Spiritual Fortress
Part I: Flee

A common feature of our ancient Egyptian monasteries is that each monastery contains a fortress. Though rarely used in such capacity today, the purpose of the fortress was to harbor the monks during raids by savage barbarians. The fortress is a tall building with very thick walls and narrow windows. The only entrance to the fortress is through a door located on the 2nd floor that is accessible only by a drawbridge from the neighboring building. When invaders would arrive, the monks would sound the bell, run into the fortress, pull up the drawbridge, and close the door. Once the drawbridge was lifted, the attackers were unable to access the fortress, and hence the monks were safe from their perilous enemies. Since the monks would potentially spend days to weeks in the fortress, there was a place for sleeping, storage for food, and, most importantly, altars for the monks to continue their prayers.

After taking a tour of several of these fortresses, I asked myself, do we have an **emergency plan** when Satan and his evil armies attack our souls? Emergency plans are an everyday part of our life; in school and work, we participate in fire and severe weather drills, we construct emergency checklists and protocols, etc. But do we have an emergency plan when we are attacked by the demons? Just as the monks had an emergency plan for their attackers, we too should construct a spiritual fortress to which we can flee during our trials and temptations.

The instance we notice we are under attack from the devil, we must sound our mental alarm and begin our emergency action procedures. **The first part of our emergency evacuation plan should be to flee immediately.** In the *Paradise of the Desert Fathers*, St. John the Short says, "I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great numbers. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me; I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy." [1]

Some may read the previous passage and inaccurately judge that St. John is behaving cowardly by fleeing from the devil. They may suggest that he should be courageous and instead confront the devil. Although fleeing might seem cowardly, engaging in the confrontation is worse as it demonstrates arrogance. Fleeing in this context is not cowardice at all; rather, it is a sign of wisdom. Perhaps a few illustrations will clarify this concept.
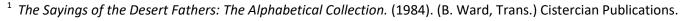
Say, for example, we are with a group of friends who are planning to visit an unholy place. If we go with our friends, we will be walking into the frontline of the battle with the devil. Undoubtedly, our consciences and purity will be tested by the environment in which we voluntary placed ourselves. Rather than arrogantly assuming we can withstand such temptations, it would be infinitely better for us to humbly admit our weakness and flee from such a gathering from the start.

Perhaps a TV show has an inappropriate scene or an inappropriate picture appears on a social media profile. The wise Christian would sensor these attacks from the devil by fleeing. Fleeing in this context means avoiding the TV show altogether, covering our eyes and ears during an inappropriate scene, and/or excusing ourselves from the room (*e.g.* by taking a bathroom break). If you are embarrassed to cover your eyes, focus on something else in the room (*e.g.* look down at your phone) until the scene is over. In the case of social media, quickly scroll through inappropriate garbage that will pollute your mind. The worst thing you can do is allow a harmful image or scene to enter your mind uninhibited.

When the devil attacks, sound the spiritual alarm in your mind and flee to the peace and security of your fortress. In the next article, I will continue to discuss the next steps of our **emergency evacuation plan**.

Fr. David Hanna
fr.davidhanna@gmail.com

_____

[1] *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection.* (1984). (B. Ward, Trans.) Cistercian Publications.