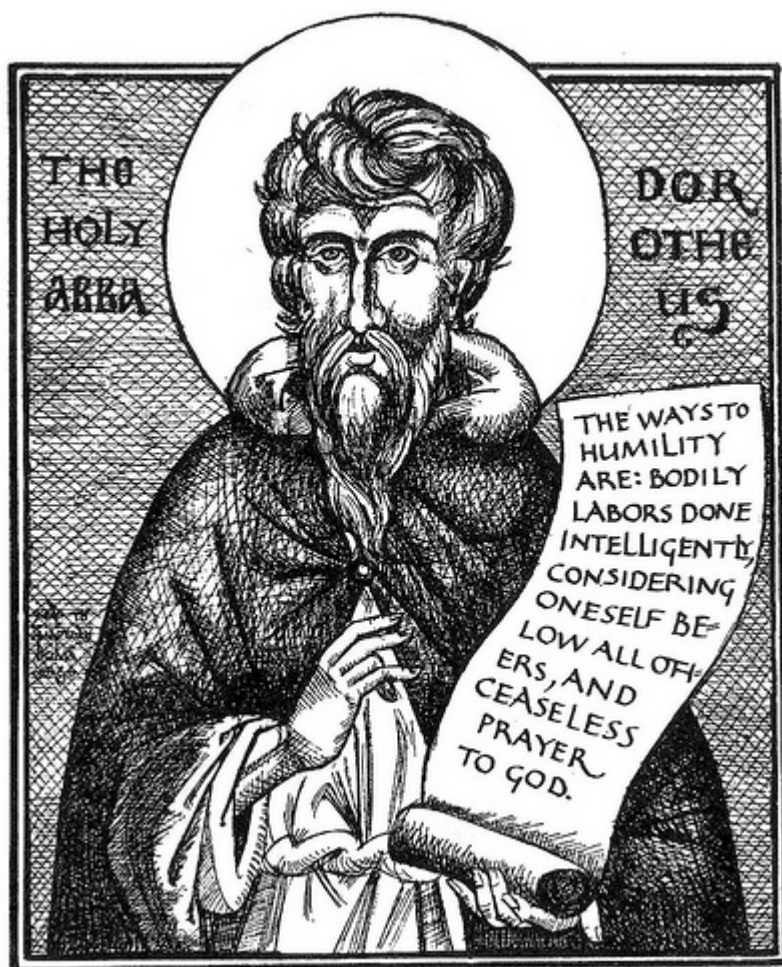


Abba Dorotheos on Self-Censure

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At the end of the excerpt of Saint John Chrysostom's homily on the Sunday of the Paralytic, we read: 'Even now I can show you many who naturally hate having anything to do with women, and avoid conversation with them as impure. Shall we call them chaste; tell me, shall we crown them and proclaim them victors?'

This seems fairly simple. If you're not troubled by a particular temptation or sin, it takes no great effort to avoid it. This is hardly a victory over temptation, since there was none in the first place. By the same token, if we make a virtue out of a necessity, it's not the same as making a virtue out of temptation. Abba Dorotheos gives an example of this, and goes on to demonstrate the spiritual dangers involved in a lack of self-awareness.

There was a certain brother living at the monastery before I left there and I never saw him put out or troubled about anything, even though I saw many of the brethren insulting him and treating him outrageously, in a variety of ways. The young man bore everything that was done to him by everyone as if he wasn't bothered in the least. I used to wonder at his amazing tolerance and wanted to learn how he'd acquired such virtue. So on one occasion I took him aside, made a deep obeisance to him and begged him to tell me what thoughts were always in his heart- either when he was being sworn at or when he treated badly by others- that he should manifest such patience. He answered naturally and simply, 'I just keep my distance from these filthy people and put up with it, just as good dogs do with the way people treat them'. When I heard this I bowed my head and said to myself, 'This brother's found his way!' I made the sign of the cross and left, praying that God would protect both him and me.

So it can happen, as I've said, that people, through disdain, may not be troubled. This is obviously a loss. Being upset with a brother who's annoying us happens because we're not in a good mood at that moment or because we dislike him. There are many reasons why this might be so and it can be explained in a variety of ways. If we look at it carefully, the root cause of all these disturbances is that we don't censure ourselves, and so we have all these upsets and never find any peace. It's not to be wondered that we hear from all the saints that there's no other way but this. We can see that no one ever trod a different path and found peace. Yet we reckon to achieve peace of soul and take the direct route to it without ever reaching the point of censuring ourselves. Indeed, if somebody achieved a whole host of spiritual accomplishments but didn't keep to this path, they'd still never stop troubling others or being troubled by them, and their labours would be in vain. As Abba Pimen says, how much joy, how much peace of soul would people have- wherever they went- if they would only censure themselves? If anything happened

to them, some punishment, a dishonour, or any kind of trouble, they'd accept it as if they deserved it and would never be troubled. Would anyone be more free of care than them?...

Two brothers came to me once, and they were always quarrelling. The elder said about the younger: 'I tell him to do something and he gets upset, and that distresses me, because I think that if he had faith and love towards me he'd accept what I tell him with complete confidence'. The younger one would say: 'Forgive me, Master, but he doesn't speak to me with the fear of God, but more like somebody who wants to order me about, and this is why my heart's not easy, as the Fathers say'... Do you see the self-deception, brethren? God knows how sorry I am about the fact that we bend the sayings of the Fathers to our own evil will and lose our souls thereby. Each of these should have taken the blame himself. The first should have said: 'I never really asked forgiveness from my brother from my heart and this is why God hasn't allowed him to feel at ease'. And the other, 'I wasn't ready in my heart to forgive my brother before he asked me and this is why God hasn't allowed him to feel at ease'... But each put the blame on the other.

You see, this is why we don't make any progress, this is why we find no benefit in anything, but spend the whole of our time languishing in the thoughts we're having about our brothers and belittling them. Because each of us justifies himself and excuses himself, as I've said. We don't keep the commandments at all but we demand that our neighbour should keep them. This is why we don't train ourselves to do good. Because as soon as we are in the least bit enlightened, we immediately demand things of our neighbour. We censure him, saying, 'He should be doing this', or 'Why isn't he doing that?' Why don't we require of ourselves to keep the commandments and criticize ourselves for not doing so?...

For each little thing, we go and accuse our neighbour, saying that he's being contemptuous towards us and acting against his conscience. And if we hear anything, we immediately distort it, saying, 'If he hadn't meant to annoy me, he wouldn't have said that'...

But we can't bear to say about our brother that the Lord told him to do it. If we hear anything, we immediately behave like dogs: if somebody throws a stone at them, they forget about the thrower and go and bite the stone. This is what we do: we forget God, Who allows us to be visited by trials in order to purify us from our sins, and take issue with our neighbour, saying, 'Why did he say that to me?' or 'Why did he do that to me?' And while we could benefit greatly from these things, we actually do damage to ourselves because we ignore the fact that everything happens through God's providence, for the benefit of each of us. Through the

prayers of the Saints, may God grant us understanding. Amen!