Coping with Anger

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Introduction

The Rule of Benedict (4.22-28) contains a series of texts about anger and falsehood: "You are not to act in anger, nor nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace, or turn away when someone needs your love. Bind yourself to no oath lest it prove false, but speak the truth with heart and tongue" (RB80). Or in Fr. Terrence Kardong's excellent translation: "(22) Do not act under the impulse of anger. (23) Do not wait for vengeance. (24) Do not plot deceit. (25) Do not give a false peace. (26) Do not abandon charity. (27) Do not swear oaths for fear of swearing falsely. (28) Bring forth truth both in your heart and in your mouth."

In this chapter four, Benedict is following closely the text of the Rule of the Master. The Master found much of his material in the Bible. These verses in Benedict's chapter are part of a longer section (10-33) which is closely paralleled in an apocryphal text called the Passio Juliani et Basilissae (section 46, which contains 20 maxims).

Fr. Terrence offers some helpful commentary. (22) Benedict doesn't prohibit anger as such, a legitimate and healthy emotion which arises when evil is encountered. However, Benedict wants our actions to be shaped by reason as well as emotion. (23) A spontaneous eruption of justified anger may be preferable to smoldering resentment which grows over time. (24-25) Benedict recognizes that internal resentment breeds deception, because one must constantly give signs of peace to others. (27) Benedict may well be changing the subject here, but anger and resentment can certainly lead to oaths. (28) The opposite of smoldering resentment, plotting deception, false oaths, is candor with oneself and with others.

The concerns of this paper are the sources from which Benedict derived this teaching about anger, overt and concealed, particularly, Cassian, and how later monastic authors, in this case Hildegard, discussed the matter. Then, a look at the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh's Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames (New York: Riverhead, 2001) will remind us of some added dimensions to the Christian understanding of anger.

Cassian

Early, pre-Benedictine monastic writers, Evagrius Ponticus in particular, were very much concerned with the ideas and images and impulses which enter a person's head. They called all these "thoughts." Evagrius distinguished eight principle thoughts. They appear in hundreds of medieval spiritual writings as "The seven deadly sins.

Evagrius and other ascetics of the Egyptian desert had a profound influence on Cassian, who was one of Benedict's prime sources and one of the few authors he recommends (in chapter 73 when he refers the reader to the Institutes and Conferences, which were titles of Cassian's to monastic treatises). Cassian deals with the theme in a discourse in the Conferences which is devoted to friendship. According to classical theory about friendship, a true friendship should last forever.

Cassian wonders what makes a friendship grow cold, so that we lose sympathy for our friend. He went from this to think about various situations which lead to hostility in a monastic setting. His suggestions about what to do seem very contemporary.

First, he says, sometimes people are preoccupied or depressed. When people do seem troubled by something, especially if that something is us, we should take the initiative and ask them what is bothering them. If we have offended or irritated them, we should apologize, even if we feel we haven't offended intentionally.

Secondly, he says that sometimes we are more ready to forgive a stranger than those closest to us. He reminds his readers that Jesus said "if your brother or sister has something against you, then leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled."

Thirdly, sometimes we are angry at somebody, but instead of dealing with the problem, we give them the silent treatment. We irritate them terribly and deliberately, but pride ourselves on not getting overtly angry or saying anything hostile. Cassian quotes from the Prophet Jeremiah: "With our mouths we speak peace to our friends, and secretly we are lying in wait for them." Such passive aggression, Cassian says, is like Judas's kiss.

Fourth, another twisted form of anger is to quit eating or take sick or otherwise give bodily expression to the hostility which is eating us up from within. Cassian goes on to say that sometimes Person A's body language is so hostile that Person B strikes A. Then A turns the other cheek, thinking that by such an overtly peaceful but inwardly hostile act he is fulfilling the letter of Jesus's command. The anger remains lodged in his heart.

Fifth, he says: Many people "treat others with a freedom which sometimes borders on outrage; yet they cannot themselves endure to be told anything that is displeasing."

Finally, having given these examples of anger leading to a loss of sympathy, Cassian gives some advice about how to restrain anger, so that we will not shoot off our mouths or strike out vengefully. First, he says, try to be big-hearted. Have such a big heart that the waves of anger will break on a shore of love that is wide and calm. Secondly, think that even if you don't deserve the anger or irritating behavior of your neighbor, you do deserve much for all the offensive things you've done. Third, practice being patient and not reacting without thinking. In modern terms, count to ten.

In the Institutes , Cassian devotes one chapter to each of the eight principal "thoughts." In chapter 8, On Anger, he begins by saying the monks needs to purge the deadly poison of anger from their souls at all costs. As long as anger lurks there, one's interior eye is darkened and one's judgment and sense of fairness is clouded. One cannot be wise and angry at the same time. He warns that one should never correct someone else indignantly. He says that one time in which it is lawful to be angry is when we are assaulted by temptation and unruly emotion. Conscious of our dignity as God's creatures, we should be angry that such things happen to us. If we are angry at our brothers or sisters, we must defuse our anger before sundown as the Scriptures say. It is very wrong to

treat them coldly day after day, and think that because one doesn't say anything hostile, one is virtuous. Meanwhile, such anger and a desire for revenge eats a person alive.

Sometimes one is tempted to just withdraw from other people, because then there will be no occasion for anger. But the problem is not in those who irritate us, but in us. Our interior peace does not depend on the goodness of others. Achieving peace depends on our virtue and on our largeness of heart. Cassian reports that when he was alone in the desert, he found himself getting infuriated at his pen, when it didn't write properly. That only goes to show that anger is one's own problem, not someone else's fault. So, we need to concentrate on the roots of anger in our soul, not its outward manifestations. Remember, too, that anger, resentment and hate make prayer impossible.

To all this sage advice from Cassian, modern psychologists would add a couple of clarifications. Anger is an emotion, not a sin, not even in itself a temptation. Anger is a spurt of energy aroused by some obstacle, hurt or evil. Anger empowers us to do something about the bad situation. What we need to do is control the energy which anger brings, instead of letting it control us. Moreover, we need to find an outlet for that energy, some way to direct it at improving the situation. Merely venting (hitting a tree or pillow instead of the person who has angered us) brings only temporary relief; moreover, it is a rehearsal for attacking the actual person at whom we are angry.

However, psychologists warn us that sometimes our anger is misdirected. If we become unreasonably angry over small things, or if we become enraged at people who do us very slight harm (like drivers who don't signal soon enough when they are going to turn), we may well have deep seated angers that have never been resolved. These angers are festering within us and fuel the ordinary irritations of daily life into big blowups. We probably all have some repressed or unresolved angers, but if they become overpowering or interfere with living a loving, forgiving Christian life, we need to get those angers resolved, by counseling if necessary.

Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen structured her moral teaching around thirty principal virtues. Although there is a certain amount of artificiality in her organization, her teaching draws on a long tradition. The Scivias, Bk 3, which describes an elaborate architectural construct which situates the virtues in the context of the history of salvation from Adam, through Noah and Abraham and Moses to Christ, and then via the various categories of apostles and saints to our time and beyond, concentrates on the virtues rather than their opposed vices. A later book of hers, the Liber vitae meritorum contrasts virtues and vices and analyzes their operation very carefully. What concerns us is the vice of hardheartedness (obduratio) and its opposed virtue, mercy or compassion (misericordia).

In Scivias, misericordia/mercy comes fourth in the first set of virtues. These virtues are rooted in fear and reverence for God. They are situated at the starting point of her tour of the building, on the Tower of the Anticipation of God's Will, that is, God's plan as it worked out in the OT.

Mercy follows love of heaven, discipline and modesty. If one chooses love of heaven instead of allowing one's desires to focus on earthly satisfactions, one will discipline one's desire and lusts.

This restraint or discipline will be fed by contrition for past faults and will be supported by fear. Next comes modesty (verecundia) which moves one to hide oneself from sin, and so is a protection and expression of inner conscience. Mercy is the virtue which prompts us to help the needy.

Mercy arises in the heart of God; it was manifest to Abraham. Abraham [marked as father of the chosen people and ancestor of Christ by quasi-sacrament of circumcision] was shown wonders in the Trinity ["hospitality of Abraham"], and in the sacrifice of Isaac gave the world a symbolic foreshadowing of Christ.

Mercy brings souls to salvation from the exile of death, for mercy shines on them from heaven like a sunbeam. Mercy is thus a fruitful mother of souls. Mercy is feminine, because women are sweeter than men and because the mercy which had dwelt in the Father was now shown visibly when it arose in the womb of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mercy is surrounded by the shining Sun, Christ, who lights up the world by the sanctification of the church.

Hence, we read in Lk 1.78: "Through the depths of the mercy of our God, in which the Dayspring from on high has visited us."

In her morality play called the Play of the Virtues, Hildegard gives one bit part to mercy, just a few words, but very moving:

> How bitter in human minds is
> the hardness that does not soften
> and mercifully ease pain!
> I want to reach out my hand to all who suffer.

In the Liber Vitae Meritorum,1.7, hardheartedness is a spectral figure with no human features except big black eyes. It is motionless. It says: I created nothing. Why, therefore, should I do any work? Nothing interests me except what benefits me directly. Let God take care of his creatures. If I am busy being compassionate what good will it do me? I will take care of myself.

Liber Vitae Meritorum 1.8, Mercy answers: Stones glitter, flowers give off aroma. The things of earth minister to human beings and so do good. You are not worthy to have human form. You have no mercy, so you are like pungent black smoke. I, however, am a sweet-smelling, moist, green plant. I have so much sap I can help others. I came forth with the Fiat that made all creation for serving humans. I help the sick. My words are like salve for pain. You are just smelly smoke.

Many chapters later, Hildegard returns to hardheartedness and mercy. Hardheartedness arises from ennui via a life of frivolity (joculatio). The hard-hearted man gets bored. He hasn't learned the law or Scripture so nothing restrains him. He is featureless, unrelieved wickedness, with large black eyes without any glint of mercy. Such people are abusive. They look for someone to praise, but then give them feigned praise poisoned with envy. The hard-hearted person has no eyes for God or the needs of human beings or other creatures. Hardheartedness is immobile. Its only aim is to afflict people. It despises people, does not rejoice with them or encourage them (1.70).

Still later, Hildegard discusses the punishment which hardheartedness deserves. It is cast down a deep wide well filled with seething pitch. Through a hole smoke and worms rise up into the well. Spikes are flying around the well as in a whirlwind. Hard-hearted souls sit at the bottom of the well. They are afraid they will fall through the hole into the fire below. They suffer from smoke, worms, and spikes, while sitting in the seething pitch: smoke, because they fled from God; storms, because they inflicted inhuman sorrow on others; spikes, because they showed no mercy (1.107).

To overcome hardheartedness one should fast and inflict penance (1.108).

Hardheartedness is the the worst sin. It values neither charity nor good works. It is strong in some tyrants. The hardhearted listen neither to precepts of law nor judgment of rational people. God treats them as he did hard-hearted pharaoh (1.109). Hildegard concludes by saying that she is writing all this for the cleansing and saving of souls. "What I say is true " (1.110).

Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh is a much published Buddhist monk from Vietnam who now lives in France. He says that anger is psycho-physical, and that what we eat (e.g., meat from angry cattle raised in brutal conditions) can nurture anger, and what we watch and read and listen to can be toxic. Hence, one of the five mindfulness trainings is concerned with what we consume (the others are reverence for life, generosity, sexual responsibility, deep listening and loving speech). His advice is that one practice mindfulness in breathing and walking. Then, when we feel anger, we should embrace it gently, like a mother hugging a howling baby. We need to let it cook with the lid on (like potatoes), then turn, embrace and transform it into the energy of understanding and compassion. Our immediate reaction is to blame someone else for our misery, but by looking deeply (which often we don't want to do) we will discover that we ourselves are the main source of our anger. We need to recognize the suffering of the other person; this will help us to transform our desire to punish into a desire to help. Much of what Thich Nhat Hanh says is directed at anger between husbands and wives, or parents and children, but it is applicable in other situations also.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests some techniques by which one deals with anger towards another person. Fundamentally, there are three steps. One lovingly tells the other: (1) "My friend (darling, etc.), I am angry. I suffer"; (2) "I am doing my best to refrain from acting out of anger"; (3) "Please help me to understand and to deal with my anger."

If one finds oneself angry at another person, one should speak with them or write them within 24 hours, and if necessary, make an appointment to talk to them later.

The metaphysical basis for listening attentively to the other and to one's deepest self, for acknowledging one's conscious and buried anger and asking the other to help in dealing with it, is the notion of the non-self, which positively stated, means that we are each other.

Conclusion

These Buddhist teachings or practices have much in common with what we have seen in the moral teaching of the Christian monastic tradition. Both Buddhist and Christian recognize that anger is a natural emotion, which must be channeled constructively. The two key elements in channeling it are understanding and compassion: one must understand what anger is and where any particular anger is coming from, and one must regard the angry person (oneself or another) with compassion (Hildegard's "mercy"). One should not give immediate expression to anger, but let it cool down, then embrace it truthfully and gently and transform it (from garbage to compost, says Thich Nhat Hanh). The Buddhist teaching on non-self reminds Christians of their central belief that all are one in the body of Christ, and what is done to one of the little ones is done to Christ. No one is an island, but all are Christ to each other, all branches on the vine. The pain of the other, which perhaps has caused her to act in a way that hurts and angers me, is my pain, just as my pain is hers. Christ on the cross is a reminder that he made that pain his own, felt its effects through thorns and nails, in order to embrace it, gentle it, forgive its effects in those who knew not what they were doing.