

Metanoia - Committing to change of mind and behavior

Jesus' first teaching: *"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* (Matt 4:17)

There is no limit to perfection, for even the perfection of the perfect is truly without completion. Saint Isaac the Syrian (1/70, 340)

The fear of God is the father of heedfulness, and heedfulness is the mother of inner peace, and the latter gives birth to conscience, which causes the soul to behold its own ugliness as in a certain pure and undisturbed water; and thus are born the beginnings and roots of repentance [metanoia]. St Seraphim (52)

Repentance [Metanoia] is endless. Elder Ephram (57)

Through repentance [metanoia] shall all, every one of us, be saved. Saint Silouan the Anthonite (347)

This is the law we have: if you forgive others, it is a sign that the Lord had forgiven you; but if you refuse to forgive, then your own sin remains with you. Saint Silouan the Anthonite (351)

Metanoia¹ is the foundation of our faith. It involves turning from yourself to God. It is the first act of one who develops faith and the fear of God. As you develop faith and awe of God, you will become aware of how neglectful you have been about living God's commandments and how distant you are from God. You begin to realize that your relationship with God is weak and you develop a strong inner desire to change this and live in union with God. This is the time to commit yourself to making changes in how you live your life. Repentance (metanoia) involves a radical change, a transformation of your mind and heart, reorienting yourself through changed behaviors to carrying out the will of God.

When you examine your life what do you find? Do you find that it is mostly self-centered, not necessarily selfish, but organized around how you meet your needs? Do you pick friends that make you feel good? Do you buy material things to give you pleasure and comfort? Do you focus on your job so you can buy all the material things that will give you a good life and make you more comfortable? Do you worry about some of your basic needs and wrestle with insecurities about your job, your relationships, your health or other things? Does Church seem like an obligation that is often difficult to fulfill and not in the mainstream of your life? Do you find that your life is very busy and often feels like it is running at a hectic pace, and a bit out of control? Do you find that sometimes your biological needs often dominate your thinking, placing an

¹ Metanoia means a change of mind and is normally translated as repentance.

emphasis on seeking the pleasure of food, health regimens or good sex? Do you ever feel like you are chasing after an unreachable goal? Saint Theophan says,

*“Such a person is always in a painful state. He thirsts, but his thirst is not quenched. He hungers, but his craving is not fed. He seeks, but cannot find. He exerts himself, but does not receive. Some are left in this state for a very long time, so that they feel as though they have been repudiated by God, as if God has forgotten, rejected, and cursed them.”*²

The question you need to begin asking is, “How can I turn my life around and find a inner peace anchored in God and His divine grace?” You may wonder if this is even possible. As you wrestle with this you will feel a certain contrition or touch of sorrow in your heart. It is the feeling that you have not lived up to what someone you love very much has asked of you.

This is important! You cannot accept your current condition no matter how good it seems. Nor can you despair no matter how bad it seems. Your condition is common in today’s world. You want to have a feeling of sorrow along with hope. Remember, God made you in His likeness and image and gives you far greater potential than the life you now experience. He calls you to perfection. Jesus told His disciples to become perfect as My Father is perfect. Yes, He is calling you to become like God. Remember also that God is all loving. He wants to help you in your struggles with life. He has given you the capacity to choose and to change. Metanoia is the way to your perfection.

Are we by Nature sinful?

The answer is No? The problem is we find ourselves enmeshed in lives that are not our natural state. Let’s go back to the time of Creation. Remember, each time God announced one of His creations He said it is “good”. All of creation is “good”. So why is it that we have to face suffering and the possibility of death? It all began by the disobedience of Adam and Eve. They chose to separate from God’s will and suffered as a consequence the fate of such a separation - death and suffering. This we inherit from them as their ancestors. We are not guilty of their action, but we inherit their condition and tendency to put our priorities into things of this world. This is why God sent His Son to save us by His teaching, example, victory in death through His resurrection, and then empower the Apostles with the Holy Spirit and establish the Church here on earth all to help us come into union with Him.

Saint Isaac says,

Just as it isn’t possible for someone to cross the great sea without a ship, so someone can’t reach love without fear. We can cross the tempestuous sea placed between us and the spiritual paradise only with the ship of repentance, borne by the oarsmen of fear. If these oarsmen of fear don’t handle the ship of repentance well, by which we cross the sea of this world toward God, we will be drowned in it. Repentance is the ship, fear is the rudder, love the divine harbor. So fear puts us in the ship of repentance, and we cross the

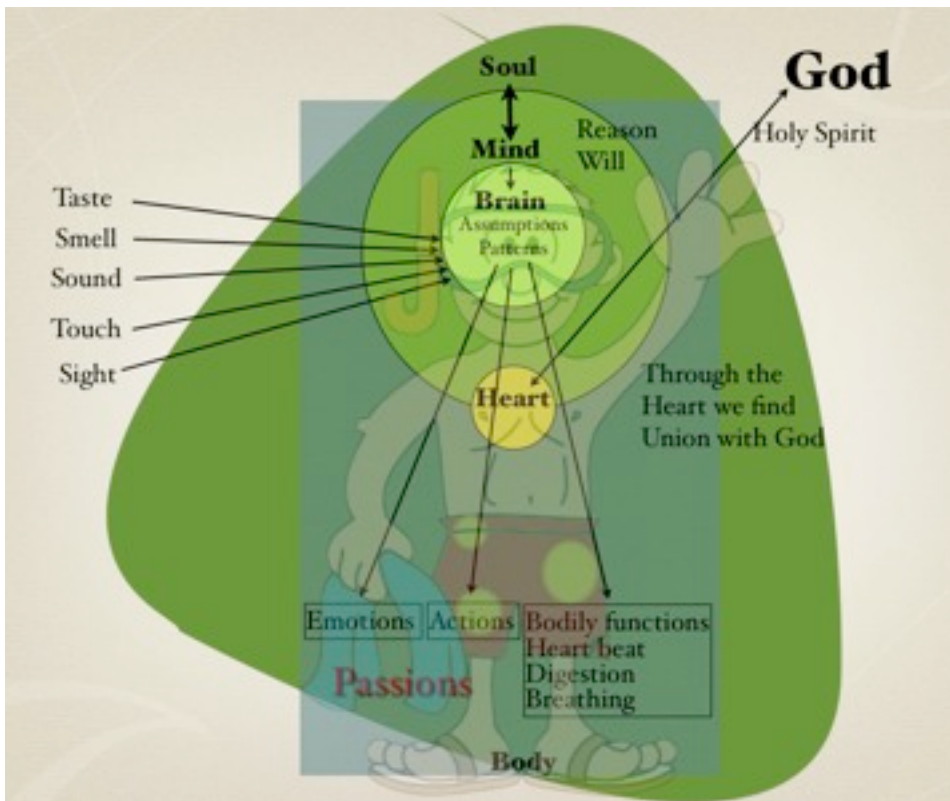
² THG (15)

tempestuous sea and it guides us to the divine harbor, which is love where all those who labor and have been enlightened by repentance arrive. And when we have reached love, we have reached God. And our journey has ended and we have reached the island which is beyond this world. (Ascetical Homilies 72, p. 248)

Nature of Soul, Mind, Brain, Heart

To continue our discussion we need to understand the nature of the soul, mind, heart and brain. Modern science can help us on this issue as well. There has been much brain research recently attempting to come to terms with the mystery of our consciousness. They always start from a materialistic basis instead of a spiritual one, but have been able to show us how our biological system works and holds us in a sinful nature. As we increase our scientific knowledge, and we learn how to give priority to our soul over our body and its biological brain, we can begin to lift ourselves up from our condition by God’s grace.

The soul is a mystical concept that we cannot totally understand. The word is derived from the Greek word “psyche” and has many meanings as used in Scripture. It is a



word often used interchangeably with spirit. Our Church Fathers have given us various insights about the nature of the soul. From the account of Creation in Genesis³, the first man is created from earth and then God breathed into him and he became a living being. The word used for breath is the word we translate into soul. So in the broadest sense the soul is the inbreathing of God

into our being to give us life. The soul is how the material world is connected to God.

³ Gen 2:7; We cannot take this account totally literally as we God described in human terms for our understanding of underlying spiritual concepts.

Body and soul were created at the same time creating a unity⁴ of body and soul. There are two principles that come together, spirit and earth. The soul makes the material element become conscious and capable of willful actions. With a soul in the body, spirit can meet the world.

There is no church dogma on the soul other than to say that it does not preexist our birth, but is given at the time of conception by the will of God. How the soul is created in each person remains a mystery. The Church Fathers teach that the soul is the image of God and has the powers of nourishment, imagination, instinct and intelligence.⁵ It permeates the entire body and is bound up in it, but transcends its materiality. It is not a derivative of the brain or the body, but has its own distinctness. It is the soul that gives us consciousness. We are created in this way to bring the created material world into union with the eternal principles of the world God created. This involves a dialogue and a collaboration with God.⁶ Our soul provides these capabilities. By this means God makes the world spiritual and does so through mankind. Through the soul, humankind brings about the spiritualization of the entire world.

Another term that is widely used by the Church fathers is the term nous. It too is a term that is difficult to define. Generally we can think of it as the mind. The nous is seen by the Fathers as the higher and intellectual part of the soul. The soul is more than the nous or the mind. However, sometimes nous and soul will be used interchangeably. At other times it refers to the “eye of the soul.”⁷ Saint Maximos tells us that it has the powers of understanding, acuteness, apprehension and quick-wittedness. He says that its natural function is to keep the passions of the body under control, to contemplate the inner essences of created things and to carry out God’s will.⁸ It is capable of direct intuitive knowledge of God.

Still another common term used by the Fathers is “heart.” From Scriptures we have Jesus telling us in His Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”⁹ God is revealed in the heart and it is there that man comes to know Him. The heart is where the knowledge of God is revealed to us. The heart is the innermost part of our being. It is part of our sub-consciousness. You only become

⁴ Saint Maximos the Confessor says, “at the beginning through creation, and afterwards through birth and will of God, the soul and body come into existence simultaneously as a unity, not truly a unity of substance, but as a unity from both elements” (p71 Staniloae, *Experience of God* vol2)

⁵ Saint Maximos

⁶ p 65-67 Staniloae, *Experience of God* vol2

⁷ p125 Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychology: The Science of the Fathers* “Sometimes it is identified with the soul, sometimes it is an energy of the soul, the eye of the soul, sometimes the term suggests the essence of the soul, sometimes its energy, and sometimes it means the attentiveness which is subtler than the mind.”

⁸ p 128 Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychology: The Science of the Fathers*

⁹ Matt 5:8

aware of it gradually. The heart is the control center that reigns over the body. It is the place from which grace penetrates throughout the body and the mind. It is the deepest part of the soul and where Christ comes to dwell within us.¹⁰ Saint Theophan the Recluse says the heart is the innermost part of man and is spirit. This is where our self-awareness, our conscience and our idea of God resides. The Fathers see the heart as both a bodily organ and the center of our being. Peter says the heart is that place that is energized by God's grace. It is a place that is deep within us and unknown to others and often to ourselves. "*Do not let your adornment be merely outward... rather let it be the hidden person of the heart.*"¹¹

How about the brain? Where does it fit into the scheme of things. The brain is an organ of the mind. It is the organ which integrates soul and body and the external world. The brain as the most complex part of the body allows the body to adapt to its environment and to interact with it.¹² It supports the survival of the physical body. It has very powerful functions that must be controlled by the heart and mind. The brain has the capacity to take input from all the senses and creates an integrated but simplified view of the world. It contains an incredibly complex network of physical connections that allow us to respond to the ever changing environment almost automatically. It is where the instincts necessary for our survival are stored. It contains the means for regulation all the bodily functions. You can think of it as the manager of the body and its functions. Its focus is on the body and its needs and desires (passions). Without the higher mind humans would be no different than other animals only acting out of instinct. With the grace of God through the heart, the mind points the body towards God and His commandment of love. This is our purpose, to seek union with God so we can orient our whole being to God and carry out His will.

¹⁰ Saint Markorios says, ""the heart governs and reigns over the whole bodily organism; and when grace possesses the ranges of the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts. for there in the heart is the mind, and all the thoughts of the soul and its expectations; and this way grace penetrates also to all the members of the body... Within the heart are unfathomable depths. There are reception rooms and bedchambers in it, doors and porches, and many offices and passages. In it is the workshop of righteousness and of wickedness. In it is death; in it is life... the heart is Christ's palace: there Christ the King comes to take his rest, with the angels and the spirits of the saints, and He dwells there, walking within it and placing His Kingdom there.

The heart is but a small vessel: and yet dragons and all the treasures of wickedness; rough, uneven paths are there, and gaping chasms. There likewise is God, there are the angels, there life and the Kingdom, there light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace; all things are there. pp17-20 *Art of Prayer*

¹¹ 1Peter 3:3-4

¹² Consisting of only 3 lbs of gray flesh it is the most complex physical object we know. Although the brain represents only 2% of the body weight, it receives 15% of the cardiac output, 20% of total body oxygen consumption, and 25% of total body glucose utilization.

A typical brain contains 100 billion cells--almost as numerous as the stars in the Milky Way galaxy. And each cell is linked by synapses to as many as 100,000 others. The synapses between cells are awash in hormones and neurotransmitters that modulate the transmission of signals, and the synapses constantly form and dissolve, weaken and strengthen in response to new experiences.

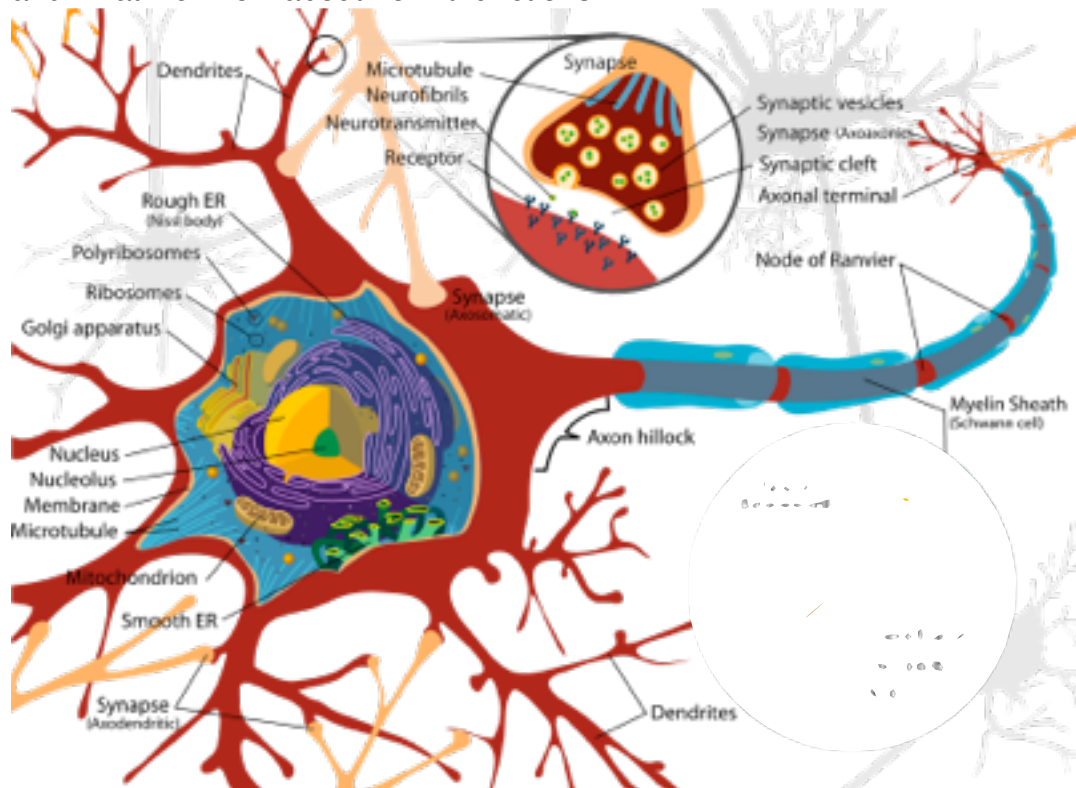
The spiritual path involves keeping things in their proper order: God, soul, mind, heart and then body. Our human struggle involves the condition where the body has taken priority and the depth of the heart is unknown and ignored. The body pursues its pleasures, which become passions, blocking us from a life of love as Jesus taught. This separation from God is what is called our sinful state.

The basic problem

Paul says in his letter to the Romans,

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (Rom 7:18 -23)

So why are we stuck to do that which we do not want to do? How has evil captured our bodies and dominated our soul? We can find some clues in recent studies of the brain and what we know about how it functions.



In its many connections of neurons through trillions of synapses the brain has etched in it patterns that allow us to respond quickly to our environment. In these connections are captured responses that you need to change if you are going to be able to follow the commands of the Lord. The devil knows your weaknesses and continually tempts you based on these almost automatic responses.



Homer Simpson's brain shown here characterizes the problem. Encoded in the array of connections are all of our desires along with our responses if we are denied them. You simply can't let the brain as a part of your body to dominate your actions. You need to modify some of the brain's programming to be able to overcome your sinfulness. You have to struggle to put the soul in charge.

You can look at your sinful tendency in two ways. First, it is the devil who tempts you. Second, it is your mental programming that produces automatic responses which are called your passions.

What are Passions?

Passions (πάθος) are the emotions that control you. They include sexual desire, anger, envy, desire for

material goods, rejection, fear and love to name a few. They are all desires that cannot be satisfied. You can never gain all the material goodies you desire. You will never gain all the recognition you feel you deserve. You will always have a desire for tasty food, but if you fill your desire for it you will get sick. The same goes for sex and many other desires. Passions are an expression of your ego-centeredness. It's all about yourself and what you want for your own pleasure and gratification. In reality, your passions are futile attempts to satisfy your spiritual longing by this world's means and are doomed to failure.

Paul reminds us, *Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* (Gal 5:24) Jesus reminds us, *From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within and they defile man.*" (Mark 7: 21-23)

You can also look at the parable of the sower where Christ tells us about the seeds that were sown among the thorns. He tells His disciples, *"As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who, hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature."* (Luke 8:14) The passions that come from your inner bodily programming do block you from your goal to be united with Christ.

Passions are no more than forces that dominate your soul and are etched into your brain and its neural structure, programming your automatic responses. They need to be rooted out, or overlaid with new programs. You can assume that some of this programming is hereditary. We know we inherit ancestral sin from Adam and Eve. This means this task is not a simple one. It requires God's help along with a committed effort on your part.

Traditionally the passions are gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, self-esteem, pride and vainglory. We can think of them in two types: natural and unnatural passions.

The natural passions depend on our physical nature and the maintenance of our physical being. These include our appetite for food, our fear of being harmed, and our sexual attraction to the opposite sex. These are all necessary for our preservation. They are a central part of our animal nature and common to all animals. These are not a problem unless they go beyond the need for self-preservation.

Saint Maximus says,

*“The natural passions become good in those who struggle when, wisely unfastening them from the things of the flesh, use them to gain heavenly things. For example, they can change appetite into the movement of a spiritual longing for divine things; pleasure into the pure joy for the cooperation of the mind with divine gifts; fear into care to evade future misfortune due to sin; and sadness into corrective repentance for present evil.”*¹³

Then there are the unnatural passions. These are our natural passions that we mistakenly connect with our longing for spiritual wholeness. We continually seek happiness only to find pain on the other end. Then feeling pain or dissatisfaction, we again seek more pleasure only again to find again pain. Saint Maximos reminds us, *When man isn't focused on distinguishing between what is spiritual and things of the senses he disobeys the divine command. He errs when the irrationality of feeling is the only form of discernment. He is captured by pleasure and avoidance of pain.*¹⁴

Saint Anthony writes,

*Things that are done according to nature aren't sins, but those done by choice; it's not a sin to eat, so that the body will be properly maintained in life without any evil thought, but it is to eat without gratitude and improperly and without restraint; neither is it a sin to look with chastity, but it is a sin to look with envy, pride and desire; it is not a sin to listen quietly, but it is with anger. It's not a sin to let the tongue be unrestrained in thanksgiving and prayer, but it is to speak evil; to not let your hands do acts of mercy, but to commit murder and theft. So each of our members sins if it does evil instead of good, doing things its own way and not according to the will of God.*¹⁵

Recently scientists have studied similar issues from the perspective of the physical world. One of these is Dr. Antonio Damasio who developed a theory about how emotions work in us. He says that first something from our senses initiates a response. Then the brain sends a command to the other regions of the brain and to most everywhere in the body. This happens through chemical injections into our blood stream that act on receptors in the cells of our body tissues. This tells us that its even more complex that just the trillions of connections in our brain, but our entire body acts

¹³ St. Maximus Questions to Thalassios 1, PG 90.269 - OS 9

¹⁴ St. Maximos, Questions to Thalassios 1, 43, PG90.412-13 - OS 87

¹⁵ *On the Character of Men* 60, GrPh 1, p 12; cf. Phi 1, p. 338 - OS 92

as an integrated organism. In the neuron pathways, commands take the form of electromechanical signals that act on the other neurons or on muscular fibers or organs which in turn can release chemicals of their own into the blood stream. The result is a response that causes a change of state of our entire organism. Once this happens we become aware of a feeling. We feel irritated, angry, pleased and so forth. This tells us that we cannot simply rely on the idea that we can wait for our feelings to develop to control our behavior, but that we have to change the programming that leads to the response of feelings. By the time we have an emotion the organism is already jolted into action and it is difficult to change its course and we may have already sinned.

The bottom line is that you cannot wait for your feelings to develop to control your behavior. You need to interact at the time of the stimulus and change the automatic responses that lead to the emotional response of the body. Of course you can also try to avoid the situations where you are stimulated to some degree as well, like what you do and who you do it with.

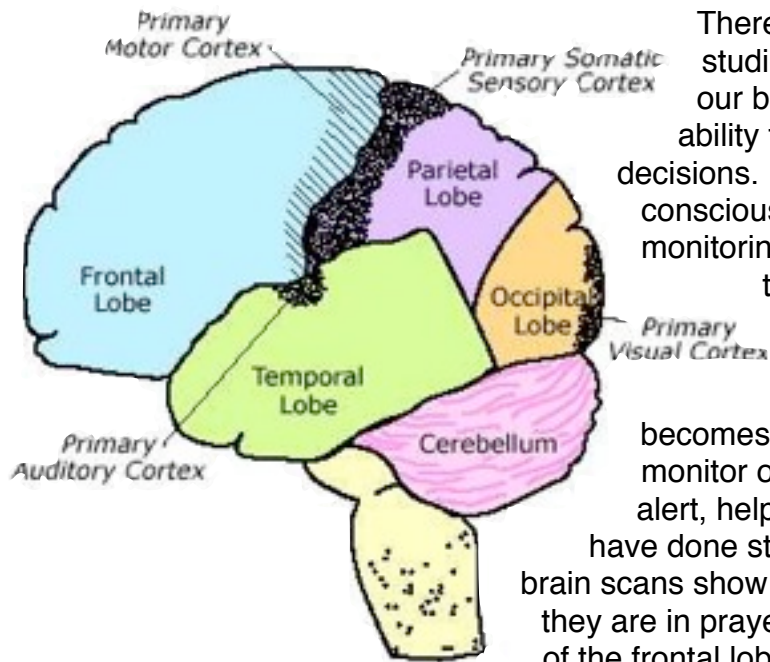
There are two places where you can interrupt this cycle. One is when you first receive the sensual stimulus. The second is when you notice the emotional feeling, but before you automatically take an action. The Church Fathers instruct us to do both of these and especially the first. This is called guarding your "Heart" or "Watchfulness."

Daniel Siegel is another modern scientist who gives us insight into this issue. He says we can actually focus our minds in a way that changes the structures and function of the our brain.¹⁶ He proves that attentional processes, emotion regulation and capacity to observe internally, to introspect and reflect are all considered trainable skills.¹⁷ By developing this attentiveness in your mind you can prepare yourself to act in cooperation with God. You will see later in our discussion of prayer, fasting and worship that our Orthodox religious practices can help you develop this attention.

You need to first recognize the limited nature you have of your understanding of what you sense. You must realize that your brain is taking shortcuts all the time. What you sense, what you have in your memory and the mental images you have, only give you a symbolic representation of the world. You will never have the whole picture of reality. These shortcuts allow your brain to identify what it believes to be significant so it can ignore the rest and take appropriate action.

¹⁶ *Mindful Brain*, p96

¹⁷ Lutz and colleagues 204, p 97



There are numerous brain imaging studies that suggest the frontal lobe of our brain is critical in directing our ability to act freely and to make decisions. This shows that free will is a conscious choice involving an introspective monitoring of the self.¹⁸ The studies show that the more you concentrate on a moral idea, the easier it becomes to act on that belief. In other words, the brain becomes reprogrammed. The frontal lobes monitor our ability to stay attentive and alert, helping us to focus on a task. They have done studies on nuns in prayer. Their brain scans show a different brain pattern when they are in prayer that involves a greater activity of the frontal lobes of the brain indicating this attentiveness. We don't fully understand this, but

we do know that the brain is functioning different when in prayer than otherwise.

Andrew Newberg also adds to our understanding in his studies reported in *Why we Believe What We Believe*. He found that if you want to maintain a sense of well being you have to work at it continually reinforcing positive feelings and beliefs. This is clearly one of the benefits of prayer, worship and other spiritual practices. The key to creating any reality is based on a concentrated repetition of ideas.¹⁹ The more you stay focused on an object of contemplation the more real the thought becomes. You must be careful about what you pray for or meditate on, because it may eventually become your personal truth. If you want to make spirituality a central part of your life, he says, then by all means focus on spiritual ideals as often as you can.

Of course you don't have to turn to modern scientists for this kind of advice. Apostle Peter says, *Gird up the loins of your mind... not conforming yourselves to the former lusts but ... you also be holy in all your conduct.* (1 Peter 1:13-15) *Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul... submit yourself to every ordinance...* (1 Peter 2:11, 13)

Apostle Paul says, *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; unchastity, uncleanness,, passion, evil desire and greed, which is idolatry... But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.* (Col 3: 5-10)

¹⁸ *Mindful Brain*, p 158

¹⁹ *Why we Believe What We Believe*, p 189

Orthodox Way of Life

Fortunately, the Church shows you the way to deal with this most difficult task so central to your salvation and union with God. You must remember that you can't do it by your own effort alone, but can only succeed through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This effort that all of us must make is called the purification of the heart. It is a difficult path requiring persistence and endurance.

The Church doctrine of Synergy is an important one to keep in mind. Salvation depends on your cooperation. This is not a cooperation between equals but between finite man and the Almighty God. It is not about earning Salvation, but about cooperating with His grace. Grace leads and you respond. You must make yourself capable of receiving grace as well as responding even when it is contrary to your brain's programming.

The Church provides many "tools" to aid you along your path to Salvation. These are prayer and fasting, repentance and Holy Confession, Worship and Holy Communion, praying with icons, reading the Bible and the Church Fathers, ordering your life to protect you from harm and to provide time for nurturing our soul, living by the virtues and putting others first. We will be addressing these in a later chapter.

The Orthodox Way of Life begins with Faith. Based on faith and your inner knowledge of God, you can learn to surrender your ego and embrace the teachings of the Church. You learn to become obedient to the direction of a spiritual Father and to the practices of the Church, which is Christ on earth. You surrender to Christ based on a love and trust in Him based on your experienced based faith. You can learn to live a life based on an attitude of repentance. The Church helps you to focus your attention on God, to receive God's mercy, and to be continually strengthened in this life long struggle to come in union with Him.