation of watchfulness. The watchful person develops an inner sanctuary where their heart and mind are guarded against the rapid-fire onslaught of images in our culture’s media.

Thankfully, we can also use our physical sight to aid in the cultivation of spiritual sight. We need only direct our eyes toward things which lift our hearts up to the remembrance of God. I learned this lesson during a season of seismic change in my life. After the birth of our first child, my world was turned upside down. Activities and work all took longer to do. Time once spent exercising was instead spent folding cloth diapers. Even my disciplined practice of morning prayer using my favorite prayer book changed. To my great frustration, I quite simply could not hold a prayer book and a baby at the same time.

Challenging though this was for me, it provided a season in which I had to pray using images rather than books to cue my prayers. As I paced around the house in the middle of the night, swaying with my crying daughter, I discovered that nearly every room of our house has a wall on which hangs a cross. Some had images of Jesus upon them, and as I beheld Christ on the cross, my heart turned away from the frustrations of the moment toward the Passion of the Lord. In our living room also stood an image of Jesus which my wife had mounted and decorated with *découpaged* paper featuring the phrases “Open the eyes of my heart” and “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” In the center of the picture, Jesus points to an image known as the Sacred Heart. It is Jesus’ heart encased in the crown of thorns with a cross and flames rising from its top. Here I saw the compassion of Christ, in which His heart is wounded for the healing of our own hearts. When I would otherwise have

forgotten God's mercy, these images simply but powerfully reminded me of His presence and love.

In my experience, the use of such holy images in worship and prayer has proven fruitful for detoxifying my mind and retraining it to see the world through a lens of holiness rather than vulgarity. The Apostle Paul advised the Philippians to meditate on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, [and] whatever is lovely" (Phil. 4:8). When we engage in visual meditation upon holy images, they can replace in our mind the deceitful, ignoble, bad, impure, and ugly images which have been hawked at us by the media of our culture. In time, eyes which have been sanctified by holy images see people not "according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16) but as God sees them.

This became real for me during one early morning trip to the gym. Before leaving the house, I had read a brief meditation by St. Mark the Ascetic upon the Incarnation. As I pondered Mark's words, I remembered an icon I had seen at the monastery I visited each month on retreat with a group of other pastors. The title of the icon is "Mother of God of the Passion," and it features the child Jesus in Mary's arms as angels reveal to Him the crucifixion which awaited Him. Mary's eyes look sorrowful, as though she is already mourning Jesus' death. These images were bouncing around in my mind as I completed my early morning run on the treadmill, when suddenly my eyes caught sight of a particularly attractive woman exercising nearby. To my surprise, the first thought that came into my mind was, "She could have been Mary."

This thought profoundly changed the way I view women. How much more might the wise use of holy images change other sinful elements in our hearts? What images might counter our world's deceitful portrayals of wealth, graphic depictions of violence, or subtle

enticements to envy? By recognizing the power of such images, we strengthen our rejection of evil thoughts and further purify our minds in the pursuit of watchfulness. As we do, those whom we once objectified will become people in whom we see the potential to become saints, and those whom we once denigrated, we will see as bearers of the image of God.



*See, friends, how beautiful is the Master!
Yes, do not close your mind by looking toward the earth,
Yes, do not, by concern for wealth and worldly affairs, and
By desire for glory, be overpowered and leave
Him behind, the light of eternal life! (Jn 8.12)
Yes, friends, come with me, lift yourselves up with me,
Not by the body, but by the mind, and soul, and heart,
Cry out in humility to the good Master,
The merciful God, who alone is benevolent!
And by all means He shall heed, and certainly He will have mercy,
And certainly He will be revealed, and certainly He shall display
And give a glimpse of his joyous light to us.*

- St. Symeon the New Theologian¹⁵ -

Drunkenness, of both the literal and figurative varieties, *weighs the heart down*. The image of a heart held down by weights suggests that hearts are instead meant to rise up. I think this was the Apostle Paul's intention when he wrote to the Colossians, "Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). Elsewhere, Paul wrote of our baptism as union with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). In baptism, we die with Christ so that we may be

¹⁵ St. Symeon the New Theologian, "Hymn 27" lines 138-149 in *Divine Eros: Hymns of Saint Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2010) p. 209.

raised like Christ. Because the risen Christ has ascended to the Father, our union with Christ means that we join Jesus in His Ascension to the Father. This happens as we set our hearts “on things above, not on the things that are on earth” because our life is “hidden with Christ in God.” Paul then concludes that “when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

Our hearts are meant to ascend with Christ into the presence of God so that we also will appear with Him in glory. Glory is the result of the heart’s ascent to God. Jesus tells us to guard ourselves against dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life precisely because He wants us to share in His glory! He even prays, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). To see Christ’s glory, to behold the fruit of the Father’s eternal love, our hearts must ascend to where Christ is. That place is heaven.

St. Symeon the New Theologian, a late tenth and early eleventh century monk and priest, was given a brief taste of such heavenly glory early in his monastic career. After experiencing and losing such glory, he spent his whole life pursuing Christ with rigorous abandon, desiring deeply to be with Jesus again in glory. To those who would heed his advice, Symeon says, “do not close your mind by looking toward the earth” and “do not, by concern for wealth and worldly affairs and / by desire for glory be overpowered and leave / Him behind, the light of eternal life.” The words echo those of Jesus which have been our theme for this meditation: “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life.”

To fully ascend into Christ's glory, the watchful heart must be cut free from the tethers of worldly cares and concerns. Much of what has been written above falls into the categories of "drunkenness and dissipation." But Jesus intentionally adds the "worries of life" to this short list of weights which prevent our hearts from ascending to God. In the explanation of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus says that "the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

Worry and the deceitfulness of riches are just like the other thistles and thorns which threaten to overgrow our hearts, only Jesus specifically says they choke the *word*. Because of its context in the parable, we may picture a seedling or a young plant as the word which is being choked. But I wonder if there might be a double meaning here: Jesus is the Word of God and God zealously desires for His Word to dwell in us. Can the Word of God, being formed within us as we grow in the likeness of Christ, actually be choked by our worries? When we are drunk upon the things of the world, our worries, wealth, and selfish desires, do we squeeze the life out of the likeness of Christ which is trying to grow within us? At the risk of overstating the point, we might imagine our worldly preoccupations as the instruments of torture used upon Christ, cutting off His life within our hearts. Our worries become the whips which lashed His back. Our desires become the shouts which say, "Crucify!" Our riches become the crown of thorns piercing His face.

Such is the effect of gazing upon the things of the world instead of upon the One in Whom we live and move and have our being. The danger of worldly images is not just that they can inspire sinful desires such as greed or lust. Their danger lies in the fact that they turn the eyes away from heaven, directing our attention away from the immaterial God to material things of the world. The rich young man who went away from Jesus sad is a portrait

of the heart preoccupied with material things. Jesus had good reason to tell his disciples “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). The heart whose treasure is on earth never ascends higher. The heart whose treasure is in heaven ascends with lightness and ease.

Rather than gazing at the things of the world, St. Symeon, who gloried in his poverty, invites his friends to behold “how beautiful is the Master!” Here is an invitation to turn our gazes upward. The call to pass through life as one without sight is an invitation to behold the One who dwells in unapproachable glory. Symeon invites, “friends, come with me, lift yourselves up with me, / not by the body, but by the mind, and soul, and heart.” Expanding on his invitation, we can imagine him saying, “Lift yourselves up – by leaving behind your money and possessions. Lift yourselves up – by caring nothing for worldly glory or fame. Lift yourselves up – by fasting in order to receive the Bread of Heaven.”

Lift yourselves up. This is the language of worship. It is in worship that our hearts most perfectly leave the concerns of the world behind and ascend to be with Christ. And it is at the climax of the worship service that we bear witness to our hearts’ most full ascent into Christ’s presence. Throughout much of the history of the Church, the prayer which consecrates the Lord’s Supper traditionally has begun with words like these:

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them up to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise.

This is an invitation to offer to God hearts that are not weighted down. Given St. Symeon’s love of the Eucharist, I cannot help but wonder if Symeon’s invitation to his friends to turn

away from worldly concerns and lift themselves up with him is an invitation to enter into worship and receive the Mystery of Communion with Christ. Perhaps it is at the Lord's Table in worship where Symeon understands that "He will be revealed, and . . . give a glimpse of his joyous light to us."



Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O Good Jesus, hear me. Within your wounds hide me, and let me never be separated from you. From the malicious enemy defend me, and at the hour of my death call me, and bid me come to you, that with your saints I may praise you forever. Amen.
– *The Anima Christi* –

In Psalm 104, we thank God for "wine that gladdens the human heart." As with everything in the Psalms – indeed, everything in the Old Testament – this verse foreshadows Christ. To those with the eyes of faith, the wine that most gladdens the human heart is the blood of Christ, received as the finest and most intoxicating wine one could ever desire.

My thirst for the wine that truly gladdens the heart has increased as I've regularly prayed the *Anima Christi* over the past two years. Beginning with a general plea for the soul (*anima*) of Christ to sanctify us, the prayer then proceeds through images of Christ connected with the sacraments and the Passion of Christ. Water from the side of Christ washes us in Baptism. The Body of Christ saves us in Communion. And the Blood of Christ inebriates us. *But what does it mean to become inebriated by the Blood of Christ?*

St. Diadochos said of alcohol that, "when we drink wine in due measure, the earth of the heart yields a clean crop from its natural seed and produces a fine harvest from what is

sown in it by the Holy Spirit.” In a similar statement, St. Hesychios the Priest wrote that “The more rain falls on the earth, the softer it makes it; similarly, Christ’s holy name gladdens the earth of our heart the more we call upon it.”¹⁶ The heart which has dwelt upon the name of Jesus, thus growing in watchfulness, yields a clean crop and produces a fine harvest. The crop is clean because it is under the control of the Father, whom Jesus says is the master Vinedresser:

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:2-5)

Apart from Christ we can do nothing. To bear fruit, we must yield control totally, uninhibitedly to Him.

Perhaps this is why deep states of prayer are so frequently mistaken for drunkenness. Eli the priest rebuked Hannah, saying “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you” (1 Samuel 1:14). She responded that she was pouring out her soul before the Lord, asking to conceive a son. That son became the sober and watchful Prophet Samuel. In the familiar example of Pentecost, some who heard the Apostles speaking in tongues mocked them, saying “They are full of sweet wine” (Acts 2:13). But in the powerful preaching of Peter that day, we glimpse a heart fully submitted to and zealous for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ St. Hesychios, “On Watchfulness and Holiness” p. 169.

I believe this is what faithful Christians have sought for centuries as they prayed the *Anima Christi* upon receiving Communion. As the wine which has become Christ's blood enters our bodies, we pray for inebriation. The human experience of drunkenness is redeemed as a metaphor for total submission to Christ. A drunk person has lost self-control, is uninhibited, and behaves foolishly. By praying for the Blood of Christ to inebriate us, we surrender our self-will to Christ, release the inhibitions which prevent us from faithfully following him, and offer to become fools in the eyes of the world for the sake of knowing and obeying the True Vine.

What if the "due measure" of wine which Diadochos says produces a "fine harvest" of the fruits of the Spirit is actually the portion the believer receives each Sunday from the cup of Communion? What if one's heart has to be freed from worldly constraints and pursuits in order to fully receive such fruit-bearing wine? Having cultivated watchfulness, the sober heart receives Communion with transfigured senses, perceiving the nourishment given by Christ and rejoicing in the union of the Lover and the Beloved. Because of its fixation upon Jesus, the watchful heart then begins to see all wine not as a vehicle for drunkenness, but as a reminder of Christ's intimate love.

St. Hesychios, the master of watchfulness whose words have guided much of this work, wrote with great reverence about the gift of Christ's presence in Communion:

When in fear, trembling and unworthiness we are yet permitted to receive the divine, undefiled Mysteries of Christ, our King and our God, we should then display even greater watchfulness, strictness and guard over our hearts, so that the divine fire, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, may consume our sins and stains, great and small. For when that fire enters into us, it at once drives the evil spirits from our heart and remits the sins we have previously committed, leaving the intellect free from the turbulence of wicked thoughts. And if after this, standing at the entrance to our heart, we keep strict watch

over the intellect, when we are again permitted to receive those Mysteries the divine body will illumine our intellect still more and make it shine like a star.¹⁷

Here there is a real belief that the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ enters us as we partake of Communion. This sense that a sacrament really *does something* fills the writings of the early Church. As Hesychios indicates here, Christ's presence in the bread and wine mattered precisely because consuming the elements really has an effect upon us. In Communion, Christ burns away our sins, casts out the demons from our hearts, and illumines the recipient more and more with the Light of Christ. As one who experienced God's light making him "shine like a star," St. Symeon the New Theologian dared to say that the reception of Communion even made him one with God:

... I say the perceptible
Union belongs to the mysteries.
For having been purified by repentance,
And by rivers of tears,
And having partaken of the deified
Body as God himself,
I myself become God
By this ineffable union.¹⁸

It is by such union with Christ, that we can truly say, "It is no longer I who live but *Christ who lives in me*" (Galatians 2:20). This is holy drunkenness. To be inebriated with the blood of Christ is to be filled with the very life and essence of Jesus Christ Himself. Here the passivity of drunkenness is a virtue. We receive Communion. God gives to us the wine that gladdens human hearts. The repentance and tears which Symeon says precede Communion are likewise good and perfect gifts from our Father, given to turn our attention away from

¹⁷ St. Hesychios, "On Watchfulness and Holiness" p. 179.

¹⁸ St. Symeon the New Theologian "Hymn 30" lines 465-472, p. 244.

all that would prevent us from receiving His love. Intoxicated by His love, we yield totally to His control, becoming more radiantly and fully the Body of Christ.

Such drunkenness characterizes the lasting union between Christ the Lover and the Church who is His Beloved. In the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom calls the Bride's love "better than wine" (Song 4:10). The love of Jesus is better than any earthly wine, and yet by His grace wine becomes a symbol and instrument of our union with Him. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised His own abstention from wine until the day when we feast with Him in His Father's Kingdom. When we enter into Communion with Christ and feed upon His Body and Blood, we are with Him in the Father's Kingdom. We join the future and eternal Wedding Feast of the Lamb and experience the union of the Lover and Beloved, becoming one with God.



I have not been graced with the eyes to perceive such mysteries in the way that saints like Hesychios and Symeon have, nor have I yet experienced the joyful awareness of loving intimacy with Jesus that they knew. My heart is still weighed down in many places. But by the Lord's grace, He has called me to repent and given me a thirst for His very life. Thankful for His mercy, and hopeful in His grace, I pray for the weights to be cut away from my heart and the hearts of all who read this. May the Lord grant us the grace of hearts that rise to His throne and receive the angelic invitation to heavenly union:

Praise our God, all you His servants,
you who fear Him, both small and great.
Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and His bride has made herself ready.

it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean;
for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.
blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

- St. John the Revelator (Rev. 19:5-9) -