

THE MINDFULNESS OF DEATH ACCORDING TO THE ASCETIC PATRISTIC TRADITION

BY
CONSTANTINE MALANDRAKIS

The Christian faith appeared from the beginning as the expectation of the last things and of the kingdom of God. Christian communities of the primitive period were eschatological communities, awaiting the revelation of the glory of the kingdom of God, which will be the revelation of the glory of the faithful too, who are limb of Christ.¹ The power of this expectation for the last things appeared clearly, during the apostolic era, in the church of the Thessalonians, when Christians waiting for the abolition of the world in the immediate future, started to abandon their works considering as useless any occupation with this world. The Apostle Paul condemned this conception of indifference for every-day life, recommending vigilance and sobriety (I Thessal. 5,6, and 2 Thess. 2,1).

The time of our remaining here, the duration of which remains always unknown for each person, has been defined as time of penitence. Wasting this time is the greatest loss for man according to St. John Chrysostom (†407).² The believer, by devoting the time of his life to God, is freed from the fear of ruin and death, and faces his life in time from a new view point. The way out of this world, which is realized biologically by death, can be realized spiritually by the consciousness of the vanity of this world and by the transfer of orientation to the other reality.³

The meaning of the sacrament of baptism is exactly this, that all who attain to this grace should die to sin, as Christ is said to have died to sin, because He died in the flesh, which is the likeness of sin.⁴ Through the sacraments Christians appropriate for themselves the death

1. see Col. 3,3-4. see also Nicholas Cabasilas, *On Life in Christ*, 2, PG 150, 548BC.

2. see *Homily on John*, 58, 5, PG 59, 321.

3. see C. Mantzarides, *Christian Ethics*, p. 93. Thessaloniki 1981.

4. see St. Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, ch. 42, PL 40, 253.

of Christ.⁵ Thus while they are considered as spiritually dead till baptism, through this sacrament they acquire a substance in Christ and they are vivified while they die for this world.⁶ Nicolas Cavailas († 1391), the great theologian of the 14th century, compares the sacraments with windows from which the light of Christ comes into the world in order to mortify worldly life and to offer supramundane and eternal life⁷.

The monastic development during the third century, through its parting from the world and the ascesis of virginity, constitutes the Christian phenomenon *par excellence* of renunciation of this world and of the expectation for an end. Mortification for the world and the beginning of a new life in Christ constitute the central idea of solitary life. The garments of the monks, which are black,⁸ their isolation from other people, and their living in small and narrow cells and in many cases in graves, are the external elements to give a daily reminder of their mortification.

Solitary life is a struggle of mortification for the world and the things of the world, but nevertheless a struggle for the birth of a new life in Christ. Thus history testifies that monks did not care for food or clothes, but they were in expectation of the presence of God alone through hymns and prayers.⁹ This constant expectation of the kingdom of God makes the whole of life a preparation for death. For this reason mindfulness of death constitutes a central element of monastic training, as can be seen, for example, from a book such as the *Ladder* of St. John Climacus.

Death should be a constant dimension and quality of any Christian's life, not just something that befalls him at the last moment. Awareness of death gives to life immediacy and depth, and makes life so intense that its totality is summed up in the present moment. As Christ claimed the victory over death by death, so a Christian defeats

5. see Nicholas Cabasilas, *On Life in Christ*, I, PG 150, 501D-504A.

6. *ibid.* See also in *Matthew* 8,22, where Christ says to a disciple who asked permission to bury his father: 'Let the dead bury their own dead'. Meaning that those who were not following Him were in fact dead.

7. N. Cabasilas, *ibid.*, PG 150, 504BC.

8. see John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 7, PG 88, 805C: «Let your black garment urge you to the work of mourning, for all who lament their dead are dressed in black. Thus you must mourn and if you do not mourn, mourn for this cause».

9. see *Paradisus Pratum*, introduction, PG 65, 444CD.

death and the fear of death with all its tragic consequences, through mindfulness of death during his life.

A conscious remembrance and mindfulness of death is not an emotional or intellectual condition, but an ontological one of grace under which the whole of the human being, soul and body, participates. «Real death is hidden inside in the heart and man is mortified inside. Whoever has gone in secret from death into life, he truly lives for ever and he never dies; and although the bodies of those persons are dissolved for a certain period of time, nevertheless they (the bodies) are sanctified and are resurrected in glory; and for this reason we call sleep the death of the saints¹⁰» as St. Macarios of Egypt (†389) says.

The Christian phenomenon of mindfulness of death is clearly Christocentric.¹¹ The believer experiences secretly in himself the mystery of the death and the resurrection of the saviour Christ. As Christ was buried in the earth and resurrected, in this same way Christ is buried as in a grave in the heart in the believer and there united with the soul. He is resurrected, resurrecting the soul with Him exactly as He had resurrected Adam from Hades. As Christ was pinned on the cross and the sin of the world was pinned along with Him, and as He descended into the lowest parts of Hades and again ascended and rose from the dead and ascended to Heaven with glory, likewise when a Christian comes out of the world by spirit and enters into the sepulchre of humility, through penitence and the imitation of Christ's suffering, he is united with Christ, Who descends from heaven into his body as into a sepulchre. When Christ has been united with the soul, she is resurrected from the dead, because the soul was considered as dead until that time, and she contemplates the glory of the secret resurrection of Christ.¹²

Remembrance of death for the pious Christian is not a mere remembrance of the end of his life or a philosophical view before the fact of

10. Magnus Macarii Aegyptii, *Liber de custodia cordis*, 2, PG 34, 824B.

11. see Macarii Aegyptii, *De libertate mentis*, I, PG 34, 936 C: «When you hear that Christ descended in Hades and delivered all the souls who were captured there, do not think that those things are far away from what is happening now. Think that your heart is a grave and down there your thoughts and your mind are buried in heavy darkness. The Lord comes then in Hades; i.e. in the depth of your heart, and there He bades death to deliver those captured souls who long for Him. And after this He opens the grave and He resurrects the dead and delivers the captured soul from its dark prison».

12. see Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechese* 13, 35-55, *Source Chretienne* vol. 104.

death, but it is a grace, (a special gift coming from the Holy Ghost), which has the power to transform essentially the human person. It is a fact the majority of people try not to think about death and especially their own, and live a life free from any thought of its end. There are also humans who meet daily with the fact of death, because they are obliged to do this, like doctors or gravediggers etc. Such persons are naturally always aware of the presence of death, but this mindfulness of death does not lead to any good transformation and does not differentiate them from other people, neither does it free them from the fear of death.

The ascesis of the remembrance of death from a Christian is always accompanied by humility, mourning for his transgressions that separate him from God, and tears; which under the condition of grace become ceaseless.¹³ Thus the aim of the Christian life is to hate the world¹⁴ and all the things of the world through remembrance of the one who puts to death and vivifies. To renounce this life in order to live in Christ. To despise the desires of his flesh in order to quicken his soul. As someone who mourns for the loss of a very beloved person, so that no material goods can remove the mourning from his soul, likewise a Christian owes to be always in mourning for his separation from God.¹⁵ For this reason the Great Fathers of the Desert considered themselves as dead for anything that has the smallest connexion with the world, and kept in their heart the thought that they had been dead for many years.¹⁷

The perception of proximity of death in no way means negligence or destruction of the body, not even for the ancient ascetics of Egypt, as happens in most dualistic religions or philosophies. On the contrary it helps for the conservation of both body and soul in the best possible state. Thus Evagrius (†399) says that a monk must be prepared as if he was going to die tomorrow, and again to use his body as if he was going to live for a long time. The first care extracts the thought of de-

13: see Macarii Aegyptii, *Liber de custodia cordis*, 10, PG 34, 829C.

14: The use of this word here bears the evangelical and patristic meaning. The aim is not to hate the creation of God, but rather the materialistic orientation of life (κοσμητικὸν φρόνημα).

15: see Fr. Antony, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 85C.

16: see Fr. Poemen, *ibid.*, PG, 65, 328D. (Such an opinion requires a priori the Orthodox view concerning original sin and death).

17: see Fr. Poemen, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 317B, and also Fr. Amonas, *ibid.*, 317BC.

spondency and helps for spiritual progress, while the latter protects the body and always keeps the mind in soberness¹⁸.

In the patristic tradition the remembrance of death is to be found mainly in the ascetic writings which appeal to monks. In the long history of Christian tradition, however, there has never existed any essential difference between monks and laity, at least concerning the definition of obligations which are necessary for salvation. The only difference between monks and laity is the exercise of celibacy and poverty by the former, which are considered as optional virtues. All of the virtues that are required for salvation have to be practised by the laity as much as by the monks. The references to some virtues or exercises, like the remembrance of death, in ascetic writings by the Fathers, which appeal specially to monks, are caused by the fact that those virtues were more fitting for monks because of their special way of life, as regards deliverance from daily cares, but they do not mean that those virtues are unsuitable for ordinary people. After all it is well known that monks always were, and still are, the spiritual directors of the laity and the laity was always asking for advice and spiritual direction from monks. Thus monks were those who in most cases inherited the episcopal office and were responsible for the spiritual guidance of thousands of people.

Remembrance of death can not be isolated as an absolute monastic virtue. Especially in Christian spirituality, where virtues are tightly bound up with each other, and one can not be exercised independently from the other, remembrance of death appears as one of the most essential virtues for the spiritual progress of a Christian. Thus St. John Climacus († 649) says that «as of all foods, bread is the most essential, so the thought of death is the most necessary of all works.»¹⁹

In the patristic tradition it is constantly repeated over the centuries that a Christian should be mindful of death throughout his life. When someone faces death it is impossible not to live quite differently from someone who considers death as the distant end of his life. «Let us recollect of death unceasingly if possible», says St. Hesychios the presbyter († 433). «by which recollection all useless care is laid aside, and we acquire guarding of mind and continual prayer. The body becomes free from any passion and we hate sin, and indeed every virtue

18. see Evagrii Pontici, *Capita practica ad Anatolium*, 29, PG 40, 1244BC.

19. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 793C.

comes out from it. Thus we must use this thing (recollection of death) like our own breath if possible». ²⁰

When someone perceives the urgency of every moment in the awareness that it may be the last, he will make his life so intense that its totality is summed up in the present moment. Time acquires a new dimension and the most important becomes the present moment in which we can either do the right thing or the wrong. «Take always care of yourself, have in front of your eyes your death and look forward with all your reason in which kind of virtue you will render glory to God». ²¹ And Evagrius says: «Be always mindful of your exit (from this world) and never forget the eternal judgment, and no transgression will be found in your soul». ²²

By the time that a person will understand that this life has been apportioned to him by grace and not by a property of nature as he thinks, he will certainly change his attitude, and he will contemplate his position in this life as a debt in the capital of love and condescension of God. «Man makes his life a meditation of death approaching and living with thought of what is called natural death. In this way he delivers his soul from any bodily care as if he was truly dead while he is still alive. Thus his soul is not attached to perishable goods and is not attracted by them and never learns what greediness is, which deprives him from divine grace». ²³

The inclusion in this life of death and eternal life is far away from a negative attitude towards this life, which comes from fear of the future. The now acquires totality and is united with the future in an uninterrupted course of life. «Become dead in your life and you will live after death». ²⁴

The main importance of what the Fathers call remembrance of death is to be found in the comfort that it gives to those who exercise it, according to the Lord's beatitude (Mt. 5,4), because it drives away the fear of future ceaseless mourning and bears the engagement of eternal happiness. At the same time it ensures virtue because it makes the soul

20. Hesychios the Presbyter, *To Theodulos*, 155, *Philokalia* vol. I, p. 165. Athens 1957.

21. Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechese* 20, 90-93, *Source Chretienne* vol. 104.

22. Evagrius, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 173D.

23. Maximos the Confessor, *Explanation of the prayer of our Father*, PG 90, 900AB.

24. Isaak the Syrian, 'Ascetic Homilies', Homily 44, p. 162. Athens 1976.

unmovable towards evil.²⁵ Thus when someone daily contemplates himself as a deadman buried in his grave, or has the awareness that death approaches him every moment, he becomes capable of partaking of every virtue,²⁶ and he comes to the state of humility,²⁷ for it is natural for one who contemplates his dissolution approaching him to be incapable of pride. Therefore it is impossible for someone not to spend every day of his life devoutly if he regards it as the last of his whole life.²⁸

The Christian Fathers give two different functions to the remembrance of death according to the spiritual state of those who exercise it. Thus in the first case mindfulness of death is recommended to beginners of the spiritual life for two reasons. 1) Preventive, in order to restrain weakening of spiritual zeal and fall into sin. «Remember thy last and thou shalt never sin unto eternity»²⁹. 2) Awakening, in order to deliver them from the lethargy of negligence and enslavement to passions. «If your mind turns towards God and commemorates the eternal judgment, the passion falls immediately and disappears.»³⁰ To spiritually elevated and illuminated souls, mindfulness of death has none of the former uses but is rather identified with mindfulness of God and spiritual joyfulness, for the separation of the soul of a saint from its body is not a cause of fear and anxiety but a certain transition from death to life.³¹ «I do not fear God anymore for I love Him,»³² according to the words of Father Antony.

The two states are completely different. For those who still are in the beginning of the path to perfection mindfulness of death is given as a remedy which has the power to cure voluptuousness and despondency,³³ and to lead a man in security to spiritual progress. «Mindfulness of death is a good educator of body and soul, so that we must always be mindful of death overlooking all else.»³⁴ For those who are advanced on the spiritual path mindfulness of death is a gift of the Holy

25. see Gregory Palamas, *To nun Xeni*, Philokalia vol. 4, p. 113. Athens 1976

26. see Fr. John Colobos, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 216C.

27. see Fr. Cronios, *ibid.*, PG 65, 248C.

28. see John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 797C.

29. *ibid.* PG 88, 800A.

30. Fr. Cronios, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 248B.

31. see *John* 5.24.

32. Fr. Antony, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 85C.

33. see John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 7, PG 88, 804C.

34. Hesychios the Presbyter, *To Theodulos*, 95, Philokalia vol. I, p. 155.

Ghost which makes a Christian safe from falls in the battle against the devil.

For the beginner mindfulness of death is the safe path for obtaining purification from passions³⁵ and preservation of those virtues that have already been acquired. «Mourning is double, it works and it guards.»³⁶ For the beginner on ascetic life the most important work is to remain in his cell and to concentrate his thought on the day of his death, to ponder the dissolution of his body and the pain which comes from the separation of soul and body, and the vanity of this world in order to get rid of dirty and harmful thoughts.³⁷ Thus it is reported in the «sayings of the desert fathers» that when a monk asked Father Amonas how could he be saved, he was told that he should do exactly the same as criminals do when they are in prison. As they are anxious and wonder when the judge will come, and cry in fear, so a monk has to be mindful and careful how he will appear in front of the judgment seat of Christ, and what he will say there, crying during the length of his life.³⁸

Time is given to man in this life in order to mourn for himself,³⁹ but this is possible only to the one who has died to all things and remembers death. The one who is still tied to the world does not cease plotting against himself.⁴⁰ Thus when Father Poemen was worried about something and confessed his thoughts to Father Amonas he received the reproach: «Poemen, are you still alive? Go and stay in your cell and keep in mind that you have already one year in the grave.»⁴¹ Without fear of death and remembrance of the eternal fire it is impossible for man to overwhelm his sloth and his natural desires.⁴²

The Fathers clearly distinguish between fear of death and trembling at death, pointing out the passing nature of fear and elucidating that fear of death is a property of nature which comes from Adam's disobedience, while trembling at death is a sign of unrepented sins.⁴³

35. see *ibid.*, 17, p. 143.

36. Fr. Poemen, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 332B.

37. see Evagrius, *ibid.*, PG 65, 173BC.

38. see Fr. Amonas, *ibid.*, PG 65, 120A.

39. see John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 7, PG 88, 805A: «He Who has called us, has called us here to mourn for ourselves».

40. see *ibid.*, step 6, PG 88, 797B.

41. Fr. Poemen, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 317B.

42. see John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 7, PG 88, 805B.

43. see *ibid.* step 6, PG 88, 793B, and also 739C: «As tin is distinct from sil-

More than a weapon against passions, mindfulness of death constitutes a grace given by God in order to protect man from an absolute withdrawal from God, and to reveal his error when he falls into sin. Thus Father Orsisios says that when the soul is negligent the Holy Spirit withdraws, abandoning her until she loses her fervour, and Satan comes and fills her and the body with every bad passion. If a Christian, however, has a good intention and he merely falls in negligence, then God in His compassion offers to man fear of punishment and mindfulness of death, and guides him to purification in security until the day of his glorious presence.⁴⁴

Mindfulness of death has been defined by the Fathers as one of those fundamental virtues which are characterised as mothers of other virtues. Exactly as in nature the union of male and female brings children into existence, likewise in spiritual nature when a man exercises a virtue and the grace of the Holy Spirit comes, new virtues come to life like spiritual children. According to St. John Climacus († 649): «The remembrance of death amongst those in the midst of society gives birth to distress and meditation of their sins, and even more to sweet acceptance of humiliations. But amongst those who are free from noise, it produces the putting aside of cares, constant prayer and guarding of the mind. And all these virtues are mothers and daughters of the remembrance of death.»⁴⁵

According to the Fathers fear of death is the cause of sin.⁴⁶ Man, feeling his dissolution approaching him, deceives himself that he can be rooted in this life by acquiring power or riches or by trying desperately to taste as much as possible of this life's pleasures because he thinks that in this way he can overcome death. He rather tries as much as possible to forget that his life is going to finish, and he puts his hope in the glory and pleasure he can take from this life. The fear of death guides him to selfishness, and all the power of love which a person has becomes selfish love and man becomes a self-image (αὐτοεἰδωλον) of his passions. To this attitude of man applies the parable of the rich fool. (Lk. 12,13-21). When the end comes then all the life of a man, glorious or rich as it was, seems tragic.

ver, although it resembles it in appearance, so for the discerning there is a clear and obvious difference between the natural and contranatural fear of death».

44. Fr. Orsisios, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 316CD.

45. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 793C.

46. see Isaak the Syrian, *Ascetic Homilies*, Homily 47.

The Fathers, knowing by experience what fear of death is, recommend as remedy mindfulness of death. «The perfect sense of death is free from fear.»⁴⁷ Thus while tears, which come from penitence before death, produce fear of God, that fear of God gives birth to fearlessness and joy. And when constant joy is obtained, holy love bursts into flower.⁴⁸ A soul which is ever ready to die ceases to fear before death and comes to repentance and humble prayer, by which the mind is purified, and she is not attracted any more by the world. By constant remembrance of death, the departure of the soul and the last judgment, an insensible soul softens and comes into perception of its condition.⁴⁹

The ability which one has to discern his spiritual condition is called natural sense, and it constitutes the natural faculty of man which gives him the ability to distinguish between good and bad.⁵⁰ Thus when a man through mindfulness of death takes off from his soul the cover of voluptuousness, which covers this natural sense, he comes to the blessed sorrow and from this to spiritual sense which is the revelation of hidden mysteries and transformation of man into above natural.⁵¹ Thus man, beginning with lower works, reaches the sublime, up to his sanctification.

In the spiritual path mindfulness of death is what helps man to reach a certain stage. After that, mindfulness of death is what protects man from negligence and from turning back to his former sins. By mindfulness of death man becomes dispassionate and unable to harm his fellow man, like a dead man.⁵² So as it is impossible for sin to overcome a dead man, it is also impossible to overcome the one who has acquired mortification.⁵³ «Once the mind is overruled by mindfulness of death it is impossible for man to sin».⁵⁴

In the patristic tradition mindfulness of death is closely related to, and in some cases identified with, sorrow and mourning. Man has an experience of sorrow in his life. But the sorrow which we experience

47. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 796B.

48. see *ibid.*, step 7, PG 88, 813BC.

49. see Fr. Dorotheos, *Ascetic works*, 7th Epistle, para. 192,1-18 Kareas 1983.

50. see Isaak the Syrian *Homily 18*.

51. *ibid.*

52. see Fr. Moses, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 288B.

53. *ibid.*, PG 65, 285C.

54. Fr. Sisoe, *ibid.*, PG 65, 400A.

when we lack one of the desirable goods is a totally different experience from that which is related to mindfulness of death. «For the sadness that is used by God brings an unregrettable change of heart that leads to salvation, while the sadness that is merely human causes death». (2nd Corinthians 7,10). Anxiety and sadness concerning affairs of everyday life or deprivation of goods or intimate persons destroy man, body and soul. It is literally here that the absolute difference of the blessed sadness is appearing clearly, for it is not only harmless for man but on the contrary it fills man with power and courage.⁵⁵ «When we say sorrow, we do not mean the unreasonable one which torments the soul a lot for deprivation of passions or of material things, as those impulses against nature which are not allowed (by the law)... But we mean the reasonable one which has been approved by those who are wise in divine affairs, and which indicates the present evil. Present evil is the sadness of the soul when voluptuousness of the senses rules over rational discretion.»⁵⁶

When man considers that everything perishes away from God and only with God can there be a future, he regrets and changes his will and a new life in Christ begins for him. This sadness that comes by perception of his bad state is a grace coming from God. It is rather the revelation of God to man. But while man is still overwhelmed by his passions, he is not able to contemplate this revelation as light but perceives it in its negative form. He understands that he lives in darkness away from God and he is deprived of any good, and regrets and asks with all his heart to return to his Father's home, even if he has to be the last among the slaves of his father. This is the meaning of the parable of the prodigal son. (Lk. 15,21). When he perceived where he was, he repented and changed his will and said: «Father I have sinned against God and against you», and started back to his Father.⁵⁷ This grace makes man perceive that he is intrinsically dead, and vivifies the person. «This son of mine was dead but now he is alive». (Lk. 15.24).

The beginning of this sadness that has the power to deliver man from sin is always painful according to the measure of love by which a person is bound to material goods. Thus St. John Climacus says that

55. see Gregory Palamas, *To nun Xenī*, Philokalia vol. 4, p. 114,15-19. Athens 1976.

56. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapter on Theology*, 10, Philokalia vol. 2, p. 148.

57. see Gregory Palamas, *To nun Xenī*, Philokalia vol. 4, p. 114,35-40.

«the remembrance of death is a daily death, and the remembrance of our departure is an hourly sighing or groaning.»⁵⁸

From the beginning of repentance, however, man receives a comfort, by the Holy Spirit, which is indescribably sweet and fills him with joy. This coexistence of joy and sadness is known in the patristic literature as joy-making mourning. As the passion of Christ precedes His resurrection, so in spirituality passion is the march for resurrection and resurrection is the end of passion. Thus according to the words of Father John the Carpathian: «It is impossible for the one who is troubled by passions to overcome them without sorrow. But after this sorrow he is filled with great joy and sweet tears and divine contemplations, if he really had pain and sorrow in his heart.»⁵⁹

The sadness that comes from God is connected to joy, because it transforms the soul with the hope of repentance. Because of this joy the yoke of obedience becomes light, and man does not linger to become free of passions and to taste the fruits of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ Thus «the one who wends his way in constant mourning according to God does not cease to feast daily.»⁶¹

Man enjoys his communion with God. For this reason a true sign of those who are mindful of death in the depth of their being, is a voluntary detachment from every creature and complete renunciation of their own will.⁶² On the contrary, if anger and pride are still existing in those who seem to be mourning in a way pleasing to God, then their tears are to be regarded as coming from devilish passions.⁶³ For light can not coexist with darkness (2nd Cor. 6,14).

The remembrance of death is one of those virtues which are never to be forsaken by a Christian, for it has a power to change its profit according to the spiritual state of man and to lead to an ever higher condition. To those who are beginners in the spiritual life, mindfulness of death causes sorrow for their sins and tears, while to those who are in a state of perfection, it brings the ability to look with the eyes

58. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 793B.

59. John the Carpathian, *Encouraging Chapters*, 30, Philokalia vol. 1, p. 282.

60. see Casian the Roman, *To Bishop Kastor, on Sorrow*, Philokalia vol. 1, p. 74-75.

61. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 7, PG 88, 808D.

62. see *ibid.*, step 6, PG 88, 793C.

63. see *ibid.*, step 7, PG 88, 808B.

of their soul to the spiritual hosts.⁶⁴ For this reason St. John Climacus compares mindfulness of death to a bottomless pit which is infinite.⁶⁵ The thought of death is boundless, for it creates a spiritual work which is unlimited. Thus some of the greatest ascetics of the desert, who were indisputably on the highest states of perfection, were declaring on their bier that they are still kept in the same fear of death as they were at the beginning of their solitary life.⁶⁶

When man repents, through the remembrance of death, he is led to an ever deeper perception of his condition and humiliates himself, recognizing his guiltiness, and receives grace from God to comprehend all the states of sin and death, and to live the fall of the whole humanity. This repentance is continued endlessly «until the very strength of his bones is spent.»⁶⁷

Thus while the remembrance of death is presented by the Fathers as a remedy which alters a sinful life, at the same time it is presented as certification of perfection in spiritual life. «If a man does not reach the point where he has the remembrance of death daily before his eyes, he can not be perfect.»⁶⁸

From a first look at the subject it seems that the Christian Fathers contradict themselves. They say that mindfulness of death drives off all fear,⁶⁹ and at the same time they declare that they keep the fear of death until the end of this life.⁷⁰ Again, when they say that they mourn and lament for their sins, simultaneously they say that they are glad and rejoice in the gifts of the Holy Ghost. If someone examines this in depth, however, it can be proved that the mystic Fathers had experienced all those seemingly different conditions.

According to the Eastern tradition, man's life is a continuous fight

64. see *ibid.*, PG 88, 809A.

65. see *ibid.*, step 6, PG 88, 797B.

66. see Fr. Arsenios, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 103C: «When death was approaching Fr. Arsenios, his disciples saw him crying and asked him: even you fear death Father? He answered: Indeed this fear has been with me since I became a monk». see also Fr. Elias, *ibid.*, PG 65, 184A.

67. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 797B.

68. Macarii Aegyptii, *Apophthegmata Macarii*, 232, PG 34, 233AB.

69. see John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 6, PG 88, 796B. See also Fr. Antony, *Apoph. Pat.*, PG 65, 85C.

70. See Fr. Arsenios, *Apoph. Patr.*, PG 65, 103C. see also Fr. Elias, *ibid.*, PG 65, 184A and Fr. Theophilos, Bishop of Alexandria, *ibid.*, PG 65, 201A.

against demonic powers. For the beginner in spiritual life the remembrance of death has the power to stop acting sin and lead to repentance. The fruits of repentance are the several gifts that a Christian receives by the Holy Ghost. By the time that a man tastes these graces he is filled with joy and knows that his sins have been forgiven.

In this final stage of the fight against passions exists the greatest danger in the spiritual life, for Satan fights against man with the delicate passion of pride.⁷¹ The spiritually elevated Christian knows that prideness leads to the loss of grace and in order to resist this weapon of the Devil, descends spiritually into hell. «When we ascend spiritually in the beginning of divine contemplation, as from ignorance to knowledge, in order to avoid vainglory we must be humiliated by sorrow. And we must be sorrowful in a measure as if we were abandoned (by grace) in order to acquire more humility and submit to the glory of God».⁷²

This descent to hell is not a simple thought or act of imagination, but a real experience which has been given as a grace from God. This experience is very deeply imprinted in their mind, so that they can renew it whenever they want to, and especially when they fight against pride⁷³. Thus Father Poemen says: «I truly say, that I lie in this same place where Satan is.»⁷⁴

The natural condition of a man who has been delivered of his passions is one of happiness and communion with God. «God does not ask or desire that man should mourn from sorrow of heart, but rather that out of love for Him, he should rejoice with spiritual laughter.»⁷⁵ Man, however, uses this weapon of the remembrance of death and fear of hell whenever he wants, in order to stop the movement of passions by which Satan fights him.

The patristic tradition relates that this spiritual activity was first revealed to St. Antony, the founder of Christian asceticism. According to the tradition it was revealed to St. Antony that if he wanted to reach the highest stage of perfection he should learn the spiritual activity of a shoe maker from Alexandria. The spiritual work of the shoe

71. see Isaak the Syrian, *Ascetic Homilies*, Homily 49, p. 180: «It is impossible for one to be troubled by the thought of pride, unless he has reached the higher and laudable state».

72. Diadochos, *Ascetic Homily*, Philokalia vol. 1, p. 255, 99.

73. see Archimadrite Sophrony, *Staretz Silouan*, p. 232, Essex 1978.

74. Fr. Poemen, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 364B.

75. John Climacus, *Ladder*, step 7, PG 88, 809C.

maker was the thought that everybody was saved in that city except himself, who owed go to hell for his sins⁷⁶. Thus St. Antony exercised this thought and made it known to other ascetics of the desert. This work is one of the most difficult known to Eastern asceticism and impossible to be practised except by very few who have reached perfection. Thus Father Sisoe was saying to his disciples that, «if I had one of Antony's thoughts, I would have been like a fire; but I know that only with the greatest labour a man becomes able to keep this thought.»⁷⁷

76. see Paul Evergetinos, *Evergetinos*, vol. 1, inquiry 45, para. 83, p. 411. Athens 1957.

77. Fr. Sisoe, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 393C.