

## **ASCETICISM OF THE EYE**

*[From a talk at the Pilgrim Society, 1982]*

The word asceticism means "training," a strengthening of our will. An athlete is an ascetic who is training and his or her specific field of athletics. For Orthodox Christians, it is spiritual training, exercising our willpower, self-control, self-discipline and discernment. Apostle Paul directly links asceticism to athletic training (eg, 1 Corinthians 9:24-26)

In initiating a discussion on the subject, my mind was drawn to a working paper by philosopher Ivan Illich, "Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show."<sup>1</sup> Illich examines the changes in the concept of the gaze and convincingly argues that even the concept of what we do with the eyes has often changed dramatically over the past few centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, when we use such terms, familiar to Orthodox Christians as "guarding the eye" and "fasting with the eyes," we must realise that the concepts which initially travelled with these expressions have changed. In some cases, concepts and understandings of various aspects of vision, seeing, gazing, and looking have changed dramatically or vanished altogether. Indeed, more than one hundred words dealing with the quality and meaning of seeing have vanished from our vocabulary over the past four or five centuries.

This makes discussing the asceticism of the eye more difficult both to grasp and to practise. The task is even more complicated by our carelessness in rendering translations of Orthodox prayers and terminology, a problem we will discuss later.

## 1

### A DEFINITION OF ASCETICISM

Too often, the word “asceticism” is understood primarily as a form of "repression" or voluntary suffering. Even when one has a broader understanding of Christian spiritual struggle, the idea of "repression" is often a dominant feature in the way the concept is understood.

Asceticism of the eye is generally understood as a form of internalized optical repression and voiced almost exclusively in terms of averting the eye and suppressing the gaze: it is understood in terms of “avoidance.”

Let me reiterate: Askesis - asceticism - does not mean "repression," it means "training;" training the eye, training the gaze. While, for us, asceticism has a relation to moral development, it has no relationship to moralism or romanticised deprivation. Asceticism is a process of spiritual and mental training and development, not a system of guilt-ridden repression. The difference between the two is substantially the difference between a

Christian and a Gnostic point of view.

The asceticism of the eye has as much to do with "encounter" as it does with "avoidance."

## 2

### **THE ASCETIC ASPECT OF ENCOUNTER**

Asceticism of the eye is concerned not only with training the eye for avoidance but also with training it for encounter.

We know it is helpful to avert the eyes from anything that tempts the mind or negatively impacts the imagination. However, asceticism or training of the eye has two aspects, and we cannot speak of avoidance without speaking of encounter. When art classes and penmanship lessons were dropped in many public schools, their elimination was based on the idea that they were "frills," an unnecessary focus on niceties. In fact, the origin of these classes in the educational process was the realisation that the eyes needed to be trained. Art and calligraphy (which became penmanship) were part of the training of the eye for discretion and discernment in the "encounter."

In a deeper sense, within the Orthodox context, an example would be perceiving the full meaning, power, and spiritual impact of proper iconography without falling into delusion or saccharine phantasy. Comprehending the meaning

and revelation in this liturgical art form also depends on the asceticism of the eye, the training of the “gaze.” Orthodox people who accept, or even prefer, Western religious painting to canonical iconography lack spiritual discernment of the difference between sensual depictions and theological liturgical art designed to convey a deeper understanding of Scripture and sound doctrine. Their eye is not trained for “spiritual encounter” but remains attuned to the world of carnal images, which can actually be self-projecting idolatry.

When a skilled or trained map reader gazes at a map, he can "read himself into it." Gazing at the abstract lines and symbols, he images himself into an actual location, space and time. This is a unique faculty of human consciousness and the real value of imagination. The trained map reader is able to image himself into an unfamiliar landscape and into a specific time frame. The ascetic eye, gazing at an icon, draws him into a dimension that is timeless and boundless, and it does this by means of the symbolic aspects of the icon. The “reverse perspective” of the icon teaches the true meaning of repentance and “returning” as the Prodigal Son reversed his perspective, turning around and “returning.”

The ascetically trained eye does not simply image or gather information; it seeks an encounter with meaning. For much of humanity, deeper spiritual meaning is a missing dimension of being.

The canonical icon is intended not merely to “portray” but to “reveal.”

### 3

## **THE MORAL ASPECT OF ENCOUNTER**

The ascetic eye has the ability not merely to avoid but to “encounter” in an appropriate and edifying way - in a spiritually and morally edifying way. The moral gaze is not the puritanical glare of the averting of the eye from something unpleasant or gazing in judgment and condemnation.

The ascetic eye not only avoids temptation but also avoids offending or wounding another person. When, for example, we gaze on a homeless street person with condescending pity, we may only heap coals on their heads and wound them with the eyes of our pity or, worse, scorn. Such a visual encounter should rather be with a gaze that acknowledges and validates their full and equal humanity. The truly ascetic eye would not produce a gaze bearing the negative energy of condescending pity but the embrace of the recognition of equal personhood.

The eye, our Saviour declares, is the window of our soul (cp. Lk.11:34) The moralistic eye can register disdainful pity in place of sincere compassion, a haughty arrogance in place of humanity, whereas the ascetic eye can register healing love, the full acknowledgment of the

humanity of the person. Each form of gaze ultimately reflects the spirit of the one gazing. Lying with the eyes is far more difficult than being dishonest with the tongue. The ascetic eye discerns the image and likeness of God in every human being and understands why Christ chose the most wretched and lowliest form of death to encompass all mankind and carry all humanity into His glorious resurrection.

#### NOTES:

1. Working Paper Nr. 4 for Science, Technology and Society Studies, Pennsylvania State University, August, 1994 (unpublished)
2. Dr. Illich also mentions the former meaning of the word "face." In attempting to practise reductionism on the words of the prayers and divine services, many translators do not bother to examine what is actually meant by the words. It is only in recent times that the word "face" came to mean little more than the front of the head. In earlier centuries, it had much deeper connotations and represented both the person and the person's inner disposition. We may vaguely still remember this when we speak of "putting on a brave face," by which we mean having a countenance that does not reveal inner fear. In more modern English, the closest equivalent to what would have been meant in Greek and Slavonic or old English by the word "face" can only be rendered as "countenance."
3. When Romanides often referred to the "happiness seeking sickness" He was not asserting that happiness itself is a sickness but referring to the fact that when one begins to believe that "personal happiness" is the substance of life, one can give himself over to the continuous pursuit of a phantom of "happiness" as a constant fabric of life. This can actually lead to despair and an ultimate feeling of hopelessness.