

On The Time of Youth
from *The Path of Salvation*
by
St. Theophan the Recluse

Preface

The original PDF I have of this is formatted poorly and contains some minor errors. In the interest of both improving the quality of the material available and my own ability in typesetting, I present this reformatted version of the original.

Itself, the original is taken from a work by St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-94), a Russian monk whose authorship, until relatively recently, was borne on almost no English-language publications.

Everything following this preface is directly from the original and contains edits only of format and minor grammatical or spelling errors, plus the footnotes, which are all my own additions.

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Introduction

In the pages that follow you will find a profound explanation of the circumstances surrounding the time of Youth. St. Theophan was writing in the middle of the 19th century but his words speak sharply to our 21st century times. Having acquired the grace of God he saw with pure vision and understanding the depths of his subject. He wrote before telephones, before television and movies and videos and video-games. He wrote in a time before computers and the internet and the access of unlimited pornographic indulgence in the privacy of your own home at the touch of a button. He wrote at a time when recreational dating was still unknown and immorality was still called immorality. How much more urgent are his warnings and instructions to us living in these cold times at the end of the age? What follows is a feast of insight and great hope for parents who desperately need and want to understand their children; who want to know how to build edifying physical, emotional and spiritual environments for their families and who want to understand how to avoid faulty and ignorant expectations for and soul destroying indulgence of their children. Read this carefully and prayerfully. Your life will be changed!

Two Tendencies Characteristic of Youth

IN In itself youth is dangerous; but apart from this, there are two tendencies which are characteristic of this age, and from them the impulses of youth are powerfully inflamed and acquire great power and danger. These are:

1. a thirst for impressions, and
2. an inclination to enter into contact with others.

Therefore, as a means for avoiding the dangers of this age, one may advise that these tendencies be subjected to rules, lest in place of good they bring evil. The good dispositions which were aroused earlier will remain in all their power if they are not quenched and not hindered.

The thirst for impressions. The thirst for impressions gives a certain impetuosity, an uninterruptedness, a variety to the activities of a youth. He wishes constantly to test himself, to see everything, to hear everything, to be everywhere. You can look for him wherever there is a glitter for the eyes, a harmony for the ears, an open space for movement. He wishes to be under an uninterrupted stream of impressions, always new and therefore various. He does not like to sit home, does not like to stay in one place, does not like to concentrate on only one activity. His element is enjoying himself.

But this is not enough for him. He is not satisfied with an actual testing of himself, but wishes to assimilate and, as it were, transfer what others have felt, how others have acted by themselves or in circumstances similar to his own. Then he throws himself into books and begins to read. He goes through one book after another, often without even understanding their contents; he is chiefly interested in finding an “effect”, no matter what kind of thing it might be or what it might touch on. Something new, picturesque, sharp – this for him is the best possible recommendation of a book. Here there is revealed and formed an inclination to light reading, which is the same thirst for impressions, only in a different form. But something more is involved here also.

A youth often becomes bored with reality because it somehow binds him from the side: it tics him down and encloses him too much within definite limits, whereas he is seeking a kind of freedom. Thus he often tears himself away from reality and goes off into a world he has created for himself, and there he begins to act in glory. Fantasy builds for him whole histories, where for the most part the hero is his own person. The youth is only entering into life; before him there is a deceptive, enticing future. In time he will have to take part in it – but what will he be? Can one not draw aside this curtain and take a look? Fantasy, which is very active at this age,

does not tarry with its satisfactions. Here daydreaming manifests itself and develops in such actions.

Daydreams, light reading, enjoyments – all these, almost one and the same thing in spirit, are offspring of a thirst for impressions, a thirst for what is new and different. And the harm from them is one and the same. There is no better way to starve the good seeds which have been placed before in the heart of a youth than by these means. A young blossom planted in a place where the wind blows on it from all sides only endures a little and then dries up; grass on which people frequently walk does not grow; a part of the body which is subjected to friction for a long time becomes numb. The same thing happens to the heart and to the good dispositions in it if one is given over to daydreams, to empty reading or to enjoyments.

If one stands for a long time in the wind, especially a damp wind, and then comes to a quiet place out of the wind, he feels that everything within him is not quite in its place; the same thing happens in the soul that has been amusing itself, in whatever way. When he returns to himself from his state of distraction, the youth finds that everything in his soul has become distorted. The most important thing that has happened is that everything good has been covered by a kind of veil of forgetfulness, and in the first place stand only those deceptive things which have left their impression on him. Consequently, what was before and should always be is no longer present; one's inclinations have changed, and new ones now take the first place.

Why, after returning to it after some kind of distraction, does the soul begin to grow bored? Because it finds itself robbed. A distracted person has made his soul a highway, along which, through imagination, tempting objects pass by like shadows and tempt the soul to follow them. And then, when one is thus, so to speak, torn away from oneself, the devil secretly approaches, takes away the good seed, and puts a bad one in its place. Thus the Saviour taught when He explained who it is that takes away the seed sown by the wayside and who it is that sows the tares*. It is the enemy of mankind who does both the one and the other.

And so, young man! Do you desire to preserve the purity and innocence of childhood, or the vow of Christian life without reproach? With as much strength and good sense as you have, refrain from amusements, from disorderly reading of tempting

*Mt. 13:3-43 contains the fullest version of this parable, but it also appears in part in Mk. 4:1-20 and Lk. 8:4-15.

books, and from daydreams.

How good it is to subject oneself in this regard to a strict and even a most strict discipline, and to be, during the whole time of one's youth, under the guidance of others. Those youths who are not allowed to arrange their own conduct until they reach the age of manhood, one can call happy. Every youth should rejoice if he is placed in such circumstances. A young man, quite clearly, is scarcely able to come to this by himself; but he shows much sense if he believes the counsel to be more at home at his work, not to daydream, and not to read empty things. Let him avoid amusements by love of labor, and let him avoid daydreaming by serious occupations under guidance. Reading especially should be subject to such guidance – both the choice of books and the method of reading. Let everyone arrange this the best way he can; but it must be done. Passions, doubts, inclinations – all are kindled in precisely this unsteady ferment in the mind of a youth.

An inclination towards contact with others. The second inclination in a youth, just as dangerous as the first, is the inclination towards contact with others. It is revealed in the need for companionship, friendship, and love. All these, if they are in true order, are good; but it is not the youth himself who should place them in this order. The age of youth is a time of lively feelings. They are in his heart like the ebb and flow of the tide at the ocean shore. Everything occupies his interest; everything astonishes him. Nature and society have opened their treasures before him. But feelings do not like to be hidden within themselves, and the youth wishes to share them. Then he has need of a person who might share his feelings, that is, a friend and companion. This need is good and noble, but it can also be dangerous! To the one to whom you entrust your feelings you give a certain authority over yourself. How careful one must be in the choice of a close friend! You may meet someone who can lead you far, far away from the straight path. It goes without saying that good naturally strives towards good and avoids the evil; there is a certain taste for this in the heart. But again, how often it happens that simplicity of heart is enticed by cunning.

Thus, every young man is rightly advised to be careful in his choice of a friend. It is good not to conclude friendship until the friend has been tested. It is even better to have as one's first friend one's father, or a person who in many respects takes the place of a father, or a relative who is experienced and good. For one who has resolved to live in a Christian way, the first friend given to him by God is his spiritual father. Converse with him, entrust your secrets to him, ponder what he says, and learn. Under his guidance, with

prayer, God will send some other friend also, if it is necessary.

There is not as much danger in friendship, however, as there is in companionship. Rarely do we see real friends, but more often just acquaintances and “friends” in the loose sense. And here how much evil is possible, and how much there really is!

There are certain circles of “friends” with very bad ways of life. Being drawn in with them, you do not notice how you become united with them in spirit, just as you do not notice, when you are in a foul smelling place, how foul you yourself smell. People themselves often lose awareness of the indecency of their own conduct, and they quite calmly become crude in it. And even if this awareness is awakened in someone (in such a circle), he doesn’t have the strength to get out. Each one is afraid to declare this, expecting that afterwards he will be persecuted with sarcasm, and he says, “So let it be, perhaps it will pass away”. Evil communications corrupt good manners (1 Cor. 15:33*). O Lord, deliver everyone from these depths of Satan! For someone who has decided to labour for the Lord, his only companionship is with those who are pious, who are seeking the Lord; one should avoid others and in all sincerity have no close contact with them, following the example of the saints of God.

The Pinnacle of Danger for Youth

THE very pinnacle of danger for a youth is contact with the other sex. While in the first temptation a youth may only stray off the straight path; here, in addition, he loses himself. In its first awakening, this matter is mixed up with the need for what is beautiful, a need which from the time of its awakening compels a youth to seek satisfaction for it. Meanwhile, what is beautiful little by little begins in his soul to take on a form, because we can find nothing more beautiful than this. The image which has thus been formed is carried about in the head of the youth. From this time on he seems to be seeking what is beautiful, that is, ideal, not earthly, but at the same time he meets with one of the daughters of men, and is wounded by her. A youth should flee this kind of wounding more than any other, because it is a sickness, and a sickness that is all the more dangerous in that the patient wants to be sick all the way to madness.

How to avoid being wounded. How can one avoid this wound? Do not go on the path which leads to being wounded. Here is how this path is described in one work on psychology; it has three

*In some versions, this quote appears in 1 Cor. 15:34 rather than 33.

turning points:

1. At first there is awakened in the youth some kind of painful feeling (what it is about and where it comes from, he does not know), which expresses itself in the special feeling that he is alone. This is a feeling of loneliness. From this feeling there is immediately produced another feeling – a certain pity, tenderness, and attention to oneself. Before this he lived as if not noticing himself. But now he turns to himself, examines himself, and constantly finds that he is not bad, that he is not worse than others, he is a person of some value. He begins to sense his own handsomeness, the pleasantness of the form of his body – in other words, to be pleased with himself. This is the limit of the first movement of temptation towards himself. From this time on the youth turns to the outward world.

2. This entrance into the outward world is animated by the conviction that he must be pleasing to others. With this conviction he boldly and, as it were, victoriously goes out into the arena of activity and, perhaps for the first time, makes for himself a law to be neat, clean, orderly, even elegant. He begins to wander, or to seek companions, seemingly without any definite aim, but in accordance with a secret inclination of his heart, which is seeking something. At the same time, he tries to show how smart he is, how pleasant he is in contact with others, how kind and attentive he can be, and, in general, everything by which he hopes to be liked by others. At the same time he gives free reign to the primary organ of contact with other souls – the eyes.

3. In such a state a youth is like gun powder placed next to a spark, and soon he finds something to ignite his disease. By a glance of the eyes or by a voice which is especially pleasant, as if struck by an arrow or wounded by a shot, he stands in the beginning as if in ecstasy or turned to stone. Coming to himself from this state and recovering, he finds that his attention and his heart are directed to a certain object and are drawn to it with an unconquerable power.

From this time his heart begins to be eaten up by languor. The youth becomes bored, he is immersed in himself, he is occupied with something important, he seeks as if he has lost something, and everything he does is done for the certain person and as if the person is present. He is like someone who is lost; thoughts of food and sleep don't even occur to him, his usual activities are forgotten, and he comes into a disordered state. Nothing is dear to him. He is afflicted with a fierce illness which gnaws at his heart, hinders his breathing, dries up the very fountains of life. Such is the gradual course of being wounded!

How to Guard Against the Temptations of Youth

IT goes without saying that a youth should guard himself against falling into this misfortune. Do not go on this path! Banish the signs that precede it – the vague sadness and the feeling of loneliness. Go directly against it. If you have become sad, do not give yourself over to dreams, but begin to do something serious with your attention, and it will pass. If self-pity has been aroused in you, or a feeling of how good you are, hasten to sober yourself up and banish this whim with some kind of strictness and discipline to yourself, especially by making clear a sound idea of the insignificance of whatever comes into your head. A chance or intentional belittlement or humbling in this case would be like water poured on fire.

One must take care to suppress and banish this feeling especially because it is a beginning of movement. If you stop here, you will go no further; you will have neither the desire to be especially pleasing to others, nor the pursuit of showing off fine clothes, nor the desire for constantly going out. If they break through, fight with them. The best protection in this lies in a strict discipline in everything—in bodily labour, and even more in labour of the mind. Increase your studies, sit at home, do not give yourself over to amusements. If you must go out, then guard your senses, avoid the other sex, and – the chief thing – pray.

Besides these dangers which come from the attributes of youth, there are two more:

First of all, an outlook that exalts to the heavens rational knowledge, or one's own understanding. A youth considers it a privilege to place a shade of doubt upon everything, and to set aside everything which does not correspond with the measuring stick of his own understanding. By this alone he cuts off from his heart the whole attitude which comes from faith and the Church, and remains alone. Seeking substitutes for what has been abandoned, he throws himself into theories which are fabricated without any correspondence to divine Truth; he entangles himself in these and banishes from his own mind all the truths of faith. The disaster is even greater if the occasion for these theories is given in the schools, and if such a spirit is the prevailing one there. People today think to gain possession of the truth, but they only gather together foggy ideas, empty and fantastic and for the most part even contradicting common sense; but these ideas attract the inexperienced and become an idol for a curious youth.

Secondly, there is a worldly outlook. Even though it might present itself as something profitable, when this prevails in a youth it

is ruinous. It is marked by a life according to the impressions of one's senses, by a condition in which a person remains very little within himself but is almost always outside of himself, whether in fact or in dreams. With such an outlook one hates the inward life and those who speak about it and live by it. True Christians, for them, are mystics who are confused in their understanding, or are hypocrites and so forth. Their understanding of the truth is hindered by the spirit of the world which is present in the circles of worldly life which a youth is allowed unhindered, and is even advised, to come into contact with. By this contact, the world with all its corrupt concepts and customs is pounded into the receptive soul of a youth who has not been warned ahead of time and has not been prepared to stand against it. He is just forming his outlook on life, and this worldly spirit becomes stamped on him as on wax, and he involuntarily becomes its child. But to be such a child is contrary to being a child of God in Christ Jesus.

And so, here are the dangers for youth from being young! And how difficult it is to resist! But for one who has been raised up well and has decided to dedicate himself to God before the years of youth, this age is not so dangerous. He needs only to endure a little, and then there will come the most pure and blessed repose. Only keep the vow of pure Christian life during this time also, and afterwards you will live with a certain holy, unshakable firmness. Whoever has gone without danger through the years of youth has, as it were, sailed across a stormy river and, looking back, he blesses God. But someone else, with tears in his eyes, turns back in regret and curses himself. You will never recover what you have lost in your youth. Will one who has fallen ever again attain what is possessed by one who has not fallen?