

Mental Imagery in Eastern Orthodox Private Devotion

by Father Sergei Sveshnikov

Just as there can be a properly trained voice, there can be a properly trained soul. [1]
—Fr. Alexander Yelchaninov

This presentation is based on the research that I undertook for a book titled [*Imagine That... : Mental Imagery in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Private Devotion*](#), published in paperback in February of 2009 with the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop Kyrill of San Francisco. The work is an analytical comparison of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox attitudes toward mental imagery. In this presentation, I wish to focus specifically on the Orthodox tradition of prayer.

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Eastern Orthodoxy displays a great degree of uniformity in following a path of stillness of thought and silence of mind to achieve the prayer of heart in private devotion. Saint John Climacus writes in *The Ladder* (28:19) that “the beginning of prayer consists in chasing away invading thoughts...” (285) The mind is to be freed from all thoughts and images and focused on the words of prayer. Further in the chapter on prayer (28), St. John instructs not to accept any sensual images during prayer, lest the mind falls into insanity (42; 289); and not to gaze upon even necessary and spiritual things (59; 292).

Unlike some forms of Roman Catholic spirituality, the Orthodox Tradition does not encourage the use of mental imagery. In fact, it almost appears to forbid sensory imagination during prayer altogether. In the words of one of the contemporary Orthodox elders, Abbot Nikon (Vorobyev) (1894-1963), “that, which sternly, decisively, with threats and imploring is forbidden by the Eastern Fathers—Western ascetics strive to acquire through all efforts and means” (424).

One of the best summaries of the Orthodox patristic tradition of prayer is contained in the works of Bishop Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) (1807-1867), a nineteenth-century scholar, theologian, and saint. Having studied the works of both Eastern and Western saints in their original languages, St. Ignatii was also known as a man of prayer, and his writings breathe not only of academic vigor, but of personal practical experience as well.

St. Ignatii certainly acknowledges that there are visions from God which are shown to those “who are renewed by the Holy Spirit, who put off the old Adam, and put on the New” (*Works* 2004, 1:86). “Thus,” he writes, “the holy Apostle Peter during prayer saw a notable sheet descending from heaven. Thus, an angel appeared to Cornelius the centurion during prayer. Thus, when Apostle Paul was praying in the Jerusalem temple, the Lord appeared to him and commanded him to immediately leave Jerusalem...” (1:86) But St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) categorically forbids seeking or expecting such “supernatural states”:

The praying mind must be in a fully truthful state. Imagination, however alluring and well-appearing it may be, being the willful creation of the mind itself, brings the latter out of the state of Divine truth, and leads the mind into a state of self-praise and deception, and this is why it is rejected in prayer.

The mind during prayer must be very carefully kept without any images, rejecting all images, which are drawn in the ability of imagination... Images, if the mind allows them during prayer, will become an impenetrable curtain, a wall between the mind and God. (1:75)

Saint Isaac of Syria (d. c. 700), a bishop and theologian, writing centuries earlier, conveys a similar warning to those who desire visions, saying that such a person is “tempted in his mind by the devil who mocks him” (174).

Specifically addressing devotees’ visions of the Lord and the saints, St. Ignatii points out that human imagination can lead to fake sensory experiences, falsely recognized by the person as originating outside of his or her mind:

Guard yourself from imagination, which can make you fancy that you see the Lord Jesus Christ, that you touch and embrace Him. This is empty play of puffed-up and proud self-opinion! This is deadly self-praise! (1:33)

Imagining the Lord and his saints gives to the mind as if materiality, leads it to the false, prideful opinion of self—leads the soul into a false state, a state of deceptive self-praise. (1:76-7)

If during your prayer there appears to your senses or spontaneously in your mind an image of Christ, or of an Angel, or of any Saint—in other words, any image whatsoever—do not accept this apparition as true in any way, do not pay any attention to it, and do not enter into a conversation with it. Otherwise, you will surely suffer deceit and most serious damage to your soul, which has happened to many. (1:75-6; see also Philokalia 5:233)

In other words, according to St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov), purposefully creating images in one’s mind, and even accepting those appearing spontaneously, is not only dangerous spiritually, but can also lead to the damage of the soul, or psychological problems, “which,” he says, “has happened to many.” In this particular passage, St. Ignatii is reacting to the experience of some Western saints, which he viewed as dangerous. But cases of mental disorders facilitated by improper prayer or state of mind are also known in various Orthodox literature, especially *paterikons*.

Saint Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022), writing in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries, warns against the method of prayer later used by St. Ignatius of Loyola and other Western saints as potentially leading to mental problems:

The specific features of this... type of prayer are such: when one, standing at prayer and lifting up his hands, and eyes, and mind to heaven, imagines in his mind divine councils, the heavenly goodness, the ranks of angels, and the dwellings of the saints; in other words, all that he has heard from the Divine Scriptures, he collects into his mind... But during this type of prayer, little-by-little, [he] starts to puff-up in his heart, not understanding this himself; it seems to him that what he is doing is from God’s grace [given] for his comfort, and he asks God to let him always be in this state. But this is a sign of great deception... Such a person, [if he practices this type of prayer in seclusion][2] will hardly be able to stay sane. But, even if it so happens that he does not go insane, he, nonetheless, will not be able to acquire virtues... (Philokalia 5:463-4)

Commenting on this passage, St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) calls imaginative prayer “most dangerous”:

The most dangerous of the incorrect types of prayer consists of the person creating imaginary pictures, seemingly borrowing them from the Holy Scripture, but in reality—from his own state of fall and self-pride; and with these pictures he flatters his own self-opinion, his fall, his sinfulness, deceives himself. Obviously, everything which is created by the imagination of our fallen nature, does not exist in reality, is make-belief and false... The one who imagines, with the first step on the path of prayer leaves the area of truth and enters the area of deceit, passions, sin, Satan. (Works 1:160-1)

The teaching of St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) continues the tradition of prayer carried by the Fathers of the Eastern Church. Much of this tradition was compiled into a large work titled Philokalia (Gr. “love of the good”), which contains the writings of the Eastern Fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries. This work, a staple of Orthodox spirituality and an unquestionable Orthodox authority on prayer, forbids the use of mental imagery in no uncertain terms. Saint Macarius of Egypt (A.D. 300-391), for example, writes that Satan appears to those seeking visions as an angel of light to foster in them a proud opinion of themselves as visionaries of the divine, and by this self-pride to lead them to destruction (see 630). Saint Nilus of Sinai (died c. 430) a disciple of Saint John Chrysostom, teaches that the mind must be “deaf and dumb during prayer” (Philokalia 2:208). “When you pray,” he writes, “do not imagine God in any form and do not allow your mind to form any image...” (2:215) St. Nilus also warns to not even desire to see any images or visions: “Do not desire to see any face or image during prayer. Do not desire to see Angels, or Powers, or Christ, in order not to become insane, having accepted a wolf for the shepherd and having worshipped the enemies—demons” (2:221).

Likewise, another one of the Eastern Fathers, Saint John Climacus (A.D. 525-606) asserts that at least some visions and revelations may be created by the demon of pride who uses them to plant and nurture self-pride in devotees:

When the demon of pride becomes established in his servants, then, appearing to them in a dream or in a vision in an image of an angel of light or a martyr, gives to them revelations of mysteries, and as if a gift of [spiritual] gifts, in order that these unfortunate ones, having succumbed to the temptation, completely lost their mind. (191)

A Sinai Father, Saint Gregory (c. 1260-1346) shows an unbroken continuity of the patristic tradition of prayer and continues to caution against mental imagery during prayer:

[N]ever accept if you see anything physical or spiritual, inside yourself or out, even if it is an image of Christ, or an Angel, or some Saint, or a light appears to you and shows in your mind. The mind itself has a natural power of imagination and can easily create a phantom image of a thing, which it desires... In the same way, a recollection of good or bad things usually shows their images in the mind and leads the mind to imagination... (Philokalia 5:224)

In another place, St. Gregory repeats the same warning even more sternly:

When doing your task [of prayer], you see light or fire outside [yourself] or in, or a face—of Christ, for example, or an Angel, or someone else’s—do not accept it, in order not to suffer

damage. And yourself do not make images; and those that come on their own—do not accept them, and do not allow your mind to keep them. (Philokalia 5:233)

It becomes clear, therefore, why the Eastern Tradition warns so sternly against accepting any images whatsoever, even those seemingly coming from God. Instead, an emphasis is placed on humility and repentance, which are seen as the foundation and the goal of prayer. Saint Ignatii (Bryanchaninov), summarizing this emphasis for novices, wrote:

Concerning voices and apparitions, one must have an even greater caution: here, the demons' deceit is closer and more dangerous... This is why the holy fathers taught those beginning prayer not to trust voices and apparitions—but to reject them and not accept them, leaving this to the judgment and the will of God, but for themselves considering humility more useful than any voice or apparition. (Works 2004, 5:306)

Mental^[3] prayer, according to Orthodox authors, is achieved “when the *nous*.^[4] pure from any thoughts and ideas, prays to God without distraction” (Hierotheos 145). This type of prayer is achieved by stilling the mind, rather than rousing it with ecstasy, by ignoring apparitions, rather than accepting them as a sign of personal perfection, and by deliberately keeping the mind from creating thoughts and images, rather than using it to exercise imagination. Thus, ecstatic visions, which were the core of private devotion of some Roman Catholic saints, are considered by the Eastern Tradition to be a temptation to either avoid or fight off, rather than “favors” from God, as Teresa and Mechtilde call them. Similarly, desiring the images and visions or creating them with the use of imagination is seen as a dangerous practice, leading to neuro-psychological trauma, rather than as an acceptable form of spiritual exercise.

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In the context of forbidding attitude of the Eastern Fathers toward mental images, it seems necessary to briefly mention elaborate and very imaginative Orthodox iconography.^[5] Icons in the Orthodox Tradition are used for prayer, meditation, and contemplation. Yet, even during prayer before icons, which obviously present visual imagery, the use of mental imagery, according to the Orthodox Tradition, is to be avoided. St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) writes:

The holy icons are accepted by the Holy Church for the purpose of arousing pious memories and feelings, but not at all for arousing imagination. Standing before an icon of the Savior, stand as if before the Lord Jesus Christ himself, Who is invisibly everywhere present and by His icon is in that place, where the icon is; standing before an icon of the Mother of God, stand as if before the Most-Holy Virgin Herself; but keep your mind without images: there is a great difference between being in the presence of the Lord or standing before the Lord and imagining the Lord. (Works 2004, 1:76)

The specific canons and stylistic rules which guide the writing of an Orthodox icon, therefore, as well as the proper training of the mind, may be seen as the means to achieve the goal formulated above by St. Ignatii—the real presence before the Lord, rather than to express or influence visual imagination.

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Having briefly described the Orthodox position on the use of mental imagery in prayer, I highlighted the rejection and non-acceptance of visions and imagination by the Fathers of the Church. However, there are some notable exceptions and inconsistencies. On one hand, patristic and Orthodox authors are certainly aware that some (perhaps, many) saints do have visions which do come from God. Orthodox hagiographic accounts abound in visions and revelation, including some in what appears to be the state of spiritual ecstasy. Of the authors, whose works were examined above, St. John Climacus, for example, recounts an apparition he had during prayer, in which he even had a dialogue with an angel:

[A]n angel enlightened me when I thirsted for more revelations. And again, being in the same state [of seeing], I asked him: "What was the Lord like before He accepted the visible image of human nature?" But the Prince of Heavenly Hosts could not teach me this, and he was not allowed. Then I asked him to reveal to me in what state He is now. "In one that is specific to Him," he said, "but not in these." I asked again: "What is His state of sitting on the right of the Father?" He answered: "It is impossible to accept the understanding of this mystery through hearing." I begged him to lead me to that, which I desired. But he said: "This time has not yet come, because you still have too little of the fire of incorruption in you." However, I do not know and cannot say whether I was in the body or out of the body when this was happening to me. (274-5)

It is interesting in this passage that St. John kept asking the angels about the matters which are difficult to place within a personal soteriological context. Indeed, it may be questionable whether knowing in what state Christ sits on the right of the Father would bring anyone closer to salvation. It is telling that the angel refused to answer and elaborate on these matters. Nonetheless, it appears that St. John not only had a vision, but accepted it, conversed with it, and desired more visions or revelations.

St. Gregory of Sinai in retelling^[6] about his meeting a holy monk by the name of Maximus Capsokalivite says that the latter not only had visions, but also disagreed with those who rejected them. Maximus wondered why some people rejected visions despite God Himself offering them to His people through the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28):

Thus, the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord uplifted upon a high throne and surrounded by seraphim. The first-martyr Stephan saw the heavens opened and the Lord Jesus on the right of the Father, and the rest. In the same way, today also the servants of Christ are given to see various visions, which some do not believe and do not accept them as truthful, but consider them deceits, and those who see them they call being in a state of deceit. (Philokalia 5:474)

It is unclear whether Maximus would have considered most Roman Catholic ecstatic visions to be from God, but he does add a qualifier: "[W]hen this grace of the Holy Spirit descends upon someone, then it shows to him not something usual from the things of this sensory world, but shows that, which he has never seen and never imagined" (5:475). A very similar thought is contained in the teachings of St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov), who, while being one of the most outspoken critics of visions, contends that some of them are true:

True spiritual visions and feelings belong to the next age, are fully non-material, cannot be explained in the area of senses, through a material word: such is the true sign of that which is truly spiritual.—The voice of the Spirit is non-material; it is fully clear and fully non-material: it is a noetic voice. In the same way, all spiritual feelings are non-material, invisible, cannot be explained or clearly relayed through human material words... (Works 2004, 5:306-7)

Yet, even St. Ignatii would probably acknowledge that some visions “relayed through human material words” were nonetheless “truly spiritual.” I am not aware of any Orthodox authors, for example, disputing the spirituality of hagiographic accounts of the visions of an angel as told by Abba Dorotheus of Gaza (A.D. 505-565), or the visions of the Theotokos by Saints Andrew and Epiphanius (10th century), Sergius of Radonezh (ca. 1314-1392), Sergius and Herman of Valaam (14th century ?), Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-1783), or Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), whom St. Ignatii revered as a master of prayer (see, for example, *Works* 2004, 1:198), or the vision of the Lord by the same Saint Seraphim during a liturgy.

It appears that the seeming inconsistency in relation to visions in Orthodox patristic writings, may come from their (the writings’) pastoral nature. While the Fathers are aware of true visions from God and experience them, they are also aware of the real dangers along the spiritual path and warn less experienced adepts to not accept any visions until a certain level of spiritual maturity and a skill of discerning spirits is reached. In other words, the Fathers warn the novices not to have the Satan for an iconographer. Having founded prayer on repentance and humility, rather than on visions and revelations, a person stays on the correct path and is able to overcome the temptations and attacks of the devil regardless of the presence of any visions or their absence. Founding prayer on ecstatic visions, on the other hand, according to the Orthodox thought, puts the soul, especially that of a novice, on the path of great danger.

Willful and conscious use of imagination, on the other hand, finds favorable or at least tolerant mentions in Orthodox works influenced by Western spirituality. Saint Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894), for example, who is usually seen as somewhat more tolerant of Western spirituality than is St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) (with whom St. Theophan entered into polemic on more than one occasion), wrote that imagining the Lord is acceptable: “When you contemplate the Divine, then you may imagine the Lord however you want,” but he adds: “During prayer, you should not hold [in your mind] any images... If you allow images then there is a danger to start praying to a dream” (qtd. in Kuraev, *Challenge* 121).

Another example of Western influence may be seen in the works of Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain (1749-1809), one of the compilers of the *Philokalia*. His famous work, which was printed in English under the title *Unseen Warfare*, was based on *Combattimento Spirituale* by a Roman Catholic priest Lorenzo Scupoli (*Handbook*, 26), while Nicodemos’ *Spiritual Exercises* was based on *Esercizii Spirituali* by Piramonti (28). Nicodemos, in his *Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, warns about the dangers of using imagination, but concedes: “Finally, it is permissible, when fighting against certain inappropriate and evil imaginations presented by the enemy, to use other appropriate and virtuous imaginations” (152). The wisdom of such advice was questioned by St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) who suggested that one of his correspondents stop reading the *Unseen Warfare* (which had recently been translated into Russian by Theophan the Recluse) (see

Works 2004, 5:274). While we may never know whether the saint's correspondent heeded the advice, what is important here is the very fact that even works by respected Orthodox authors, such as St. Nicodemus, may be questioned without much hesitation due to the dissonance they create with the strictly Orthodox path of prayer.

Summary

While differences in opinion of Orthodox authors, such as St. Ignatii (Bryanchaninov) and St. Theophan the Recluse, exist, the overall attitude of the Orthodox Tradition forbids the use of mental imagery in prayer. Even though the adepts on the higher rungs of the spiritual ladder are reported to have visions^[7] and revelations, the general advice to those who have not achieved perfection is to reject or at least ignore all and any visions and apparitions as potentially dangerous. The basis and the founding principle of Orthodox prayer is seen in repentance and humility, rather than in ecstasy and “favours.”

With respect to the conscious use of imagination during prayer, the prohibition of the Orthodox Tradition is equally strong. Some use of imagination is viewed by some authors as permissible outside of prayer, but all the Orthodox sources known to me unanimously speak against the conscious and willful use of imagination during prayer. Thus, there appears to be a clear difference in the area of the use of mental imagery between some Roman Catholic traditions of prayer as exemplified by Saints Teresa of Avila, Angela of Foligno, and Ignatius of Loyola on the one hand, and the Orthodox tradition of prayer as presented by Saints Ignatii (Bryanchaninov), Nilus and Gregory of Sinai, John Climacus, and others. While some of the theologians quoted above may have written in part in reaction to the Western mystical experience, others—Macarius (4th century), Nilus (5th century), John (6th century), Isaac (7th century), and Simeon the New Theologian (10-11th centuries)—constitute an earlier tradition that can be seen as having a formative influence on the spirituality of later saints and theologians within the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Thus, a definite, unbroken, and non-fragmented tradition of rejecting mental imagery in private devotion can be seen as existing in the East from at least the fourth century until the present.

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Notes

[1] Here *et passim* translation from Russian is mine—S.S.

[2] That is to say, perhaps, devotes enough time and effort to it.

[3] In Orthodoxy, mental prayer is called “noetic,” from the Greek νοησις—“mind.”

[4] Mind.

[5] Similar questions can be raised concerning Orthodox hymnography.

[6] It appears that the text in *Philokalia* was written down by someone else who had either heard or read the account of St. Gregory.

[7] Including the “uncreated light” of the hesychasts.

Source: <http://saintsilouan.org/orthodoxy/prayer/mental-imagery-in-eastern-orthodox-private-%C2%A0devotion/>