

On the Passions

From Homily 32, by St. Isaac the Syrian (7th c.)

How sweet are the origins of the passions¹! Sometimes a man can cut off the passions and be at peace because of his distance from them, and he rejoices that they have ceased; he cannot, however, extirpate the causes of the passions. For this reason we are tempted against our will. When it is by the passions, we are grieved; but we cherish their origins and would have them remain in us. We do not desire sin, but we accept with pleasure the causes that bring it upon us. For this reason the second (the causes) by their activity become the sources of the first (sins)².

¹ St. Isaac, *Homily 2*: “When we wish to give a collective name to the passions, we call them *world* (see 1 Jn. 2:15-17). And when we wish to designate them specifically according to their names, we call them *passions*...These are the passions: love of wealth; gathering objects of any kind; bodily pleasure, from which comes the passion of carnal intercourse; love of esteem, from which springs envy; the wielding of power; pride in the trappings of authority; stateliness and pomposity; human glory, which is the cause of resentment; fear for the body...But that I may speak briefly: the world is the carnal way of life and the ‘mind of the flesh’ (Rom. 8:7). Hence, a man’s elevation above the world can also be recognized from these two things: from the good transformation of his way of life and from a discernment of his thoughts.” *Homily 3*: “The passions are, consequently, an addition to nature from causes in the soul. Yet by nature the soul is passionless...The passions, therefore, entered into the soul afterwards, and it is not right to say that the passions belong to the soul, even though she is moved by them...If, therefore, virtue is the natural health of the soul, then the passions are an illness of the soul which befalls and invades her nature and despoils her proper health...Every passion that exists for our benefit has been given by God. The passions of the body have been implanted in it for its benefit and growth, and the same is true with respect to the passions of the soul...And whenever the soul, abandoning what belongs to her, follows after the body, she is immediately harmed, as the divine Apostle said: ‘The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, and these two are contrary the one to the other’ (Gal. 5:17). Let no one, therefore, blaspheme God, saying that He has imposed the passions and sin upon our nature...For that which is proper to a nature does not destroy it...Therefore, since it is known that the passions of the soul and body oppose one another, it is evident that although the soul should employ something that helps and relieves the body, this thing should not be thought to belong to the soul’s nature. For what is proper to the soul’s nature is death to the body...[T]he passions move in the man who is clad with a body, whether he wills it or not. Wherefore every man must guard himself.”

² “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death...Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not

The man who loves the origins of the passions is an involuntary bondsman, and against his will he is enslaved to the passions. He who hates his sins will cease to sin, and he who confesses them will receive forgiveness. It is impossible for a man to forsake the habit of sin if he does not first acquire a hatred of sin; and it is impossible to receive forgiveness before a confession of iniquities³. With the latter (confession) there is real abasement; and with the former (hatred of sin) there is remorse arising from shame that cleaves to the heart.

It is impossible for a man to forsake the habit of sin if he does not first acquire a hatred of sin; and it is impossible to receive forgiveness before a confession of iniquities.

If we do not hate those things which are blameworthy, we cannot smell the stench of their activity; and so long as we carry them in ourselves, we shall not be able to perceive their malodor. Therefore, until you cast away from yourself that which is unseemly, you will not comprehend the disgrace that entangles you, nor the shame that arises from it. But when you see your burden in others, understand the dishonor that covers you. Withdraw from evil, and immediately you will comprehend its malodor. For if you do not withdraw, you will never learn it, nay rather, you will put on its stench like a beautiful fragrance, and you will reckon the nakedness of your shame to be a veil of glory.

Blessed is the man who has withdrawn far from this darkness and sees himself! For within it clear vision and discernment cannot operate. How, indeed, could the beclouded discernment of such a man distinguish what is necessary? Blessed is the man who has put away the heavy-headedness of his intoxication and has understood his own insatiable debauchery by seeing it in others. For then he will know his own shame. But so long as a man carries in himself the drunken debauchery of his sins, everything that he does appears comely in his eyes. For when nature leaves its

know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 1:14-15; 4:1-4).

³ “Above all let us make our confession to our good judge (i.e., father confessor), and to him alone, though to all if he so commands. Wounds shown in public will not grow worse, but will be healed...Confession is like a bridle that keeps the soul which reflects on it from committing sin, but anything left unconfessed we continue to do without fear as if in the dark” (St. John of the Ladder, Step 4, *On Obedience*).

rightful order⁴, it is no matter whether it be intoxicated with wine or with lusts, for both alike drive it from its proper state, and both produce an identical inflammation in the body; the means may be different, but the resulting concoction is the same, and the derangement is identical. The different causes are not equal, but in their recipients there is no distinction.

Every rest is followed by hardship, and every hardship endured for God is followed by rest. Everything that is in this world is subject to change, and furthermore a man undergoes change in contrary ways, whether in this age, or in the age to come, or at the time of his departure; and this is especially true with respect to the pleasure that comes from licentiousness, and the suffering that a man endures for the sake of sanctification and which opposes that pleasure. Now God provides in His compassion that a man will taste this punishment either while he is journeying on the road or when he reaches its end; then, by reason of His rich mercies, a man will

⁴ Romans 1:26 (NKJV) – “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use (Gk., *tēn physikēn chrēsin*) for what is against nature (Gk., *para physin*).” “Passions, then, are a perturbation of the soul contrary to nature (Gk., *para physin*), in disobedience to reason (Gk., *pros ton logon*)” (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* Bk. II, chap. 13). N.B. *Reason* refers ultimately to the Son of God, the Word (Gk., *Logos*; cf. Jn. 1:1-3, 14), by whom the natural universe was created by God’s design and purpose. “A culpable passion is an impulse of the soul that is contrary to nature (Gk., *para physin*)” (St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Love*, 35). “Of the things contingent upon those give us by God, some are in the soul, some are in the body, and some relate to the body. Those in the soul are spiritual knowledge and ignorance, forgetfulness and memory, love and hate, fear and courage, distress and joy, and so on. Those in the body are pleasure and pain, sensation and numbness, health and disease, life and death, and so on. Those relating to the body are having children and not having children, wealth and poverty, fame and obscurity, and so on. Some of these are regarded as good and others as evil. Not one of them is evil in itself. According to how they are used they may rightly be called good or evil...In all things misuse (Gk., *parachrēsis*) is a sin.” (St. Maximos the Confessor, *Second Century on Love*, 76; *Third Century on Love*, 86). “God neither caused nor created evil and, therefore, those who assert that certain passions come naturally to the soul are quite wrong. What they fail to realize is that we have taken natural attributes of our own and turned them into passions. For instance, the seed which we have for the sake of procreating children is abused by us for the sake of fornication. Nature has provided us with anger as something to be turned against the serpent (i.e., the devil), but we have used it against our neighbor. We have a natural urge to excel in virtue, but instead we compete in evil. Nature stirs within us the desire for glory, but that glory is of a heavenly kind. It is natural for us to be arrogant – against the demons. Joy is ours by nature, but it should be joy on account of the Lord and for the sake of doing good to our neighbor. Nature has given us resentment, but that ought to be against the enemies of our souls. We have a natural desire for food, but not surely for profligacy” (St. John of the Ladder, Step 26, *On Expert Discernment*).

pass through punishment as a recompense (for pleasure)⁵; but through rest, only as an earnest (for suffering endured for sanctification's sake), so that the interest on the good (deeds done) does not eat away its own capital; but for evil (deeds), yes – as it is said: He who is chastised here eats away his own Gehenna (i.e., hell; see Mk. 9:43).

Beware of the freedom that precedes an evil slavery. Beware of the consolation that precedes warfare. Beware of the knowledge that is acquired before an encounter

**If we are all sinners
and no man is superior
to the temptations of
sin, it is certainly true
that no virtue is more
pre-eminent than
repentance.**

with temptations; but especially beware of the ardent love that is prior to the completion of repentance. If we are all sinners and no man is superior to the temptations of sin, it is certainly true that no virtue is more pre-eminent than repentance. For a man can never complete the work of repentance. It is always suitable for every sinner and righteous man who wishes to gain salvation. There is no limit to perfection, for even the perfection of the perfect is truly without

completion. And for this very reason repentance is bounded neither by periods of time nor by works until a man's death. Remember that every pleasure is followed by disgust and bitterness as inseparable companions.

Beware of joy that does not have conjoined to it the cause of change. For you cannot understand the limit and the cause of the change of anything that is provided by a hidden dispensation from above. Fear those things that are considered to possess uniformity, for it is said that they are outside the path. He who knows wisely to steer

⁵ “When God the Logos created human nature He did not make the senses susceptible either to pleasure or to pain; instead, He implanted in it a certain noetic capacity through which men could enjoy Him in an inexpressible way. By this capacity I mean the intellect's longing for God. But on his creation the first man, through an initial movement towards sensible objects, transferred this longing to his senses, and through them began to experience pleasure in a way which is contrary to nature. Whereupon God in His providential care for our salvation implanted pain in us as a kind of chastising force (see Gen. 3:16-19; Prov. 3:11-12); and so through pain the law of death was wisely rooted in the body, thus setting limits to the intellect's manic longing, directed, in a manner contrary to nature, towards sensible objects” (St. Maximos the Confessor, *Philokalia*, vol. 2 [Fourth Century of Various Texts, 33]).

the raft of the world has conjoined change to everything that is His; and what is outside of this is a shadow.

Relaxation of the members is followed by wandering and confusion of the thoughts; immoderate activity is followed by despondency; and despondency is followed by wandering. But the former wandering differs from the latter wandering. The former originating from relaxation is followed by the warfare of fornication, but the latter originating from despondency is followed by the forsaking of one's solitude and roaming from place to place. Righteous works with moderation and laborious perseverance are beyond price; slackening in them increases lust, but excess, on the other hand, increases confusion⁶.

Patiently endure the folly of your nature which prevails against you, my brother, for you ready yourself to attain the wisdom that holds the everlasting crown of sovereignty. Do not be frightened by the turbulence of your Adamitic body, fashioned to enjoy that delight (the knowledge of which passes the understanding of carnal man) when it will put on the heavenly Image, who is the King of Peace. Do not be troubled by the change and turbulence of nature, for the hardship caused by this quickly passes from the man who accepts it gladly. The passions are like dogs that are wont to spend their time before the butchers' shops; they run away at the sound of a man's voice, but if they are left unattended, they attack like great lions. Set every small desire at naught, that you may not ponder upon the vehemence of its burning. For patience shown for a short time with respect to small matters disperses

⁶ Note here the genealogy of passions and vices, the opposite of which is true for the virtues. For instance: "[Gluttony's] firstborn son is the servant of fornication, the second is hardness of heart, and the third is sleepiness. From me flow a sea of dirty thoughts, waves of filth, floods of unknown and unspeakable impurities. My daughters are laziness, talkativeness, breezy familiarity, jesting, facetiousness, contradiction, stubbornness, contempt, disobedience, stolidity of mind, captivity, boastfulness, audacity, love of worldly things, followed by impure prayer, distracted thoughts, and sudden and often unexpected catastrophes, with which is linked that most evil of all my daughters, namely despair...Gluttony is the mother of lust, and vainglory is the mother of despondency. Dejection and anger are the offspring of those three, and the mother of pride is vainglory" (St. John of the Ladder, Steps 14 and 26). "There are eight ruling passions: gluttony, avarice (greed), and self-esteem (vainglory) – the three principal passions; and unchastity, anger, dejection, listlessness (boredom/tedium), and arrogance (pride) – the five subordinate passions. In the same way, among the virtues opposed to these there are three that are all-embracing, namely, total shedding of possessions, self-control, and humility, and five deriving from them, namely, purity, gentleness (meekness), joy, courage, and self-belittlement – and then come all the other virtues" (St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines*, 91).

the danger of great ones. It is impossible to overcome great evils, if you do not subdue the lesser.

Remember, O brother, the state wherein you will be found, by which mortality is broken and which has no part in life that slowly takes its course and is maintained by means of bodily humors. In that state there is no warmth of the constitution, which by the enticements of pleasure causes hardship for the infantile nature. Patiently endure the toil of the struggle into which you have been led for trial, that you may receive a crown from God and, having passed away from this world, you may find rest. Remember also that rest which has no end, that life without enticements, that perfect state, that unchanging mode of life, and that compelling captivity of divine love that dominates nature, of which things may we be deemed worthy by the grace of Christ, to whom with the unoriginated Father and the All-holy Spirit be glory, both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.