

THE FOUR STAGES OF SIN

There is a secret war that takes place in the soul with thoughts from the evil spirits. The soul is invisible, and thus the sly powers attack it with an invisible warfare that is akin to the soul's entity. In this confrontation that takes place between the soul and the enemies, one can observe weapons, battle formations, cunning strategies, fearsome combat, relentless clashes, both victories and defeats from both sides.

According to the holy Fathers, there are four stages of sin. An **assault** is a simple thought or image of a certain object that arises in the heart and which comes to mind. **Dialogue** occurs when someone converses with the thought or image that appeared. **Consent** takes place when the soul accepts and indulges in the sinful thought. The first is not a sin. The second is not always blameless. The third depends on the spiritual state of the person who is struggling against sin. Ultimately, the battle will become a cause for either crowns or punishment.

First we are **assaulted** by an evil thought. Second a **dialogue** takes place. Third there is **consent**. Fourth we are taken captive. Finally, a passion develops permanently on account of habit and repetition. This is what constitutes our downfall in this war.

Each passion unquestionably requires a corresponding amount of repentance or it will lead to eternal punishment. Therefore, **the person who resists and confronts the first stage (i.e. the assault), in one fell swoop severs all the ensuing evils**. This is the battle waged by the evil demons against humans, and this is what our victory or defeat hinges upon. And crowns will be awarded according to the victories, whereas punishment will be served to them who sinned and did not repent. Therefore, **let us struggle mentally against the demons, so we do not carry out their evil suggestions and sin with physical actions**.

St. Philotheos of Sinai

First of all, there is an **assault** with an evil thought. Second, a **dialogue** takes place when our thoughts mingle with the demonic suggestions. Third, there is **consent**, when we contemplate the demonic suggestions, and we decide to carry out evil. Fourth comes the **physical action**; that is, sin. If, therefore, we guard our mind carefully and push away the initial assault as soon as it appears (by resisting it and calling upon our Lord Jesus Christ), the next stages (dialogue, consent, and sin) remain inactive. The evil demon, because he is a bodiless spirit, cannot deceive souls unless he uses fantasies and thoughts.

The great Law-giver Moses, rather the Holy Spirit, says to us, “**Watch yourself, lest a hidden word in your heart becomes a sin**” (Dt. 15:9). “A hidden word” refers to the recollection of something evil that God despises. The holy Fathers call this an “assault,” which is launched by the devil in the heart.

St. Hesychios the Priest

There are different types of thoughts; some are sinful, and others are not. There is the **assault** (i.e. the recollection of something good or evil), which is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. This is followed by an **association** (i.e. a dialogue takes place with the thought) ... Then there is a battle with the evil thought, which will either defeat or be defeated by the mind, and which becomes the cause of either a crown or condemnation. **Consent** is the pleasurable inclination of the soul toward the thought or image that appeared to it. In following the heart is taken captive and forcefully lead, against its will, to carry out the **sinful action**. When a sinful thought remains in the soul for an extended period of time, then a passion develops, and a habit forms that leads the soul to proceed on its own toward the sinful action ... Therefore, **whoever is prudent pushes away the mother of evil (i.e. the sinful assault), and thus simultaneously severs all the ensuing evils that issue from her.**

St. Peter of Damascos