

Prayer and Meditation

From an anonymous father of the Egyptian desert

A brother asked one of the Fathers, "What shall I do? My thoughts are always turned to lust without allowing me an hour's respite, and my soul is tormented by it." He said to him, "Every time the demons suggest these thoughts to you, do not argue with them. For the activity of demons always is to suggest, and suggestions are not sins, for they cannot compel; but it rests with you to welcome them, or not to welcome them. Do you know what the Midianites did? They adorned their daughters and presented them to the Israelites. They did not compel anyone, but those who consented, sinned with them, while the others were enraged and put them to death. It is the same with thoughts."

The brother answered the old man, "What shall I do, then, for I am weak and passion overcomes me?" He said to him, "Watch your thoughts, and every time they begin to say something to you, do not answer them but rise and pray; kneel down, saying, 'Son of God, have mercy on me.'"

Then the brother said to him, "Look, Abba, I meditate, and there is no compunction in my heart because I do not understand the meaning of the words." The other said to him, "Be content to meditate. Indeed, I have learned that Abba Poemen and many other Fathers uttered the following saying, 'The magician does not understand the meaning of the words which he pronounces, but the wild animal who hears it understands, submits, and bows to it. So it is with us also; even if we do not understand the meaning of the words we are saying, when the demons hear them, they take fright and go away.'" END

From "The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers," by Benedicta Ward, (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986), pp. 16-17