

Making Delusions Real

There are many struggles we face in trying to live a spiritual lifestyle. We are bombarded with thoughts and memories: some are just noise, while others represent temptation. Since we are spiritually 'blind' from the Fall of Man, we cannot see their origin.

By the Holy Spirit's restoring of our spiritual vision (a process which the Church teaches us to cooperate in), we can begin to understand where our thoughts and temptations come from. We can remove the sources of many of them, and also eliminate our inappropriate reactions to them.

The Holy Fathers of the Church, witnessed by their fruits of compassion and love, along with countless mystics of traditions that have sought after the Divine, all agree that the worst thing you can do when confronted with an unpleasant or inappropriate thought or memory is to resist it.

This is why our Lord counsels us to not resist the evil one (c.f Mt 5:39), who always begin his attacks with thoughts. If we do not engage the bad thoughts that come into our minds, then they have no power over us. Evil itself is nothing other than something which is not God's will. It has no reality on its own.

But, by engaging a thought or feeling and struggling against it, we can make it *real*. We can turn it into our 'reality' by fighting with it. This is done in two ways: by enjoying the thought, holding on to it to prolong its presence, and by resisting it. If a thought is not engaged, it passes away like the wind. Think of a sail: the sail which unfurls against the invisible wind will follow wherever the wind blows, but the sail tied firmly to the mast keeps the ship where it is. We only unfurl the sail of the mind when the Holy Spirit blows, and we bring it down when temptations come.

This is what it is to effectively resist the devil. In the case of St. Anthony, he was so good at this that the devil had to resort to physical violence to distract the saint's prayer. The Father's say we will constantly be assaulted by thoughts, but if we practice non-engagement with them, they will have less power over us. Then, during times of stress, we will be less likely to make errors in judgment if we turn to prayer and meditation rather than too much thinking.

When a thought comes, the best thing to do it to remain still. It will hit us with full force in the beginning of our work, but what we are trying to do is remain detached from it. Instead of judging ourselves for having the thought, explore the thought from the outside. Give the thought a label: is it angry? sad? desperate? Think of the thought as a rubber ball, and move the mind's 'hand' along the outside of the ball. What is it attached to? Some thoughts are from the devil and are random, while other thoughts come from unresolved issues within us.

Through confession and spiritual guidance, these sources of temptation can be removed, and we will have fewer unpleasant thoughts. This is the peace of Christ that we strive for.