

The Anthropology of the Heart in the Spiritual Tradition of the Christian East

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Introduction

“There are infinite depths to the human heart:” writes St. Macarius of Egypt.¹ The idea of the heart (*kardia*) is one of the most beautiful and at the same time one of the most ambiguous and complicated concepts in the spiritual tradition of the Christian East.² First of all, the heart is the physical centre of man, as St. Macarius writes: “The heart directs and governs all the other organs of the body.”³ While the many references to ‘the heart’ do genuinely refer to the physical organ of the human body the heart clearly signifies much more than this. The heart signifies the fullness of the spiritual life of the whole man, with all his faculties, powers and activities.⁴

Very often we find in the writings of the Eastern Fathers concepts such as the prayer of the heart, the divine presence in the heart, the purity of the heart, the attentiveness of the heart, and similar. What do they signify and what is their theological meaning for Christian life? In this paper we shall consider the concept of the heart in the context of the anthropology of man with a particular emphasis on the tradition of the spiritual attentiveness or watchfulness in the Christian East.

¹ Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 15:32*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 120; PG 34, 558-570.

² Cf. Lampe, Geoffrey William Hugo, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 702.

³ Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 15:20*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies...*, p. 116; PG 34, 558-570.

⁴ Cf. Spidlik, Tomas, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, Kalama-zoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986, pp. 103-104.

The Prayer of the Heart

If we look for the source of our prayer, we find that Scripture speaks sometimes of our soul or the spirit, but most often of the human heart – it is the heart of man that prays.⁵ Since we cannot perform prayer without a break, the Eastern Fathers considered the call to “pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17),” more as a call to a state of prayer, that is, a habitual disposition of the heart, which somehow in itself deserves the name of prayer, aside from the acts of prayer which it produces with greater or lesser frequency.⁶ St. Evagrius writes that “we have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast constantly, but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing.”⁷ St. John Chrysostom teaches: “It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop,... while buying or selling,... or even while cooking.”⁸ Prayer is a vital necessity for man and so it must influence the daily activities of life and be brought into humble, everyday situations. This state of Christian prayer is the disposition proper to the entire spiritual life, a steadfast disposition of the human heart, a state of ever greater attentiveness to the deifying presence of God in the life of the Christian. The question remains, however, how is it practically possible to realize this commandment of unceasing prayer and thus to grow in spiritual attentiveness?

First of all we should mention the three stages of Jesus prayer. As the saintly Theophan the Recluse writes, the first stage of prayer is the prayer of the body, the second stage is the attentive prayer, and the third one is the prayer of feeling.⁹ According to the teachings of the Eastern Fathers the aim of the Jesus prayer is to strive for to the third stage. The saintly Theophan explains that the most important is the standing and walking before God with a heart that is praising the Lord.¹⁰ Following the teachings of the Fathers, the saintly Theophan writes that the Jesus Prayer is not only for monks but also for the lay people, since it is not some kind of complicated technical activity but a simple one.¹¹ For the beginners’ exercise of Jesus prayer he advises to have some concrete time of silence in

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, no. 2562.

⁶ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 105.

⁷ St. Evagrius Ponticus, *Capita Practica ad Anatolium*, 49, in: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2742; PG 40, 1245C.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Eclogae ex Diversis Homiliis*, 2, in: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2743; PG 63, 585.

⁹ Cf. St. Theophan the Recluse, *Puty ko Spaseniju (The Way to Salvation)*, in: *O Molitve Iisusovoj (About Jesus Prayer)*, Ukrainskaja Pravoslavnaja Cerkov (Ukrainian Orthodox Church), Melisa, p. 42.

¹⁰ Cf. idem, *Sobranije Pisem (A Collection of Letters)*, in: *O Molitve Iisusovoj (About Jesus Prayer)*, p. 40.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 41.

the morning and in the evening, preferably after the recitation of Daily Office or other prayers.¹² In this way one develops a constant disposition of heart that begins the day by standing in the presence of God in the morning, and then, walks the whole day in his divine presence too. Thus, the saintly Theophan the Recluse advises to begin the day with the experience of divine presence through the practice of Jesus prayer and then throughout the whole day try not to loose this disposition of heart. Even if it disappears – one should return back to the Lord with humility by calling upon the holy name of Jesus.¹³

Authentic prayer is never separated from the Holy Mysteries, from the Sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, and is deeply rooted in the Holy Eucharist. Sometimes the praying heart is compared to an altar.¹⁴ “In the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays.”¹⁵ Even when prayer is lived out in secret, in the innermost of the heart, it is always the prayer of the whole Church, “it is a communion with the Holy Trinity.”¹⁶

St. Hesychios the Priest writes: “The more the rain falls on the earth, the softer it makes it; similarly, Christ’s holy name gladdens the earth of our heart the more we call upon it.”¹⁷ The gift of a name belongs to the order of trust and intimacy, so God entrusts his name to those who believe in him and he reveals himself to them in his personal mystery: “The Lord’s name is holy. For this reason man ... must keep it in mind in silent, loving adoration... Respect for his name is an expression of the respect owed to the mystery of God himself and to the whole sacred reality it evokes.”¹⁸

In the tradition of the Jesus prayer the concept of the heart that calls upon the holy name of Jesus involves the whole person. The psalmist says: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart (Ps 9:1).” The heart here signifies a prayer not just of the affections and emotions of man, but of the whole person. Once advanced in spiritual life the prayer of a Christian, by the grace of God, becomes something not merely said by the lips, not merely thought by the mind, but offered spontaneously by

¹² Cf. idem, *Puty ko Spaseniju (The Way to Salvation)*, in: *O Molitve Iisusovoj (About Jesus Prayer)*, p. 48.

¹³ Cf. idem, *Pisyma o Chriistianskoj Zisny (Letters on Christian Life)*, in: *O Molitve Iisusovoj (About Jesus Prayer)*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2655.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, London – Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983, vol. I, no. 41.

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2143- 2144.

the whole of one's being – lips, intellect, emotions, will, and body.¹⁹ We read in *The Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart* the following explanation:

Prayer practices within the heart, with attention and sobriety, with no other thought or imagination, by repeating the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” silently and immaterially leads the mind to our Lord Jesus Christ himself. By the words “has mercy upon me,” it turns back and moves it towards him who prays, since he cannot as yet not pray about himself. But when he gains the experience of perfect love, he stretches out wholly towards our Lord Jesus Christ alone, having received actual proof of the second part [that is of mercy].²⁰

The Encounter of the Heart

The heart is a point of encounter with God. It is the place of Christ, writes St. Macarius, where he sets up his kingdom.²¹ St. Maximus says that as a dwelling place of Christ the heart should be continuously purified if we wish to perceive the divine treasures within us.²² Since, as St. Paul says, Christ dwells in our hearts by grace through faith, and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in him, then all the divine treasures are hidden also in our hearts, and they are revealed to the heart in proportion to our purification by means of the commandments.²³ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt 5:8).” As St. Maximus writes, God dwells in the pure heart and he honours it “by engraving his own letters on it through the Holy Spirit, just as he did on the Mosaic tables.”²⁴ And God does it according to the degree to which the heart, through the practice of the virtues and contemplation, has devoted itself to the admonition which binds us, in a mystical sense, to be fruitful and multiply.²⁵

As a pupil of the eye is, so to speak, a point of intersection between the outer and the inner worlds, so the Eastern Fathers thought, that there has to be in man a mysterious point through which God enters the human

¹⁹ Cf. Ware, Kallistos, *The Orthodox Church*, London: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 65.

²⁰ The Monks Callistus and Ignatius, of Xanthopoulos, *Directions to Hesychasts, in a Hundred Chapters*, in: *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, London: Faber and Faber, 1951, p. 222.

²¹ Cf. Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 15:33*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies...*, p. 120; PG 34, 558-570.

²² Cf. St. Maximus the Confessor, *Fourth Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, London – Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, vol. II, no. 69-70; PG 90, 1047-1082.

²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 70.

²⁴ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Second Century on Theology*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 80; PG 90, 1123-1177.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

heart with all his riches.²⁶ If we look for the inner shrine of the heart it is the intellect (*nous*).²⁷ The intellect (*nous*) abides in the heart, writes St. Macarius.²⁸ The intellect constitutes the innermost aspect of the human heart where we fill “the divine longing.”²⁹ St. Diadochos writes that unless the inner shrine of our heart, which is the intellect, is not actively illuminated by the Holy Spirit we shall not be able to taste God’s goodness “with the perceptive faculty undivided, that is, with unified aspiration.”³⁰ The intellect of man dwells in the depths of human soul, it constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart and it is the “organ” of contemplation, the “eye of the heart.”³¹

It has to be said that the Eastern Fathers carefully distinguish between the intellect (*nous*) and reason or mind (*dianoia*).³² The reason (*dianoia*) is the discursive, logical and conceptualizing faculty in man, the function of which is to draw conclusions or to formulate concepts coming from information provided either by sense observation or through revelation or knowledge.³³ The intellect (*nous*) is the highest faculty in human person, through which, provided it is purified by grace, man knows God or the inner principles of created things by means of personal and intimate apprehension or spiritual perception.³⁴ Thus the intellect does not function by formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning, this is the function of reason (*dianoia*), but it understands divine truth by means of experience, intuition or simple cognition.

St. Maximus the Confessor, following the tradition of the Eastern Fathers on the *trichotomy* of human soul, writes: “With our intelligence we direct our search; with our desire we long for that supernal goodness which is the object of our search; and with our incensive power we fight to attain our object.”³⁵ The first aspect or power of the soul is the intelli-

²⁶ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 104.

²⁷ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 932.

²⁸ Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 15:20*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies...*, p. 116; PG 34, 558-570.

²⁹ St. Diadochos, *On Spiritual Knowledge*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 29.

³¹ *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 384.

³² Cf. Danker, Frederick William, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 234.

³³ Cf. *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 386; *dianoimatikos* has a meaning of meditative or reflective, Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 356.

³⁴ Cf. *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 384.

³⁵ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Second Century on Various Texts*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 25; PG 90, 1222-1258.

gent (*to logistikon*) and the two other powers of the soul are the appetitive power (*to epithymitikon*) and the irascible or incensive power (*to thymikon*).³⁶ The appetitive power is the soul's desiring power and the irascible power is the force provoking vehement feelings and often manifests itself as wrath or anger. The appetitive and the irascible powers of the soul sometimes are termed as the soul's passible or passionate powers (*to pathitikon*), that means, the aspect of the soul which is more especially vulnerable to passions.³⁷ Speaking of the desires of the heart or the zeal of heart we actually refer to these above mentioned powers.

The Purification of the Heart

St. Macarius says that the heart is the vessel of "all the treasures of the evil."³⁸ As the Scripture says: "Out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man (Mk 7:21-23)." At the same time the Scripture teaches that the heart is there where the treasure of man is: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Mt 6:21; Lk 12:34). And St. Macarius comments on this saying that "to whatever thing one's heart is tied and where his desire draws him, that is his God."³⁹ Now we shall consider the concept of the heart as being a source of passions.

The term passion (*pathos*) has a variety of meanings: accident or illness, the passion of Christ, suffering of martyrs, means of remission of sins, emotion in man.⁴⁰ Some of the Eastern Fathers regard the passions as some kind of "disease" of the soul, something evil, while others look on them as impulses placed in man by God, and thus fundamentally good, although at present distorted by sin.⁴¹ St. John Climacus writes that passion "is properly something that lies hidden for a long time in the soul and by its very presence it takes on the character of habit, until the soul of its own accord clings to it with affection."⁴² St. John Cassian writes that passions in man are created by God for a good purpose, and they "appear to change through neglect from being natural into the body into something that is unnatural."⁴³ St. Hesychios the Priest says that human desires and passions should be directed towards God and holiness:

³⁶ Cf. *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 380; Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 657, 807.

³⁷ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 991.

³⁸ Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 43: 7*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies...*, pp. 221-222.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴⁰ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 992-995.

⁴¹ Cf. *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 386.

⁴² St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁴³ St. John Cassian, *On the Eight Vices, On Avarice*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 78; PL 49, 53-476; cf. St. Isaiah the Solitary, *On Guarding the Intellect*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 19.

Our intelligence should control our incensive power and our desire with wisdom and skill, regulating them admonishing them, correcting them and ruling them as a king rules over his subject. Then, even should they rebel against it, our inmost intelligence will direct the passions in a way that accords with God's will, for we shall have set it in charge of them.⁴⁴

When the intellect has lost the control over them the passions become dangerous and evil.⁴⁵ St. Maximus writes: "In trying to obtain pleasure and avoid pain, instigated by his self-love, man invents multiple and innumerable forms of corrupted passions."⁴⁶ St. Maximus defines disobedience to the commandment of love as self-love (*philautia*)⁴⁷ – a self-centred egoism – while the life of virtue is a manifestation of charity and thus the fulfilment of the twofold commandment to love.⁴⁸ Thus, St. Maximus writes: "Self-love is an impassioned, mindless love for one's body. Its opposite is love and self-control. A man dominated by self-love is dominated by all the passions."⁴⁹ Also St. John of Damaskos teaches that the mother of all vices, those of the passions of the soul and of the body, is self-love – "a senseless love of one's body and an impassioned attachment to it."⁵⁰ St. Maximus writes: "Stop pleasing yourself and you will not hate your brother; stop loving yourself and you will love God."⁵¹ Each passion initiated by self-love, raises other forms of evil passions and, if they are not confronted and re-directed by charity and self-control towards God, they bring disintegration into man. St. Maximus writes:

Thus the immense and innumerable host of passions invades men's life. Their life becomes in this way deplorable. For the human beings honor the very cause of the destruction of their existence and pursue themselves, without knowing it, the cause of their corruption. The unity of

⁴⁴ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 126.

⁴⁵ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 268.

⁴⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassius, Prologus*, in: Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos*, p. 58; PG 90, 244-265.

⁴⁷ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 1476.

⁴⁸ Cf. Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos*, p. 94.

⁴⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Third Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 8; PG 90, 1018-1046.

⁵⁰ St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 336; PG 95, 81-97.

⁵¹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Fourth Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 37; PG 90, 1047-1082.

human nature falls into a thousand pieces, and human beings, like beasts, devour their own nature.⁵²

St. Maximus makes the distinction between a thing, a conceptual image and a passion: “For example, a man, a woman, gold and so forth are things; a conceptual image is a passion-free thought of one of these; a passion is mindless affection or indiscriminate hatred for one of these same things.”⁵³ And he concludes that the spiritual battle is aimed against the passion. There are thoughts, explains St. Maximus, which are impassioned, they are those that are compounded of passion and a conceptual image. By separation of these two what remains is the passion-free thought and we can make this separation by means of spiritual love and self-control.⁵⁴ Evagrius writes that “man cannot drive away impassioned thoughts unless he watches over his desire and incensive power.”⁵⁵ These impassioned thoughts that constitute obstacle to the knowledge of God, are those that attack from the irascible power and from appetitive power and are against nature.⁵⁶ They are called in the Christian spiritual tradition of the East by the term *logismos* and are like “conceptions of sensory objects,” a kind of mental images, which arise in a person endowed with sensibility.⁵⁷ These images appear not in intellect (*nous*) but in the inferior part of the cognitive faculty of man, the *dianoia*, where reasoning for or against something takes place.⁵⁸

The whole purpose of ascetical life and the purification of heart is to separate the passions from conceptual images, since otherwise man cannot be able “to look on things dispassionately.”⁵⁹ This dispassion (*apatheia*)⁶⁰ does not imply the suppression of the irascible or the appetitive powers of the soul but rather it is a purification that brings about the “transformation of passions” in order to desire the virtue and the struggling against the demons.⁶¹ It is a state of an inner freedom capable of resisting

⁵² St. Maximus the Confessor, *Questions to Thalassius, Prologus*, in: Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos*, p. 58; PG 90, 244-265.

⁵³ Idem, *Third Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 42; PG 90, 1018-1046.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ibid., no. 43.

⁵⁵ Evagrius the Solitary, *Texts on Discrimination in respect of Passions and Thoughts*, in: *The Philokalia*, p. 39.

⁵⁶ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 238.

⁵⁷ Cf. Evagrius the Solitary, *Texts on Discrimination in respect of Passions and Thoughts*, in: *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, Volume I, London – Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983, pp. 38-39; Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 239; Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 806-807.

⁵⁸ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 239.

⁵⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Third Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 41; PG 90, 1018-1046.

⁶⁰ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 170.

⁶¹ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 274.

the evil passions and being able of separating them from the conceptual images.⁶² It is a state not of passivity but of active love for God, since “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Rom 5:5).” According to St. Paul, the heart of man becomes by the action of the Holy Spirit a vessel of divine love that perfects the natural love of man into a supernatural charity. St. Maximus writes that we can drive out the evil passions through “the genuine love for God.”⁶³ This genuine love is the charity that purifies the heart and makes it the burning vessel of all other virtues. St. John Climacus writes: “By dispassion I mean a heaven of the mind within the heart, which regards the artifice of demons as a contemptible joke... a dispassionate soul is immersed in virtues... dispassion is incomplete if we neglect even one of the most ordinary virtues...”⁶⁴ In the last Step (30) of the Ladder of Divine Ascent St. John Climacus writes: “Love, dispassion, and adoption are distinguished by name, and name alone. Light, fire, and flame join to fashion one activity. So too with love, dispassion, and adoption.”⁶⁵

The Provocation of the Heart

St. Hesychios the Priest, using the words of Deuteronomy, writes: “Be attentive to yourself, lest there arise in your heart a secret thing which is an iniquity (Deut 15:9).”⁶⁶ According to the Eastern Fathers the phrase a secret thing refers to the first appearance of an evil thought (*logismos*) – the provocation, introduced by the devil into the heart of man.⁶⁷ St. John of Damaskos, summarising the tradition of the Christian East, writes that it does not lie in our power to decide whether or not the evil provocations and thoughts are going to arise and disturb us but it lies within the power of man to decide whether or not to dwell on them, to excite the passions or not to excite them.⁶⁸ Thus, St. John of Damaskos similarly to other spiritual writers such as St. John Climacus, St. Mark the Ascetic, St. Maximus the Confessor distinguishes seven different steps or degrees of penetrating of an evil thought into the heart: provocation, coupling, wrestling, passion, assent, actualisation and captivity.⁶⁹

⁶² Cf. Ibid., p. 275.

⁶³ Cf. St. Maximus the Confessor, *Third Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 50; PG 90, 1018-1046.

⁶⁴ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 29, pp. 282-284; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁶⁵ Ibid., step 30, p. 287.

⁶⁶ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 2.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Cf. St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 337; PG 95, 81-97.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, pp. 181-182; PG 88, 1014-1094; St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 138-141;

Provocation (*prosbole*)⁷⁰ - is a simple suggestion, word or image encountered for the first time, which comes from the enemy, such as to do this or to do that and is entered into the heart.⁷¹ Sometimes it can be a passion-free thought brought into the intellect by memory.⁷² Sometimes it can be an impassioned thought. St. Maximus writes: "The passions lying hidden in the soul provide the demons with the means of arousing impassioned thoughts in us. Then, fighting the intellect through these thoughts, they force it to give its assent to sin."⁷³ The devil is not allowed to see into the innermost thoughts of man. He cannot read his heart or know man's inner dispositions. But he does know what happens outwardly among men, and he is more than intelligent enough to determine to what vice a man is most inclined from the outward signs of his behaviour. Therefore, the devil tempts men in various ways, in order that he may learn their weak points. Then he uses this knowledge to lead men to sin, ultimately so that men might be eternally damned.

There is also something that the Fathers call a momentary disturbance (*pararripismos*).⁷⁴ This momentary disturbance occurs "without any movement and working of the bodily passion."⁷⁵ St. John Climacus writes in this regard:

In a moment, without a word being spoken or an image presented, a sudden passionate urge lays hold of the victim. It comes faster than anything in the physical world and is swifter and more indiscernible than any spirit. It makes its appearance in the soul by a simple memory, which is unconnected with any thing, independent of time and inexpressible, and in some case comes without the person himself realising the fact.⁷⁶

Coupling (*sinduasmos*)⁷⁷ or communion with a thought is a "conversation with what has been encountered, whether this be passionately or otherwise."⁷⁸ It is "a dwelling on the thought and choosing deliberately to

St. Maximus the Confessor, *First Century on Love*, no. 84; PG 90, 959-982; idem, *Second Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 31; PG 90, 983-1017.

⁷⁰ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 1165-1166.

⁷¹ Cf. St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 338; PG 95, 81-97; St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁷² Cf. St. Maximus the Confessor, *First Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 84; PG 90, 959-982.

⁷³ Idem, *Second Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 31; PG 90, 983-1017.

⁷⁴ Cf. St. Mark the Ascetic, *Letter to Nicolas the Solitary*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 153; Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 1024.

⁷⁵ St. Mark the Ascetic, *Letter to Nicolas the Solitary*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 153.

⁷⁶ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁷⁷ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 1314.

⁷⁸ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

dally with it in a pleasurable manner,”⁷⁹ yet still hesitating whether or not to act upon the evil provocation. St. John Climacus writes that the evil provocation is free of sin and the coupling sometimes. As a result of coupling with the thought provoked by the enemy, the imagination broods on the thought continually, and passion arises (*pathos*).⁸⁰ Wrestling or struggle is our resistance that we offer to the impassioned thought or disturbance that may result either in destroying it, or in our assenting to it.⁸¹ By struggle and wrestling with the provocation, the Fathers mean “force equal to that which is leading the attack, and this force wins or loses according to the desire of the spirit.”⁸² Assent (*sinakatathesis*)⁸³ is when we give an approval to the passion inherent in the thought.⁸⁴ It is “the delighted yielding of the soul to what it has encountered.”⁸⁵ “Once this assent is given, the actual sin is then committed” – writes St. Maximus.⁸⁶ After the impassionate thought has received our assent, it is put into effect; this is the actualisation.⁸⁷ And captivity is “the forcible and compulsive abduction of the heart already dominated by prepossession and long habit,”⁸⁸ or as St. Mark the Ascetic writes: “The involuntary presence of former sins in the memory.”⁸⁹

Thus, St. John of Damaskos concludes: “If we can confront the first of these things, the provocation, in a dispassionate way, or firmly rebut it at the outset, we thereby cut off at once everything that comes after.”⁹⁰

The Watchfulness of the Heart

One of the Fathers asked Abba Nistheros the Great, the friend of Abba Anthony, and said to him, “What good work is there that I could do?” He said to him, “Are not all actions equal? Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with

⁷⁹ St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 338; PG 95, 81-97.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*

⁸² St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁸³ Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 1268.

⁸⁴ Cf. St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 338; PG 95, 81-97.

⁸⁵ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 15, p. 182; PG 88, 1014-1094.

⁸⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *First Century on Love*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, no. 84; PG 90, 959-982.

⁸⁷ Cf. St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 338; PG 95, 81-97.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 139.

⁹⁰ St. John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and Vices*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 338; PG 95, 81-97.

him. Elias loved interior peace and God was with him. So, do whatever your soul desires according to God and guard your heart.⁹¹

The whole concept of heart is deeply connected with the tradition and practice of watchfulness (*nepsis*)⁹² in the Christian East. According to St. Hesychios the Priest watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, “frees us with God’s help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions.”⁹³ If one advances in spiritual life, watchfulness leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge “of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries.”⁹⁴ And St. Hesychios concludes that watchfulness in the true sense is “purity of heart, a state blessed by Christ when he says: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’.”⁹⁵

So, for the beginners, who move through the stage of purification, watchfulness is “a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart.”⁹⁶ We protect our heart from all kind of temptations. St. Hesychios the Priest teaches that just as it is impossible for water and fire to pass together through the same pipe, so it is impossible for sin to enter the heart of man without knocking first at its door in the form of an image or fantasy provoked by the devil.⁹⁷ Therefore St. Mark the Ascetic educates: “Guard your mind, and you will not be harassed by temptations. But if you fail to guard it, accept patiently whatever trial comes.”⁹⁸ This attentiveness of intellect (*nous*) should be weld closely to the Jesus prayer, as St. Hesychios the Priest writes:

Letters cannot be written on air; they have to be inscribed on some material if they are to have any permanence. Similarly, we should weld our hard-won watchfulness to the Jesus prayer, so that this watchfulness may always be attached to him and may through him remain with us for ever.⁹⁹

These two practices – watchfulness and the Jesus prayer – mutually reinforce each other, since the close attentiveness goes together with constant prayer, while prayer goes together with watchfulness and attentive-

⁹¹ Nistheros, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975, p. 130.

⁹² Cf. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 913.

⁹³ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., no. 6.

⁹⁷ Cf. ibid., no. 45.

⁹⁸ St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 163; cf. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 54.

⁹⁹ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 183.

ness of intellect.¹⁰⁰ By continual recourse to the holy sacraments, especially Confession and Holy Eucharist, through the imitation of Christ's holy virtues, through Jesus prayer and watchfulness, a Christian becomes more attentive in his everyday life to all the evil provocations, and with the grace of Christ, repels the unseen enemies.

When the mind, taking refuge in Christ and calling upon him, stands firm and repels its unseen enemies, like a wild beast facing a pack of hounds from a good position of defence, then it inwardly anticipates their inner ambushes well in advance. Through continually invoking Jesus the peacemaker against them, it remains invulnerable.¹⁰¹

To stop, to look and to listen – such is the beginning of contemplation of a watchful person.¹⁰² This concrete material object that one sees, this moment of time, this concrete person that one speak with – each of them is a gift from God and thus can serve for man as a “window into eternity.”¹⁰³ In the life of a Christian, watchfulness helps to become more attentive of God's world around man and to grow more conscious of God's world within man. St. Hesychios the Priest writes: “To invoke Jesus continually with a sweet longing is to fill the heart in its great attentiveness with joy and tranquillity.”¹⁰⁴ But the Saint concludes then, that it is Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God and himself God, the “cause and creator of all blessings, who completely purifies the heart; for it is written: ‘I am God who makes peace.’”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

In the homilies of St. Macarius we find a use of a more Hebraic idea of the heart, which includes the whole man – not only the intellect, but also the will, emotions, and even the body. In the Scripture the heart expresses the depths of man's being, where the person decides for or against God (Jer 31:33, Deut 6:5, 29:3, Is 29:13, Ezek 36:26, Mt 6:21, Lk 8:15, Rom 5:5).¹⁰⁶ St. Hesychios the Priest writes that the heart is man's “inner self.”¹⁰⁷ The heart is the dwelling-place where the human person is, where he lives, it is the place to which he withdraws, his hidden centre, beyond the grasp of his reason and of others.¹⁰⁸ The heart is the wellspring of prayer

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 94.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, no. 8.

¹⁰² Cf. Ware, Kallistos, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, p. 117.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁴ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 91.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 368.

¹⁰⁷ St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in: *The Philokalia*, vol. I, no. 34.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. no. 2563.

where, on its innermost altar, the liturgy of the Church continues by grace in sacred. The heart is the constant object of the attacks of the demons and it is the holy place of Christ where he sets up his kingdom. It is through the heart that man enters into relationship with everything that exists, with all creation, and with other men.¹⁰⁹ The heart is the point of encounter, because as image of God man lives in relation: it is a place of covenant.¹¹⁰

Instead of looking for an organ or a faculty we could consider the heart as a focal point – a point of contact between God and man in the ground or essence of the soul, in the centre or in the root of life, where all the powers of man are concentrated.¹¹¹ As St. Macarius writes, it is a spiritual vessel where all things meet.¹¹² The heart is the principle of unity and integration of the whole human person.¹¹³ In any case the heart of man is a great mystery and only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully.¹¹⁴ Abba Pambo said, “If you have a heart, you can be saved.”¹¹⁵

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¹⁰⁹ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 106.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. no. 2563.

¹¹¹ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, p. 105.

¹¹² Cf. Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 43:7*, in: *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies...*, pp. 221-222; PG 34, 558-570.

¹¹³ Cf. Spidlik, *The Spirituality...*, pp. 105-106.

¹¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. no. 2563.

¹¹⁵ Pambo, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 166.

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