

“The Battle for the Heart: John Cassian as Desert Psychologist”

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Introduction

- Here I am, standing before a group of psychology professors and students, therapists, and other types who care deeply about the nature and health of the human person. I am not one of your kind, as you probably know. I make my living as a church historian, not as a psychologist. So you have invited an outsider to your field to deliver this lecture.
- My knowledge of psychology is limited, to say the least. Years ago I viewed a video of Carl Rogers in action, which definitely helped to turn me in the direction of creed and confession and canon, where I could ground myself on the sturdy foundation of absolutes. I read Sigmund Freud in graduate school, which only made me grateful for the many healthy and happy friends I had then and have now. Freud would have done well to teach at Wheaton or Whitworth, where there is a predominance of normal people. And yes, I have watched Opra and Dr. Phil on one or two occasions, and so have tried to think positive thoughts about my life. As you can see, my knowledge of psychology is limited. I did marry a licensed mental health counselor 2 ½ years ago, but that hardly qualifies me as an expert in the field. At least she gets to practice on someone every day. She tells me that I have become her favorite client. Come to think of it, she should be paying me.
- Still, I think that you and I have more in common than is immediately apparent, considering how different our disciplines are. I teach church history, which tells a story about how real people have tried, in their own place and time, to find health and holiness in God as we know him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course you are interested in the same thing. You simply have a different angle of vision. As a historian, I aim to treat people and

- movements from the past fairly, to give them a voice, and thus to allow them to speak to us. My goal is both accuracy and usability.
- This afternoon I am going to function as a historian and, in that capacity, introduce you to a person about whom you know little or nothing. I want to bring him to your attention because he is a psychologist of sorts and thus functioned as your counterpart some 1600 years ago. He was interested in many of the same things you are. His perspective, however, is quite different, as one would expect, living as he did so long ago. Needless to say, he was not always right, at least not entirely. Then again, we're not always right either. C.S. Lewis once wrote that reading old books and studying figures from the distant past might spare us from becoming a prisoner to our own age. Where they went wrong has long been obvious; where they were right might protect us from going wrong in the opposite direction. He writes, "The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books." Or, I would add, listening to lectures about ancient and odd people.
 - John Cassian was a "desert father," though there were desert mothers, too. I want to tell his story, very briefly, and then explore the ideas that make him such a provocative and perhaps even useful psychologist.

Cassian's Story

- Cassian grew up in the Baltics but left his native land when he was in his twenties, having been lured to the eastern Mediterranean by the strange stories he heard about the desert fathers and mothers. Cassian and his traveling partner, Germanus, settled into a monastery in Bethlehem for a while but soon grew restless to move on and meet the masters of the movement, who resided in the deserts of Egypt.
- Receiving permission to leave the monastery, they traveled to Egypt and visited the places where the desert fathers and mothers lived. There they stayed for seven years, returning only once to Bethlehem to report on what they had seen and heard. Forced out of Egypt around the year 400, they fled for protection to Constantinople, where they met the famous Archbishop, John Chrysostom, who dazzled them with his preaching, impressed

- them with his moral and spiritual vigor, and ordained them to church office. A few years later Chrysostom, too, fell into trouble. So Germanus and Cassian traveled to Rome on Chrysostom's behalf to seek the aid of the pope, Innocent I. Innocent eventually ordained Cassian as a priest.
- Cassian then left for Marseilles in Gaul and helped to found two monasteries. He also wrote two important books on Egyptian monasticism because a local bishop wanted to use what Cassian had learned there to motivate and instruct the western church in the ascetic way of life. Cassian was also involved in several controversies. He died sometime in the 430s.

Egypt and Gaul

- Already in Cassian's day Egypt had earned a reputation as the place where desert spirituality had reached the pinnacle of its power and influence. The reputed founder of the desert tradition, Abba Antony, was becoming a household name, and various *Sayings* of masters like Antony were being circulated around the Mediterranean world. The word "desert" immediately brings to mind visions of barrenness, isolation, deprivation, and hardship. In Cassian's day, however, the stories of the desert fathers and mothers had turned the desert into a metaphor for humility, wisdom, discipline, and power, as if these masters had withdrawn into the most inhospitable place on earth and created a kind of new Eden. Strangely, though outsiders in the larger culture, they had become insiders in reputation and influence.
- Cassian's *Institutes*, the first book he wrote, describes the habits, dress, and practices of the monks and then outlines in some detail the eight deadly thoughts or vices. The *Conferences* explores the teachings of a dozen or so of the masters of the desert and focuses on such topics as discretion, purity, and prayer.

Thesis

- There is much we could explore in Cassian's writings. But I want to concentrate on only one, the battle for the heart. The Egyptian masters taught Cassian that the Christian life demands struggle. The fallenness of the world (say, through sickness and mental anguish), the perversity of human nature, and the call of discipleship thrust us into this life of struggle, of which the *Sayings*

of the Desert Fathers, their mosaic of teaching, reminds us on almost every page. However hard we try to avoid it, it will eventually have its way with us, for this is one battle we simply cannot escape. So we might as well face it squarely, especially as it manifests itself in the human heart. As Abba Antony taught, “The man who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles—those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then he will have but one battle to fight—the battle of the heart.” Cassian writes similarly: “No one is more my enemy than my own heart, which is truly the one of my household closest to me.”

- I want first to describe this battle of the heart, using Cassian’s description of the eight deadly vices. Then I will show how Cassian sets a course to help us find a way out.

The Eight Deadly Thoughts or Vices

- What did Cassian mean by the eight deadly vices? Of course we know them today more popularly as the seven deadly sins. But words like “vice” and “sin” are not quite right, for they tend to connote only bad behavior. Vice expresses itself as bad habit, sin as something we do. But as we well know, sin has as much to do with the mind as with behavior. Cassian studied under the Egyptian master, Evagrius Ponticus, who used the word *logismos* instead of vice or sin to plummet the depths of the human condition. The word is rich and complex. It could be translated simply as “thought.” But the real meaning is more subtle than that. Evagrius did not have a “passing thought” in mind here, the kind that flashes across the screen of the mind at a pace that leaves no trace in the memory. Instead, he had in mind the kind of thought that dominates the mind. Thus “calculation” or “reflection” is closer to its meaning, as well as “sentiment” or “imagination.” Such a thought takes up residence in the mind and eventually inhabits it, driving out all others.
- Cassian outlines the eight deadly vices in order of danger and severity, from the least deadly to the most deadly, though in the end they are all deadly. The order follows a certain kind of logic, too. The first group of three involves some form of external stimulation; the second group of three consists of internal struggles; the final two afflict us when we appear to be at our strongest and best; in the end they cause the greatest destruction.

As I review his explanation of the eight deadly vices, keep in mind that he was writing to monks, which will require us to do some translating of his ideas to make them applicable to us.

- **Gluttony.** The problem with gluttony, says Cassian, is that it is ever present as a temptation because we never outgrow our need for food. Gluttony thus consists of preoccupation with food, craving for food, even fussiness about food. Both the need for food and the pleasure of it drive us to think about it and then over-indulge once we have it in front of us. Cassian believes that overcoming gluttony is the first battle we must fight in the spiritual life, for food is always with us. It is the foothills of the spiritual quest, not the summit. He is surprisingly flexible in the disciplines he prescribes, such as fasting. The antidote, he argues, is restraint, even as we eat. The right balance is moderation, not satiation; gratitude, not pickiness. And thus, “even while still desiring it, we should approach with restraint the food that we are obliged to eat in order to sustain our lives.” Thus he allows monks to break their fasts if company arrives and to vary their fasts lest they become legalistic and fanatical. If anything, fasting only exposes the problem; it cannot remedy it. Only God can do that. Cassian puts it this way, “True fasting is eating just a little less than what we want.” That is the essence of restraint.
- **Fornication.** This, Cassian writes, is a “savage war” that requires incredible discipline of the mind, and even then victory will always elude us without God’s help. No techniques of self-control can match the power of this vice. “For the soul cannot escape being attacked by this vice until it realizes that waging this war is beyond its own powers and that it cannot obtain the victory by its own toil and effort, without the assistance and protection of the Lord.” If gluttony poses a problem because we always have to eat, fornication poses a problem because it appeals to longings deeply rooted in human biology. We are especially vulnerable to this fantasy at night when we face the problem of “nocturnal emissions.” At this point Cassian is a realist. He concedes that monks must allow nature to take its course, which will occur about once a month for young monks, less so for older. But he is quick to add that monks exacerbate the problem by fantasizing about fornication during the day, for then “day flows into night.” The real problem is mental images, not the temptation itself,

which all of us face in some shape or form. The mind seizes upon temptation and indulges in fantasy, which leads to corruption of the soul. It is this battle that we must fight.

- **Avarice**, or love of money. Some vices, Cassian notes, are derivatives of a natural impulse, which can actually be good if the natural impulse is expressed properly. Cassian puts both anger and sadness in that category. Every human being feels anger and sadness for legitimate reasons; our task is to keep it from turning into vice. But avarice is different. It is not rooted in a natural impulse. It has nothing to do with real needs and legitimate wants. The problem with avarice is not that we need or want something; it is that we keep wanting more, no matter how much we have. Always more—more wealth, more power, more success. Thus enough never ends up being enough. It finds ready excuses, too: the insecurities of old age, for example, or the unpredictability of life, or the unfairness of the world. The consequences of this vice are especially destructive to community. Avarice undermines generosity, causes worry, drives us to make foolish decisions, turns every activity into a competition, and engenders envy of the success of others. Poverty is no cure, nor is wealth. The best discipline is to “give something up,” which is Cassian’s way of saying to give beyond our means or level of comfort and thus to wean ourselves from excessive attachment to the craving for more.
- **Anger**. This is the first of three vices manifesting largely internal struggles, though they are stirred by outward problems and disappointments. Cassian assures us that anger is natural, and can even be good. God gets angry, he says. And so should we, primarily at ourselves! That is, at our sin and selfishness, at the corruption of the heart. In fact, it is at night when we should get angry, contemplate our own sin, and repent of it, and then meditate on the goodness and grace of God. Thus Psalm 4 commands: “Be angry, but sin not; commune with your own hearts on you bed, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.” But the vice of anger is different. It is awakened when we think about the unfairness of life, the wounds we have unjustly received, the wrongs done to us by others. Yet we refuse to admit the problem, own up to it, and confess it. Instead, we hide our anger and, when questioned about it, claim

that we are not angry, often saying defensively, “What do you mean? I’m not angry! Did I do something?” Evagrius Ponticus describes anger as a boiling over until it spills its poison everywhere. Cassian prefers a different metaphor, more akin to a low simmering, which keeps the poison in the pot. “Yet, because they do not dare to or at any rate cannot bring it out into the open, they turn the poison of their wrath back to their own destruction, brooding over it in their hearts and in glum silence digesting it within themselves”(198-99). Anger is easy to excuse, Cassian notes, because it appears to have an external cause and a legitimate reason. But true tranquility and peace of mind should never depend on outward circumstances but on inward grace. No environment will ever be quite peaceful and positive enough to purge the inclination toward anger. Nothing will ever be quite right. The solution is not avoidance or escape but inward transformation. “The sum total of our improvement and tranquility, then, must not be made to depend on someone else’s willing, which will never be subject to our sway; it comes, rather, under our own power. And so our not getting angry must derive not from someone else’s perfection but from our own virtue, which is achieved not by another person’s patience but by our own forbearance” (201).

- **Sadness.** This vice might strike us as odd and misplaced. Sadness seems so natural, even healthy and right. Cassian suggests, however, that it can be just as deadly as the other vices. In fact, he calls it an accomplice to many of the other vices. Sadness, he says, broods in the heart. It manifests itself as self-pity, excessive discouragement, despair of the soul. This vice is one of the more difficult to root out, for it seems so innocent and justifiable. “You just don’t understand how hard life has been for me,” says the person who is inclined toward this vice. “You think you have had it bad. Well, it is nothing compared to what I have had to suffer.” These excuses lead to a form of egoism that is difficult to recognize and overcome. In the end it leaves us utterly alone, cut off from community, imprisoned within our own pain. We might feel absolutely justified in our self-pity; but the price we pay is terrible isolation.
- **Acedia.** Most scholars don’t even bother to translate this word, using the Greek term instead. Indeed, it is hard to translate.

Basically it refers to weariness, listlessness, impatience with routine, boredom that gives way to laziness. Cassian argues that it is the besetting sin of monks, and he calls it, as many others did before him, “the noonday demon,” for it tends to cause the clock to slow down in the middle of the day. It is also the besetting sin of anyone who has to repeat the same exercises over and over again to reach a state of competence or excellence, like musicians, athletes, actors, and students. In short, *acedia* consists of the refusal to stick with a routine of discipline once the going gets tough or the routine becomes boring. It is a tendency to give up prematurely rather than to push through to the end. It is lack of resilience, patience, and persistence. People suffering from this malady want to sleep all the time but can never sleep; they start something with enthusiasm but eventually give up. Cassian believes that the antidote to *acedia* is steady work. Not idleness, not excessive busyness, just steady work, done in a spirit of patience, gratitude, and generosity.

- **Vainglory.** The last two vices are the most deadly of all. They truly are the sins of the heart. The problem is that these vices grow more dangerous as we become better people. Their strength increases with success in life. Here growth in the spiritual life can itself become a source of temptation. The first of these two vices is vainglory. Cassian says that this vice gains strength when it is defeated, for its defeat makes us want to glory in and spread the word about our godliness and holiness. It is creative and deceptive, too, drawing attention to itself without appearing too obvious. Vain people fantasize about greatness, fame, and beauty. They love attention, and they relish being noticed, admired, and affirmed. They see themselves only through the eyes of other people. In a sense, vanity is the opposite of pride. While pride doesn’t care what anyone thinks, including God, vanity only cares what other people think, excluding God. Cassian warns that we will never be able to root this out by going after it directly, for it will always rebound with a vengeance as we flatter ourselves that we are godly enough to want to overcome it. Instead, we must aim to please God only, and thus lose ourselves by living solely for the glory of God.
- **Pride.** As you would expect, pride comes last on the list, as it always has. Most vices attack one virtue and leave the others

alone. Thus the battle line is often clear and clean; we battle gluttony or fornication or avarice, the other vices leaving us alone. But pride is different, it attacks all virtues and seeks to despoil the person until he or she is utterly destroyed, as the story of Lucifer shows. Pride tempts us to want to be God's equal and competitor; it is the one sin that leads directly to hell because it is dead set against God and in the end everyone else, too. In a strange sense, hell becomes its refuge, for hell is the one place where God isn't. There is NOTHING we can do to overcome this vice. We can try, of course; in fact, Cassian tells us that we MUST try. But we will fail all the same unless God intervenes and helps. The opposite of pride is not simply humility, however important; it is gratitude, submission, and love for God.

The Way to Health and Wholeness

- It is a depressing picture, isn't it? I mean, how can we ever hope to find even modest victory over this teeming world of egoistic vice? Cassian is right, too. We are not subject to temptations in the abstract. These vices are vicious beasts; they dominate the imagination and ravage the soul. They so occupy us that our minds are almost taken over. They might start small, lingering as a shadow in some corner of our mind, but they can grow so large that they become as big as the sky. How strange and foolish that we think we can keep them safely confined inside the head.
- The desert fathers were devoted to the practice of spiritual discipline. It is no wonder that they were called the "athletes of God." Still, they did not believe that the eight deadly vices could be overcome by ascetic practice alone, as if the Christian life could be reduced to human effort. They emphasized the practice of discipline, to be sure, but in the end they acknowledged their utter helplessness. Vice is just too strong, human nature too weak.
- 1. Cassian argues time and again that the way out begins with grace. It is a different definition of grace than we, the heirs of the Reformation, understand, as summed up in Paul and Luther. In their minds grace is more like divine help or assistance. It does not nullify the need for human effort; instead, it envelopes it, inspires it, and empowers it. It is like a mother who asks her young son to jump as high as he can to clear a tall fence, knowing that only she has the height, strength, and leverage to lift him

over. Little does he know that his effort is really not necessary! Try as he might, he will never be able to jump high enough. Yet the mother still believes that trying, however futile, is good for her son. Our efforts drive us to grace and grow out of grace. Apart from grace we can do nothing, though we must still try. As Cassian writes, God looks for some sign of willingness and openness, and God honors our willingness and openness by lifting us over the fence.

- Here is one story that appears in the *Conferences*. It is a story about the necessity of grace. It is important to observe that it is a STORY, too, and not some abstract theological exposition. It begins with a young man who is “exceedingly careful about seeking goodness.” He approaches an old man to confess that he is having difficulty overcoming the temptation of lust. Showing no understanding and sympathy, the old man shames him so much that the young man falls into despair and decides to leave the desert and return to his former life in the city. He encounters Abba Apollos on his journey. Apollos observes that he is troubled and so asks what ails him. At first the young man refuses to speak, but after patient prodding he tells Apollos the whole story. Apollos advises him not to be discouraged, nor to despair of himself, and he admits that even at his age and experience he, too, struggles against similar temptations. Then he gently reminds him that such temptation cannot be overcome by effort alone but only by God’s mercy. He urges him to return to his cell and stay there for just one more day, resuming his routine of prayer and work. So the young man returns to his cell.
- Meanwhile, Apollos realizes that the harsh old man needs to be taught a lesson for giving such bad advice. Standing outside the old man’s cell, Apollos prays that he will be tormented by the same temptation that has afflicted the young man. “Lord, who allows men to be tempted for their good, transfer the war which that brother is suffering to this old man: let him learn by experience in his old age what many years have not taught him, and so let him find out how to sympathize with people undergoing this kind of temptation.” The old man is immediately stricken with temptation and, yielding almost immediately, decides to return to the world. Apollos meets him on the way and tells him how foolish and arrogant he was to treat his young apprentice

- with so much contempt and how presumptuous he was to think he is stronger, for he has been unable to struggle against the same temptation even for one day. The old man ought to have given his young apprentice words of consolation to help him against the devil's attack. But instead he drove him to despair.
- Apollos concludes by acknowledging humanity's desperate need for grace. "Not a single person could endure the enemy's clever attack, nor quench, nor control the leaping fire natural to the body, unless God's grace preserved us in our weakness. In all our prayers we should pray for his grace to save us, so that he may turn aside the scourge aimed even at you." We receive this grace not only in the form of forgiveness and consolation but also in the form of suffering and discipline. God gives both kinds to help us to grow in maturity. "For he makes a man to grieve, and then lifts him up to salvation; he strikes, and his hand heals; he humbles and exalts, mortifies and enlivens; leads to hell and brings from hell."
 - 2. This last line is important. It is true that God comes to our assistance. God forgives and restores and blesses. God takes the initiative to free us from vice and make us like him. But setting and circumstances matter, too, which introduces us to the second step in the process. God gives grace within a context, and not always to our liking either. God never works in a vacuum. He works with real people who live in the real world under real circumstances, as married or single, as sick or healthy, as rich or poor. God can and does work in both the best of circumstances and in the worst of circumstances to transform us.
 - In fact, it is often in the worst of circumstances in which God does his most important work. This could be the reason why the desert fathers and mothers withdrew into the desert. The barrenness and harshness of the landscape stripped them of all creature comforts and reminded them of their need for God. They did not view the desert as a place of retreat or escape. If anything, the desert fathers and mothers went to the desert to fight the devil, submit themselves to a regimen of discipline, and find God.
 - This second step might strike us as harsh, for it seems to give the impression that God does not care about our circumstances. Well, he does, of course; but he cares about something else even more, namely, who we are and what we are becoming. Cassian affirms

that the only true good is virtue, the only true evil is vice. Everything else, including our circumstances, is indifferent. They can be used for good or evil, depending upon how we respond to them. “But those things are indifferent which can be appropriated to either side according to the fancy or wish of their owner, as for instance riches, power, honor, bodily strength, good health, beauty, life itself, and death, poverty, bodily infirmities, injuries, and other things of the same sort, which can contribute either to good or to evil as the character and fancy of their owner directs” (164). An action might be evil, of course, and should be labeled as such. The behavior of Joseph’s brothers comes to mind almost immediately as a telling example. But God can turn it into good, as the story shows.

- Here Cassian introduces us to a fascinating and provocative idea, which he learned from one of the desert masters, Abba Theodore. He calls it “ambidextrous spirituality.” The word *ambidextrous* describes a person who is equally adept using either right hand or left hand. In baseball an ambidextrous person is known as a switch-hitter. Cassian applies the term not to earthy but to spiritual matters. Ambidextrous disciples, he says, learn to live for Christ in both adversity and prosperity. “This power we also can spiritually acquire, if by making a right and proper use of those things which are fortunate, and which seem to be ‘on the right hand,’ as well as those which are unfortunate and as we call it ‘on the left hand’.”
- Cassian notes how God can use both prosperity and adversity to advance his purposes. Prosperity is preferable, of course, because it makes God seem good, the world seem right, and faith seem natural, as natural as writing with the dominant hand. Obviously adversity does the opposite, making life hard for us. Temptation overruns us, doubt plagues us, routine bores us. Ambidextrous Christians *take both in stride*, as Job and Joseph did; prosperity does not lead to carelessness, adversity to despair. “We shall then be ambidextrous, when neither abundance nor want affects us, and when the former does not entice us to the luxury of a dangerous carelessness, while the latter does not draw us to despair, and complaining; but when, giving thanks to God in either case alike, we gain one and the same advantage out of good and bad fortune” (174). God can use adversity as well as prosperity to

- enlarge our capacity to trust God and be conformed to the image of his son. They are tools in his hands, like the hammer and chisel Michelangelo used to sculpt his figures, setting them free from their marble grave. We don't need just the right set of circumstances to mature as Christians, nor to find happiness in life. For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, *God remains faithful*. He uses whatever is at hand to make us his and make us like Christ. Circumstances are thus neutral. They can be neutral because God never is. His entire being is devoted to our redemption. As Paul proclaimed so triumphantly, nothing can separate us from the love of God.
- 3. Cassian's third step is the practice of discipline. The practices he outlines are not for the faint of heart. The stories of the desert fathers and mothers strike terror in the soul because their disciplined way of life seems so extreme; in truth, it was extreme. They fasted for days on end, stood up and stayed up all night long to pray, embraced absolute poverty, spent days, weeks, and even years in isolation, avoided all contact with the opposite sex, chained themselves to rocks or lived atop pillars, and ate nothing but dried bread and dried vegetables. This is discipline to the extreme. What do you say about someone like Abba Macarius who repented of killing a gnat by standing naked in a swamp every day for six months as an act of penance so that every insect in Egypt could avenge the death of their friend, the gnat? Such behavior does not strike me as normal or healthy!
 - But Cassian warns that ascetic practice is insufficient, and even dangerous, if unaccompanied by discretion and balance. He mentions examples of desert saints who practiced extreme discipline, submitting themselves to every form of deprivation, only to become deceived and lost. What, he asks, can be learned from such tragic downfalls? They were not lacking in discipline, he concedes. That was NOT their problem! But they did lack discretion. "For when the works of the above mentioned virtue were abounding in them, discretion alone was wanting, and allowed them not to continue even to the end. Nor can any other reason for their falling off be discovered except that as they were not sufficiently instructed by their elders they could not obtain judgment and discretion, which passing by excess on either side, teaches a monk always to walk along the royal road," which

Cassian defines as the balance between fanaticism and slackness. Of all the desert fathers and mothers, Cassian mentions moderation and temperance more than anyone. In fact, as he puts it, “excessive abstinence is still more injurious to us than careless satiety.” Instead, we should aim for the “right measure of strictness.” Discipline does play a role; but it must be the right kind of discipline, which is why the guidance of “elders” is so important.

- 4. Cassian is critical of excess because he keeps his eye on the goal, which is not discipline or indulgence but purity of heart and love for God. He is careful to distinguish means from ends. He mentions purity of heart often, perhaps more than any other virtue, which we could define, following Soren Kierkegaard, as willing only one thing. Detachment and deprivation is the negative expression of that. But Cassian prefers to spell it out positively. He uses the story of Mary and Martha to make his point. The desert fathers and mothers did not condemn Martha. Cassian, for one, honors her virtue, for she was performing a service to the Lord. But she was distracted and irritated by many things. Mary, he concludes, chose the “better part” because she directed all of her attention to Jesus and contemplated his beauty, wisdom, and glory. Everything else is secondary, including such good things as asceticism and service, which can and should be done for one purpose only, which, Cassian affirms, is that “the soul may ever cleave to God and to heavenly things.” “Whatever is alien to this, however great it may be, should be given second place, or even treated as of no consequence, or perhaps as hurtful” (36). Thus “perfection is not arrived at simply by self-denial, and the giving up of all goods, and the casting away of honors, unless there is that charity, . . . which consists of purity of heart and love for God alone.” At the end of time life as we know it will end, and all ascetic discipline and even works of charity will no longer be necessary. Then we will behold and enjoy the very presence of God. Even now all of life should point in that direction, even when we must live more like Martha than like Mary.

Conclusion

- I want to conclude by exploring the usefulness of Cassian’s ideas for today, especially for psychologists and therapists. Cassian

reminds us that the Christian faith itself is not a self-help religion. His description of the eight deadly vices exposes the folly of mere human effort to fix the problem. These vices run too deep in human nature, the problems we face are too strong. We need help from the outside, for we are fighting a battle against a superior foe. But we know a God who is more superior still. God stands with us; God promises to save us; God sends his Spirit to transform us. We know this is true because of Jesus Christ. Pat's mentor claims that every person alive has a black hole of pain and fear that they try to avoid at all costs but must eventually look into if they want to become healthy. Staring into the abyss of this black hole, they come face-to-face with their vulnerability and helplessness. But they will find, if they dare to face it, that one has gone to the bottom of that hole and waits there to receive them. It is the one who became human for our sake, the one who chose to suffer, the one who has gone deeper into the pit than we ever will, or need to.

- The eight deadly vices remind us that we have fallen far lower than we could imagine, that we are far more vulnerable than we think, that we are far more helpless than we know. Losing weight or changing diets or taking a speed-reading course or earning high grades in college or sticking to a budget or thinking positive thoughts is simply not enough. Only God is.
- There is a second conclusion I want to draw. I think Cassian is right when he says that circumstances play a largely neutral role. Bad things do happen to us, whether it is our doing or someone else's or simply the result of bad luck. Therapists spend a great deal of time helping their clients analyze the circumstances and the feelings that they awaken. They do exercise a certain kind of power over us. So it does us no good to ignore them or dismiss them as irrelevant or to label them as something other than bad or evil.
- But God really can turn even the worst of circumstances toward the good, as the story of Joseph and Ruth illustrate so powerfully. Two weeks ago Pat and I attended a lecture delivered by a former prime minister of Ethiopia. In his younger years he joined the communist party and became a revolutionary, and for the best of reasons, too, he claimed, for he truly wanted to strive for justice and equity. After a 15-year civil war his party emerged the victor

and assumed power. But his own comrades turned against him and put him in prison, where he remained for 12 years, much of it in solitary confinement. I can't tell you the whole story now, except this one thing: after five years in prison he became a Christian. He stated boldly in the lecture that the next seven years of his life were the best years he has ever had because he drew close to God and became a bold witness for God. He echoed the words of Paul in claiming that he had learned the secret of contentment, discovering that he could do all things through the one who promised to strengthen him. There is a way out for all of us. It is not a pathway or a technique; it is a person, Jesus Christ, who rules over all circumstances as the Lord.

- Finally, Cassian teaches us that we should ponder what we really want out of life. We might find our problems too much because the solution we imagine is the wrong one. We do live in a fallen world. Even under the best of circumstances life is bound to disappoint us. Cassian calls us to a higher goal, not happiness but purity of heart, not self love but love for God. It is lofty, to be sure; but also worthy. And transcendent, too.
- Having been married to a mental health professional for these two and a half years, I have learned a great deal about your profession, and I have grown to appreciate it. On occasion Pat tells me stories of clients, though never providing details or breaking confidence. These stories remind me how hard life is for people. Many of you hear such stories, or will in the future. Some problems seem so severe and tragic that there is no apparent or obvious way out, no way to health and wholeness. Some problems seem to promise nothing but pain and pathology for years to come. And such may be the case. Yet Cassian reminds us that there is a God who has come to us. Much of life might remain the same, even if such a God exists. But somehow, whether in this life or the next, he will make all things well. Jesus Christ is the first fruits of the redemption of all creation. What God has begun he will complete. Our job is to keep believing and enduring in the faith, and carrying others along with us.
- Several years ago a distressed woman came to visit me. She had suffered a series of losses that he put her to the test, and she confessed that she found it hard to believe, not so much because she didn't think the Christian faith was true but because she was

too exhausted and discouraged to believe. She felt very guilty about her loss of faith, which of course only made matters worse. I listened for a while and then suggested that she should let me believe for her, and not only me but the entire church down through the ages. Why not let the church sing for her and pray for her and listen to sermons for her, and thus carry her along for a while until she could believe once again. This is what we Christians must simply do for each other. In the end it is not enough to be therapists, however important and necessary the work is. You must be Christians, too, for Christians look to God. They have faith, hope, and love, for themselves and for others. Thanks be to God.