

The following is an excerpt from my forthcoming translation of excerpts from John Cassian's *Collationes (The Consultations)*, a psychologically exploratory handbook structured as a series of conversations between two monks and a series of mentors. It was written in the late Roman Empire.

Consultation with Abba Isaac (*Coll.* 10.8-14)

Germanus said, “Okay, here’s the impression we have. When it comes to perfecting a given craft or discipline, it’s essential in the early stages to be trained with beginner-level exercises that are easier, forgiving, and very low-impact...After all, how do children learn to pronounce simple sequences of syllables without first really knowing the letters of the alphabet? How will they go on to be fast readers if they aren’t yet capable of grouping short phrases together? How in the world can someone who isn’t educated in grammar attain the fluency of rhetoric or the knowledge of philosophy? I’m sure that the same is true of this incomparably exalted discipline, through which we’re taught to cling tightly to God nonstop. Certain educational foundations need to be set solidly in place first. Then the framework of perfection can be built on top of them and sent soaring.

“Our tentative theory is that these are the beginning steps: first, we need to figure what exactly we should be reciting to grasp and think about God. Then, we should keep a very close watch on this material, whatever it might be, because we have no doubts that the peak of complete perfection will come into view. So we want you to show us what this methodological stuff of the memory actually is — the material that the mind uses to perceive and hold on to God constantly. That way we can keep it right in front of our eyes, and when we notice that we’ve fallen away from it, it will be easily accessible when we snap out of it and turn right back. We’ll be able to pick it up again without spinning our wheels or getting lost.

“Because, I mean, the way things go now is that when we’ve gotten distracted from spiritual contemplation, then come to, it’s like we’ve awakened from a deathly sleep. Then we have to go looking for a guide we can use to recuperate the spiritual memory that sunk out of sight. There is a prolonged search, and before we find it we falter again; and before we obtain some spiritual perspective, the attention held in our heart slips away. It’s pretty clear that this disorientation befalls us because we don’t have some particular thing set in front of our eyes to hold tight to — like a rule of thumb or something the wandering mind can work its way back to after so many different digressions and detours, like entering a serene harbor after grueling storms at sea.

“So the result is that the mind is constantly tangled up in this uninformed and struggling state, always reeling around and stumbling into things like it’s drunk. And as long as it keeps starting one thing after another and never seeing anything through to the end, it won’t even hold tight for very long to some spiritual thing it happens to run into accidentally rather than intentionally!”

Isaac said: “You’ve put the problem in a fine-grained and precise way, and it’s a sign that clarity is close by...You very perceptively compared our pedagogy to elementary education. Little kids can’t learn the alphabet, make out its shapes, or draw them with a steady hand, unless they keep carefully tracing over models of the letters using templates and models impressed in wax tablets, thinking about them all the time, and practicing every day. In keeping with that idea, I have a model for spiritual contemplation to entrust to you. By keeping it in your sight — always and as tenaciously as possible — you’ll learn to keep it turning it over in your mind in perpetual, beneficial motion. And by using it and meditating on it you’ll be able to climb to higher vistas.

“So now I’m going to set this device before you, which you’ve been seeking in your disciplinary practice and prayer. Each and every monk who is striving for an ever-present memory of God should become habituated to meditating on it, going over it continuously with their heart. But first you have to kick out every other kind of thought, because the only way you can keep it up is to disentangle yourself from all your physical and mental preoccupations. Just as it was entrusted to me by the few ancient elders who were still around, I’m sharing it in the same spirit, with only the very few persons who truly thirst for it. So to hold onto a perpetual memory of God, this is the devotional mantra to fix in your mind: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!’

“This short verse was chosen out of the entirety of the scriptures with good reason. It encompasses every state of mind that can beset human beings, and it is neatly applicable to every situation and all onslaughts. It includes an invocation to God against every possible crisis. It includes the humility of a sincere confession. It includes the alertness that comes from care and constant anxiety. It includes a reflection on one’s own weakness, confidence in being heard, and trust that help is always close at hand — because whoever appeals to their bodyguard nonstop is certain that he’s always there. It includes the burning heat of love and compassion. It includes a cognizance of traps and a fear of enemies, and in perceiving that they are surrounded by them day and night, the speaker admits that they can’t be set free without the help of their protector.

...

“A gluttonous impulse suddenly seizes me. I look around for the sort of food that hermits don’t bother with, and in my spare cell the scents of regal meals waft over to me, and I feel like I’m being dragged entirely against my will to crave them. That is when I have to say, ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!’

...

“A headache keeps me from reading to steady my heart: it gets in my way even though I *want* to read. Mid-morning, drowsiness slams my face down onto the sacred page, and it forces me to oversleep past the allotted time for rest. And eventually the onslaught of a deep sleep moves me to truncate the cycle of psalmody during the liturgy. Again I have to call out: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!’

...

“I’m pitted against the pull of boredom, pretentiousness, and pride; and my mind is deluded by the suspicion that other monks are being negligent and indifferent. To keep the enemy’s pernicious suggestion from overpowering me, I have to pray with total anguish in my heart: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!’

...

“My soul is bubbling over with countless different distractions, my heart is vacillating, and I’m unable to keep my scattered thoughts under control. I can’t pour out that prayer of mine without being interrupted by pointless mental images and inner monologues and rehashed events. I’m so in thrall to these slim pickings that I can’t conceive of a single spiritual thought. I can’t set myself free with a lot of complaining and moaning, so to earn my liberation from this mental degradation I absolutely have to call out: ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!’

...

“And so, we should pour out this brief verse in nonstop constant prayer —to be rescued when we’re embattled, and to be preserved when we’re flourishing without it going to our heads. I’ll say it again: you should recite this brief verse in an unbroken cycle in your breast. Whether you’re working, or performing some task, or traveling, you should never stop chanting it. You should recite it when you’re sleeping and eating and going to the bathroom. This perpetual motion of the heart will become a

lifesaving formula for you. Not only will it keep you unharmed from any demonic attack. It will also purge you of all the contaminating weaknesses of everyday life. It will guide you toward those unseen celestial contemplations. And it will transport you to that inexpressible fiery prayer that so few people experience.”

...

Germanus said: “Not only have you shared with us the spiritual discipline we were begging to know. We also think you’ve clearly and straightforwardly described the perfect execution of it. After all, what could be a more elevated achievement than to encompass the memory of God with such a brief form of meditation? To leave the realm of the visible world behind by repeating a single short verse? To somehow encapsulate the moods of all possible prayers with this small phrase?

“So now there’s only one final thing we’re hoping you’ll explain to us. This very verse you’ve given us as a mantra: how can we hold on to it unwaveringly? Just as we may be set free from irrelevant mundane thoughts, insofar as God grants it, how do we hold tight to spiritual thoughts without letting go?

“See, whenever we think of a section of some psalm, that bit gets plowed over for some reason and the mind is sent rolling into a passage from another part of scripture, unaware and clueless about what’s happening. And when it starts to loop through *that* passage within itself, it interrupts its reflection on that material — though it wasn’t done with it yet — with a memory that sprang up from some other prompt. From there it’s relocated to something else, thanks to yet another intrusive association, and that’s how it goes: the mind is always tossed around, unstable and meandering, spinning from psalm to psalm, jumping from a gospel text to a reading of the apostle, tumbling from there into the prophetic books, only to be carried off into haphazard spots throughout the scriptural narratives, failing (despite its ability to make decisions) to jettison or grip onto anything with any real conviction, or even to set some boundaries after giving it some thought, so that in the end it only gets a touch or taste of spiritual sensations rather than producing or controlling what it experiences!

“And so it goes: the mind is always moving and meandering, and it’s torn apart in different directions like it’s drunk, even during the liturgy, and in the process it doesn’t perform any of its functions adequately. While it prays, for example, it’s recalling a psalm or something else it has read. While it chants, it’s thinking about something besides what the psalm text says. While it recites a reading, it’s imagining what it wants to do or what it wished it had done instead. And when it’s behaving like that, it

doesn't accept or reject any idea in a controlled or useful way. It seems to get pushed around by random distractions, and it doesn't even have the power to hold onto or stick with the things it finds entertaining!

“That’s why more than anything else, we need to know how we can possibly fulfill our spiritual duties as we’re supposed to, or at least how to stay unwaveringly alert to the short verse that you gave us to use as a mantra. That way, all our conscious perceptions won’t keep getting sucked in or spat out of this whirlpool. Instead they’ll stand still, under our control.”

Isaac said: “I feel like I said enough about this topic earlier, when we were discussing the approach to prayer. But since you’re asking me to repeat the same thing again, I’ll briefly address the subject of how to make the heart stronger. There are three things that stabilize a meandering mind: keeping vigil at night, reciting and reflecting on scripture, and praying. The persistence and constant mental stretch of these practices brings a steady strength to the soul.

“But there’s no way to attain this state of mind unless we’re tirelessly and constantly dedicated to our work — not profit-obsessed work, but our sacred monastic practices. All our concerns and worries about life in the present should be totally swept away, so we might be able to fulfill the apostolic command to pray without ceasing. Whoever makes a habit of praying only when they kneel down doesn’t really pray very much. Actually, even when it comes to praying while you’re kneeling, you’re not praying at all if you’re being dragged around wherever your heart wanders. For that reason, we should be the sort of person that we want to be in prayer *before* it’s time to pray. After all, our state of mind during prayer is unavoidably shaped by the situation prior to that moment. So depending on where the mind’s thoughts were lingering beforehand, when it goes to pray it will either be vaulted up to the heavens or plunged down to earth.”

We were floored by the time Abba Isaac finished his second session about how to pray. He had entrusted us with his lesson about meditating on that one little verse, which beginners were supposed to keep in mind as source of guidance. We were totally amazed and wanted nothing more than to become experts at it, because we were sure that what he’d taught us was short and easy. But we realized, after trying it out, that it was harder than the effort we used to spend zig-zagging across all the scriptures without being tethered to anything for long.