

“natural”, it’s hard to believe that change can ever happen. Others, who subscribe to a protestant Christian view, often tell us that accepting Christ into their hearts will change everything - yet the struggle is often far less successful than they hoped.

In his book *The Mountain of Silence*, author Kyriakos Markides shares the timeless wisdom of the holy people of twenty centuries of Christianity, and outlines the very practical ways they fight against the thoughts that lead to sin, addiction, and slavery to the passions. Centuries of experience is just as useful to us.

1. Indifference

It is popular today to hold the view that any thought that comes our way must be entertained, accepted, and dealt with. Nothing could be further from the truth. The ancient Christian tradition offers quite the opposite strategy.

“Our first defense against destructive thoughts is complete indifference - ignore them completely,” says Father Maximos, a monk from Cyprus. “Do not interact with them, either out of curiosity or out of overconfidence. It is a tactical error. It’s like starting a dialogue with a mortal enemy who is much more clever than you.”

“Imagine,” says Father Maximos, “you are inside your home with the doors and windows firmly shut and someone in the yard is shouting obscenities and daring you

to come out and fight. He cannot get inside. He is just outside hurling insults at you. The best strategy is to shrug it off. Don’t pay attention. Just stay inside.” The holy elders of the Church take the same approach to the harmful or tempting thoughts - just keep them out.

2. Splitting thoughts

So what if, in spite of all best efforts, one cannot chase away such thoughts? What if one is on the verge of surrendering to them and consenting to them?

Holy Christian elders suggest a technique - a kind of game, if you like - that shifts focus from a dangerous thought (like lust or violent wrath) to another, innocuous thought. A hermit monk once spoke of chasing away a particularly bothersome temptation by counting the number of candles in the church chandelier - a huge task in a large church! By using this approach, one can gradually reduce the energy and strength of recurring thoughts. Next time such a thought returns, it will be weaker.

A brisk walk, focused prayer (such as the Jesus Prayer), and hard, manual work are all common practices in the lives of holy people, for just this reason: these activities help to turn the mind away from thoughts that would otherwise lead to spiritual downfall.

Saint Anthony the Great struggled with this very problem. When he retreated into the desert for silence, he was overcome with all

sorts of troublesome thoughts, which tempted him and led him to depression. Praying to God for help, he noticed another monk who would pray for a while, then move immediately to physical work, clearing land, breaking up dirt in the garden, making baskets, and then return to prayer again. The other hermit was in reality an angel, sent by God to teach Saint Anthony.

3. Prayer

Prayer is also critical in the struggle against the thoughts. It is important not to confuse prayer with panic, however. Prayer should be a daily and hourly tool to strengthen our will, and to help us be less emotionally attached to all the things that generate harmful thoughts of greed, avarice, covetousness, lust, anger, depression, etc. Prayer rests our heart and minds on Christ, allowing us to have greater success in achieving indifference (in Greek *apatheia*) toward troubling thoughts (called *logismoi*).

While we can and should pray in any time of need, we must take care not to make our resorting to prayer something like a paralyzed, terrified soldier, holding his rifle to his chest in fear. As a general rule, before a person begins to pray, when confronted with a troublesome thought, a rational mastery over the situation must be developed. If at all possible, the best way is to employ a strategy of complete indifference.

Prayer does its work deep in the human heart. In moments of panic, one becomes highly vulnerable to the machinations of our spiritual enemy, the devil. Trying to pray in a state of panic opens the floodgates of emotion, and the prayer itself is stifled. This is the reason we use the Sign of the Cross or other means, to help us return to stillness inside, so we can begin to truly pray.

4. Holy books

It is also important that we immerse ourselves daily in reading the Holy Scriptures, as well as the lives and writings of the saints. Reading these holy works shapes our minds in a new direction, creating a kind of spiritual antibody in our psyche that can combat destructive thoughts.

The same principle can be applied to people attending sacred rituals - the services of the Church. Even if the prayers and hymns aren't fully understood, the ancient words found in the services affect our *spiritual heart*, turning us back to God. The same is true with Confession, in which we empty out from our heart and mind all kinds of destructive thoughts, and allow God's grace to fill the space that is left. Similarly, Holy Communion allows us to commune directly with Christ Himself, which fills us with a tremendous spiritual weapon. It is really quite foolish to try to fight the spiritual battle without these weapons.

The Spiritual Father

Of course, the temptation is to try to fight this battle on our own. Yet the experience of twenty centuries shows us that we need help: the help provided by a **spiritual father or confessor**. Our passions and addictions love to return, even after we have defeated them. When this happens, we lose any objectivity in charting the best course to take, and risk losing everything for which we've worked.

It's times like these that we especially need the spiritually experienced and objective counsel of a spiritual father or confessor. We recognize that freedom from the slavery to our passions is a path worth taking, but it is a path we cannot walk alone. The first place to seek (and to continue to seek) direction is an experienced spiritual father in the Church. With such help, our struggle may be truly blessed.

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The Road Out of SIN

Part Two of The 5 Stages of Sin

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the chains of addiction and
obsession and win back
true freedom in your life

When you ask most people if they would like to find their way out of addictive or obsessive behaviour - eating, drinking, drug use, viewing pornography, watching television, or shopping - most people would reply, "Of course - but it's not possible."

For many of us, raised in a world where personal habits and proclivities are seen as