



SESSION 10: COUNCIL OF NICEA, ARIANISM, ANTONY & ATHANASIOS – READINGS

“I think, brethren, that the souls which draw near to the love of God are of three sorts, be they male or female. There are those who are called by the law of love which is in their nature, and which original good implanted in them at their first creation. The word of God came to them, and they doubted not at all but followed it readily, like Abraham the Patriarch... The second calling is this. There are men who hear the written law testifying of pains and torments prepared for the wicked, and of the promises prepared for those who walk worthily in the fear of God; and by the testimony of the written Law their thoughts are roused up to seek to enter into the calling... The third calling is this. There are souls which at first were hard of heart and persisted in the works of sin; and somehow the good God in his mercy sends upon such souls the chastisement of affliction, till they grow weary, and come to their senses, and are converted, and draw near, and enter into knowledge, and repent with all their heart, and they also attain the true manner of life, like those others of whom we have already spoken....

Now as regards those who have entered with all their heart, and have made themselves despise all afflictions of the flesh, valiantly resisting all the warfare that rises against them...

First the body is purified by much fasting, by many vigils and prayers, and by the service which makes a man to be straitened in body, cutting off from himself all of the lusts of the flesh. And the Spirit of Repentance is made his guide in these things, and tests him by means of them, lest the enemy should turn him back again.

Then the Spirit that is his guide begins to open the eyes of his soul, to give to it also repentance, that it may be purified. The mind also starts to discriminate between the body and the soul, as it begins to learn from the Spirit how to purify both by repentance. And, taught by the Spirit, the mind becomes our guide to the labours of body and soul, showing us how to purify them... And if the mind conquers in this contest, then it prays in the Spirit, and begins to expel from the body the passions of the soul which come to it from its own will. Then the Spirit has a loving partnership with the mind, because the mind keeps the commandments which the Spirit has delivered to it. And the Spirit teaches the mind how to heal all wounds of the soul, and to rid itself of every one, those which are mingled in the members of the body, and other passions which are altogether outside the body, being mingled within the will. And for the eyes it sets a rule, that they may see rightly and purely, and that in them there may be no guile. After that it sets also a rule for the ears, how they may hear in peace, and no more thirst or desire to hear ill speaking, nor about the falls and humiliations of men; but how they may rejoice to hear about good things...

Then again the Spirit teaches the tongue its own purity, since the tongue was sick with a great sickness; for the sickness which afflicted the soul was expressed in speech through the tongue, which the soul used as its organ, and in this way a great sickness was inflicted upon it, and especially through this member – the tongue – was the soul stricken...

After this again the Spirit heals the motions of the hands, which once were moved in a disorderly way, following the will of the mind. But now the Spirit instructs the mind in their purification, that it may labour with them in almsgiving and in prayer; and the word is fulfilled concerning them which says, ‘Let the lifting of my hands be an evening sacrifice’ and in another place, ‘The hands of the diligent make rich.’

After this the Spirit purifies the belly in its eating and drinking; for, so long as the desires of the soul were active within it, it was never satisfied in its greedy longing for food and drink, and in this way demons made their onslaught on the soul...

Then in regard to sexual thoughts which are moved from below the belly, again the mind is taught by the Spirit, and makes discrimination between the three types of motion of which we spoke above, and perseveres in their purification, as the Spirit helps and strengthens it; and all the motions are quenched by the power of the Spirit, which makes peace in the whole body, and cuts off from it all passions..

After all this, it gives to the feet also their purification. At one time they were not making their steps aright according to God; but now the mind, being unified under the authority of the Spirit, effects their purification, that they should walk according to its will, going and ministering in good works, so that the whole body may be changed and renewed and be under the authority of the Spirit. And I think that when the whole body is purified, and has received the fulness of the Spirit, it has received some portion of that spiritual body which it is to assume in the resurrection of the just.”

“Truly, my children, I speak to you as to wise men, that you may understand what I say to you, and this I testify to you: unless each one of you shall hate all nature of earthly possession, and renounce it and all its works with all his heart, and stretch out the hands of his heart to heaven, to the Father of all, he cannot be saved. If he do what I have said, God will have pity upon him for his labour, and grant him that invisible fire which will burn up all impurity from him, and our principal spirit will be purified; and then the Holy Spirit will dwell in us, and Jesus will abide with us, and so we shall be able to worship God as we ought. But as long as we have peace with the natures of the world, we are enemies of God and of His angels and of all His saints.”

“I want you to know, my children, that I cease not to pray to God for you night and day, that He may open for you the eyes of your hearts, to see the many malignities which the evil spirits pour upon us daily in the present time. I want God to give you a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment, that you may be able to offer your hearts as a pure sacrifice before the Father, in great holiness, without blemish. Truly, my children, they envy us at all times, with their evil counsel, and hidden persecution, and subtle malice, and spirit of seduction, and their blasphemous thoughts, and their infidelities which they sow in our heart every day, and their hardenings of heart, and their many griefs which they bring upon us at every hour, and the faintings with which they make our heart to faint daily, and all the anger and mutual slander which they teach us, and the self-justifications in what we do, and the judgements which they set in our hearts, causing us, when we are sitting alone, to judge our fellows though they dwell not with us; and the contempt which they set in our hearts by pride, when we are hard-hearted and despise each other, when we are bitter against each other with our hard words, grieving at every hour, accusing each other and not ourselves, thinking that our toil is from our fellows, sitting in judgement on what appears outwardly, while the robber is all within our house; and the disputes and divisions wherein we dispute against each other until we establish our own word, to appear justified in the face of each other.

The evil spirits make us zealous for works which we are not able to perform, and cause us to faint in tasks on which we are engaged, and which are profitable for us. Therefore they make us laugh when it is time for weeping, and weep when it is time for laughter, and simply turn us aside at every time from the right way. And there are many other deceits whereby they make us their slaves, but there is no time now to describe all this. But when they fill our hearts with these deceits, and we feed on them and they become our food, then God is patient with us and He visits us, to bring us back again

from this heavy body, that we may leave it. And then our evil works which we wrongly committed will be manifested to us in the body subject to punishment; and we shall clothe ourselves in this body once more – for God in His patience permits this – and our last state will be worse than the first. Therefore weary not of praying the goodness of the Father, if perchance His help may come upon you, that you may teach yourselves to know what is right.

Truly, I tell you, my children, that this vessel in which we dwell is perdition for us, and a house full of war. In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own will, and is subdued to his own thoughts, and takes up the things sown in his own heart, and rejoices in them, and supposes in his heart that these are some great chosen mystery, and justifies himself in what he does – the soul of such a man is a lair of evil spirits, counseling him to evil, and his body a store of evil mysteries which it hides in itself: and over such a one demons have great power because he has not dishonoured them before all men.”

- from the letters of Saint Antony the Great

“For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His godhead evident... Thus by what seems His utter poverty and weakness on the cross He overturns the pomp and parade of idols, and quietly and hiddenly wins over the mockers and unbelievers to recognize Him as God.”

“The first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning.”

“Because there is Mind behind the universe, it did not originate itself; because God is infinite, not finite, it was not made from pre-existent matter, but out of nothing, and out of non-existence absolute and utter God brought it into being through the Word.”

“This was the plight of men. God had not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. Then, turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death; for, as I said before, though they were by nature subject to corruption, the grace of their union with the Word made them capable of escaping from the natural law, provided that they retained the beauty of innocence with which they were created. That is to say, the presence of the Word with them shielded them even from natural corruption... When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, in their sinning they had surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and in justice all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: “Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also leaving the natural use of the woman flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness (Romans 1:26).”

“It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits. As then, the creatures whom He had created reasonable, like the Word, were on the road to ruin, what then was God, being God, to do?...It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself...What or rather Who was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God himself?”

“The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death, yet, He Himself, as the Word being immortal and the Father’s Son was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, itself remaining incorruptible through its indwelling, might the easier put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection.”

“By man, death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew.”

“For what use is existence to the creature if it cannot know its maker? How could men be reasonable beings if they had no knowledge of the Word and reason of the Father through Whom they had received their being? For they would be no better than the beasts, had they no knowledge save of earthly things; and why should God have made them at all, if He had not intended them to know Him? But, in fact, the good God has given them a share of His own image, that is in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same image and likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of Godlikeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Lord Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.”

“What possible could it be to God Himself, who made man, if when made they did not worship Him, but regarded others as their makers? This would be tantamount to His having made them for others and not for Himself.”

“The Word was not hedged in by His body, nor did His presence in the body prevent His being present elsewhere as well. When He moved His body He did not cease to direct the universe by His mind and might. No. The marvelous truth is that being the Word, so far from being Himself contained by anything. He actually contained all things Himself. In creation He is present everywhere, yet is distinct in being from it.”

“He accepted and bore upon the cross a death inflicted by others, and those others His special enemies, a death which to them was supremely terrible and by no means to be faced; and He did this in order that, by destroying even His death, He might Himself be believed to be the Life, and the power of death to be recognized as finally annulled. A marvelous and mighty paradox has thus occurred, for the death which they thought to inflict on Him as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument to death’s defeat.”

“Dead men cannot take effective action; their power of influence lasts only till the grave. Deeds and actions that energize others belong only to the living. Well, then, look at the facts in this case. The

Savior is working mightily among men...Can anyone, in face of this, still doubt that He is risen and lives, or rather that He is Himself life?"

"The Jews are afflicted like some demented person who sees the earth lit up by the sun, but denies the sun that lights it up."

"Christ alone, using common speech and through the agency of men not clever with their tongues, has convinced whole assemblies of people all the world over to despise death, and to take heed of the things that do not die, to look past the things of time and gaze on things eternal, to think nothing of earthly glory and to aspire only to immortality."

"One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life."

- from On the Incarnation, Athanasios the Great