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ZONARAS'S TREATISE ON NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS: INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION

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The question of whether a man who experiences a nocturnal emission should receive communion has been repeatedly asked within a Christian context since Late Antiquity.¹ One of the most forgiving views expressed on the topic comes from John Zonaras, a Byzantine monk and former judicial officer of the twelfth century. His treatise, translated below, has been described by Paul Magdalino as 'healthy, almost liberal common sense' and has been contrasted to other more repressive ideas of the time.² However, Magdalino's comment was made in passing, and the treatise has so far received only one detailed study, by Marie Theres Fögen, who, while writing about obscenity in Byzantium, highlighted the importance of this text within its wider religious and social context.³ I hope that the appended translation will generate further discussion among Byzantinists and encourage the inclusion of Zonaras's views in studies of Western medievalists on nocturnal emissions.⁴

In what follows, I will give an introduction to Zonaras and his treatise, its themes and contents. I will then pick up some of the issues raised by Fögen regarding sexuality, purity, and enlightenment, in order to argue against her claim that Zonaras' main interest in writing the treatise was not in fact nocturnal emissions, but the debate over which ecclesiastical group should be the guardian of Orthodoxy. I will maintain that Zonaras' views are comparable to his attitude towards marital sex, and fit well within his wider thinking about purity, with the result that they were not subordinate to an ulterior polemical purpose.

THE AUTHOR AND HIS TREATISE

In the title of his treatise on nocturnal emissions, Zonaras is described as a monk and 'former Great Drungarios of the Vigla and Protasekretis', that is to say commander of the imperial bodyguard, president of the court of the

¹ Brakke, 'The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions', pp. 419-60; Leyser, 'Masculinity in Flux', pp. 103-20.

I would like to thank Dr Oliver Thomas warmly for advising on some points of the translation, and the Leverhulme Trust for generously funding my research.

² Magdalino, 'Enlightenment and Repression', p. 362.

³ Fögen, 'Unto the Pure All Things Are Pure', pp. 260-78.

⁴ Twelfth-century Western ecclesiastics such as Thomas of Chobham, Robert of Flamborough, and William de Montibus also discussed the potential impurity of nocturnal emissions. See Murray, 'Men's Bodies, Men's Minds', pp. 1-26; Chapter 1: 'Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray: Nocturnal Emissions and the Sexuality of the Clergy' in Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, pp. 14-34.

hippodrome, and head of the imperial secretariat.⁵ These dignities are evidence of a successful career as a high-level judicial official, and suggest a good education in rhetoric and law, qualifications which continued to be of use during Zonaras's monastic retirement, when he composed many of his works, including his famous *Epitome of Histories*.⁶

When his retirement took place remains unfortunately unclear. Estimates of the date when he left the court to withdraw to the monastery of the Theotokos Pantanassa on St Glykeria vary widely, with the earliest suggestion being c. 1112.⁷ This, combined with the latest suggestion for his death, in or after 1161, gives a timespan of about fifty years during which Zonaras could have written his treatise on nocturnal emissions.⁸ In addition to this treatise and his *Epitome*, he wrote hagiographical, homiletical, and exegetical works, a short treatise on marriage impediments, and a long commentary on ecclesiastical canons where he also discussed nocturnal emissions.⁹ He was in fact something of an expert on the topic, as we learn from his fellow canonist, Theodoros Balsamon, who, despite adopting a less lenient approach in his own comments, referred to Zonaras as 'extraordinarily talented' and to his interpretation as 'wisely' and 'most skilfully' composed.¹⁰

Zonaras's addressees

Zonaras addressed his treatise to monks who failed to follow ecclesiastical law and meted out stricter penances for nocturnal emissions than the canons had prescribed. There were two potential problems here: (1) monastic confession itself and (2) excessive severity. Receiving confession and assigning penance was in principle the prerogative of ordained bishops and priests, but it was all too common in Byzantium for monks to assume this role.¹¹ Despite his disagreement with his addressees, Zonaras did not ask that monks in general abandon their role as confessors, but his stated prerequisite was that they had

⁵ The following abbreviation is used throughout: *Syntagma* = *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων*, ed. by Georgios A. Rhalles and Michael Potles, 4 vols (Athens: Athēnēsīn, 1852–54). Here see *Syntagma* IV.598. See also Troianos, 'Byzantine Canon Law from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries', p. 177. On Zonaras, see also Macrides, 'Nomos and Kanon', pp. 61–85; Pieler, 'Johannes Zonaras als Kanonist', pp. 601–20.

⁶ He informs us of this in the first lines of his chronicle. See *Ioannis Zonaræ Epitomæ Historiarum*, ed. by Pinder, i.3.

⁷ According to Banchich's reconstruction of Zonaras' life, he entered the monastery around 1112. See 'Introduction: The Epitome of Histories', in *The History of Zonaras*, ed. and trans. Banchich and trans. Lane, p. 7. Kampianaki's reconstruction suggests 1120s or 1130s as more likely periods for his retirement. See Kampianaki, 'John Zonaras' Epitome of Histories', p. xxiv.

⁸ Kampianaki, 'John Zonaras' Epitome of Histories', p. xxiv.

⁹ Kaltsogianni, 'Τα αγιολογικά έργα του Ιωάννη Ζωναρά', pp. 363–489; Pitsakis, *Τὸ κώλυμα γάμου*, pp. 227–31. For the relevant passages in the canonical commentaries, see *Syntagma* IV.12–13 and IV.67–76.

¹⁰ *Syntagma* IV.76 'ὁ ὑπερφύεστατος ἐκεῖνος Ζωναρᾶς σοφῶς καὶ ὑπερδεξίως, καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἄν τις εἴποι κρειττόνως, ἡρμήνευσε'. See also *Syntagma* IV.338.

¹¹ See Papagianne and Troianos, 'Die kanonischen Antworten', pp. 247–49; Gautier, 'Le chartophylax Nicéphore', pp. 183–87.

to know the canons. As such, his problem was with ignorant monks, not, as far as we know, with monks in general. This is further supported by the fact that he did not raise the question of the suitability of monastic confession in his canonical commentaries. By contrast, Balsamon did so on two different occasions, emphasising on the one hand that even ordained monks needed the permission of the bishop to receive confessions, and lamenting on the other the fact that the laity hardly ever deigned to confess to non-monastic clergy, while they did not hesitate to do so to unordained monks.¹²

Instead, Zonaras focused on the second issue, the excessive severity shown by some monks. He saw two possible reasons for it: the monks neglected the canons either because they were ignorant of the law, or because they deliberately chose not to follow it. Expanding upon the second option, he explained that monks could wish to present themselves as ‘the exacting guardians of extreme purity’ in order to assert their spiritual authority. Indeed, the topic of nocturnal emissions was particularly apt for such purposes, and a recent parallel of this situation could be found in Theophylact of Ohrid’s *In Defence of Eunuchs*, a dialogue where the inability of eunuchs to experience nocturnal emissions was touted as a sign of their superiority.¹³ In a similar way, wet dreams could be used to attack external enemies. An example from the early thirteenth century involves the metropolitan of Kyzikos, Konstantinos Stilbes, who accused Western clerics of pretending to experience a nocturnal emission, while in fact they were receiving their lovers, as in a dream, under the cover of darkness and silence.¹⁴

In his attack, Zonaras emphasised the monks’ ignorance by contrasting his own learning. His use of classical authorities, namely a story from Plutarch, an ancient Greek dictum (‘Nothing in excess’), and a reference to Plato’s *Laws*, combined with a learned disquisition on the canons, reinforced his position as a man whose opinion should be respected.¹⁵ The polemical nature of these references is further suggested by the absence of classical authorities in his canonical writings on the same topic.¹⁶ There it was enough to rely on holy Fathers, the bishops of Alexandria, Dionysios (d. 265), Athanasios (d. 373), and Timotheos (d. 385), as well as Basil the Great (d. 379). This distancing effect was already present in the title of his treatise, which refer to the author not only as a monk but with a reminiscence of his

¹² *Syntagma* II.69; *Syntagma* III.311-12.

¹³ Messis, ‘Public hautement affiché’, pp. 80-81; Mullett, ‘Theophylact of Ochrid’s *In Defence of Eunuchs*’, pp. 177-98; *Théophylacte d’Achrída*, ed. and trans. by Gautier, p. 329. For another fictional representation of this topic in the twelfth century, see Makrembolites’ novel *Hysmine and Hysminias* which featured several erotic dreams, one of which resulted in a nocturnal emission that initiated the hero into sexual life. Jeffreys, *Four Byzantine Novels*, pp. 195-98; Alexiou, ‘A critical reappraisal’, pp. 23-43.

¹⁴ Lines 159-62 in Darrouzès, ‘Le mémoire de Constantin Stilbès’, p. 70.

¹⁵ See also Kampianaki, ‘Plutarch’s *Lives*’, pp. 15-29. For the wider context of the classical turn in twelfth-century Byzantium, see Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, pp. 225-316.

¹⁶ *Syntagma* IV.12-13 and IV.70-76. See also Beck, ‘Zur byzantinischen Mönchschronik’, pp. 190-91.

former glories, further separating Zonaras the intellectual from his uneducated monastic addressees.¹⁷

The Monks' Addressees

There is, however, one more set of addressees to consider: the addressees of the monks' advice. These could in principle have included a combination of laymen, clerics, and other monks. But in this treatise the secular clergy remains conspicuous by its absence, especially when one contrasts how often it became a target of such regulations in the West.¹⁸ Zonaras describes the advisees as 'those under your [the monks'] authority', τοῖς ὑφ' ὑμᾶς, but makes no explicit distinction regarding their religious status. We do find two references to ascetics, both in the context of a letter of Athanasios which had initially been addressed to a monk, but Zonaras cites this beside Dionysios' and Timotheos' advice, which had been addressed to laymen, without emphasising the difference between the original audiences.¹⁹ A further prohibition on touching the holy icons, which is mentioned twice in Zonaras's treatise as an absurd requirement of the overzealous monks, also points towards the laity. The rules about receiving communion seem to apply equally to all, and the rules about performing the eucharist are not touched upon. This can be seen through the following phrases used to discuss the restrictions associated with nocturnal emissions:²⁰

- 1) εἰ ὀφείλει κοινωνῆσαι (600.19)
- 2) τῆς τῶν ἁγιασμάτων εἴργειν αὐτὸν μεταλήψεως (598.11-12; 599.3; 602.20-21; 606.22)
- 3) τῶν ἁγιασμάτων ἀπείργοντες (599.18)
- 4) τῶν ἁγιασμάτων ἀπάγοντες (601.25)
- 5) ἀπεῖρξε τοὺς τοιούτους τῆς τῶν ἁγιασμάτων μεθέξεως (607.19; 606.20; 610.24-25; 610.33)
- 6) τοῦ μετασχεῖν τῆς ἀναιμάκτου θυσίας ἀνάξιος (606.19)
- 7) εἰς κοινωνίαν τῶν ἁγίων παραδέχεσθαι (607.26-27)
- 8) τινὰ ἐγγίξειν τοῖς ἁγίοις (608.5-6 & 18)
- 9) τῆς ἁγιστείας ἐκβέβληται (598.20)
- 10) τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀπεῖρξον τῆς εἰς τὰ ἅγια προσελεύσεως (603.12)

¹⁷ Zonaras is not called a 'monk' in the title of the printed editions of his treatise. But both the Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana Plut. 5.2 and the Basel, Universitätsbibliothek A III 6 call him that. See below.

¹⁸ For example, see Burchard's *Decretum* 17.41 in PL CXL.927; Morey, *Bartholomew of Exeter*, p. 267.

¹⁹ Namely, 'in order to distract ascetics from their customary and salutary study' and 'as the divine Fathers say, with the enemy ambushing the ascetics'.

²⁰ The numbers in brackets refer to page and line numbers respectively in the Rhalles and Potles edition, *Syntagma* IV.

Of these expressions, the wording of the first two unambiguously refers to lay communion, while for the rest the context in which they appear makes it clear that they too refer to receiving rather than performing the eucharist.²¹ Only the last phrase could suggest a restriction on men performing the liturgy, if we interpret τὰ ἅγια to mean ‘sanctuary’. But in numbers 7 and 8 these words mean ‘communion’.²²

THEMES

The main theme of Zonaras’s treatise was the potential impurity of nocturnal emissions and the implications it had for one’s participation in religious and liturgical life. He argued that an emission of sperm was in itself no more evil or impure than the hair growing on one’s head or the mucus coming from one’s nose. These are all natural secretions, the result of the way in which God created us. He denied that any physical impurity existed that would require a man to wash or to remain segregated from fear of contagion. In this way, Zonaras clearly distanced himself from Old Testamentary rules of purity which required ritual ablution before readmission to the community for men who had experienced a nocturnal emission.²³ But neither did he think that there was any fear of moral pollution. The emissions themselves were not sinful; the thoughts that might have accompanied them could be, but did not have to be. According to Zonaras, even if a man, attacked by wicked thoughts, experienced an erotic dream, he would only be blameworthy if he willingly turned these thoughts over in his mind, dwelling upon them with pleasure. The dream after all was nothing more than ‘a shadow of truth’, a topic explored in depth through Plutarch’s story of Thonis and her admirer.²⁴

A variety of other contemporary topics of interest were touched upon in this treatise. For one, the importance that expertise in canon law had acquired in Byzantine religious discourse can be seen in Zonaras’s use of canonical precedents as a weapon against the uneducated monks. Through his detailed references to canonical texts dealing with nocturnal emissions, which are found early on in the treatise and occupy a significant portion of it, Zonaras presents an alternative route to spiritual authority that is not constructed around inspirational charisma.²⁵ This is not unique to Zonaras, nor

²¹ For other examples in the canonical commentaries where these expressions clearly refer to the laity see *Syntagma* II.11; 4:229; IV.457; IV.215.

²² For an association of example 10 with the clergy, see Hebrews 9.25 ‘οὐδ’ ἵνα πολλάκις προσφέρῃ ἑαυτὸν, ὡσπερ ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς εἰσέρχεται εἰς τὰ ἅγια κατ’ ἐνιαυτὸν ἐν αἵματι ἄλλοτριῶ’.

²³ Deuteronomy 23.10-11; Leviticus 15.16-17.

²⁴ The same story was used by the twelfth-century poet Manganeios Prodromos to remind the Emperor Manuel Komnenos of a stipend that he had promised, but not given him. *Theodori Prodromi, De Manganis*, ed. by Bernadinello, chap. 7. For more on erotic dreams, see Messis, ‘Fluid Dreams, Solid Consciences’, pp. 187-205; Angelidi, ‘Αισθήσεις, σεξουαλικότητα και οπτασίες’, pp. 221-29.

²⁵ See also Krausmüller, ‘Establishing authority in eleventh-century Constantinople’, pp. 107-124.

necessarily a mere symptom of his legal background. The same route is taken by other twelfth-century learned men, such as Eustathios of Thessalonike, who also emphasised following canonical procedure to the letter in his own defence against uneducated and unruly monks.²⁶

A second topic of interest is Zonaras's discussion of dreams and the extent to which one could exercise free will during them. This focus was shared by twelfth-century Western ecclesiastics, such as Thomas of Chobham. While Zonaras defended the view that in a dream neither one who commits adultery nor one who preserves their chastity can be held responsible for their actions, Thomas of Chobham came to the opposite conclusion. In his discussion of nocturnal emissions, he used the vision, sent by God to Joseph to lead him, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt, in order to argue that free will could be exercised in one's sleep. He noted that, while dreaming, Joseph could understand God's advice and could reason, and as such deduced that if it was possible to do something meritorious while asleep, it was also possible to do something sinful.²⁷ Such differences are instructive when considering not only the views of Eastern and Western authors on the somatic components of dreaming, but also their attitudes towards dreams as a function of spiritual sight.²⁸

Other readers might find the treatise interesting for its references to the Bogomils and their alleged theory about the demonic aspects of wet dreams, or for its focus on the connection between sin and disease, or again for its emphasis on icons as sacred space.²⁹

AUTHORITY AND THE PURITY OF MARITAL SEX

In her article, Fögen explained Zonaras's treatise on nocturnal emissions as part of a struggle between monks and secular clergy for the title of guardian of Orthodoxy. The monks were trying to prove their moral superiority by being 'more straight than the rule' and Zonaras reprimanded them for it, taking the part of the ordained clergy. According to this theory, Zonaras's real aim was 'the repudiation of monastic claims and dominance', and the topic of

²⁶ See for example his life of St Philotheos of Opsikion in PG CXXXVI.141-61; Perisanidi, 'Eustathios' Life of a Married Priest'. On Eustathios more generally, see Magdalino, 'Eustathios and Thessalonica', pp. 225-38.

²⁷ 'Item, apparuit dominus Ioseph in somno dicens ei: *surge et accipe puerum et matrem eius et vade in Egyptum*; et surrexit et abiit. Ergo Ioseph intellexit quod ei dicebatur in somno, ergo usus est ratione in somno et ita potuit mereri et peccare in somno.' Thomas of Chobham further supported his argument through references to the Song of Songs 5.2 'I dream but my heart wakes' as well as another hymn ('Let our flesh sleep in such a way that our mind may wake in Christ') to show that others too shared his expectations. 'Sed contra in Canticis: ego dormio et cor meum vigilat. Et iterum in hymno: Sic caro nostra dormiat | ut mens in Christo vigilet.' See *Thomae de Chobham*, ed. by Broomfield, p. 332.

²⁸ See also Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, pp. 35-82.

²⁹ On the Bogomils, see also *Christian Dualist Heresies*, trans. by Hamilton and Hamilton with the assistance of Stoyanov, pp. 175-249; Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel*, pp. 361-66. On icons, see also Lidov, 'Hierotopy', pp. 33-58.

nocturnal emissions was simply his vehicle to achieve this. As such, far from being ‘an enlightened liberal’, he supported the purity of nocturnal emissions not because he strongly believed in it, but because it gave him the opportunity to criticise the monks for not following the ecclesiastical canons.³⁰ I believe, however, that this argument can be refuted by examining the similarities between Zonaras’s comments on nocturnal emissions and his views on the purity of marital sex.

Zonaras discussed sexual intercourse between spouses in his treatise as part of a number of activities, including leprosy and contact with corpses, that had been considered impure in the Old Testament but whose impurity had been abolished in the New.³¹ More specifically, he claimed that his overzealous addressees could judge impure even a man who had slept with his own wife, refusing to admit him to prayer and closing the doors of the church against him. As in the case of nocturnal emissions, Zonaras denied the impurity of marital sex, basing his response on Hebrews 13.4 ‘Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled’. In both cases, he believed the physical secretion to be blameless and pure. On both occasions, he stated that everything created by God is good, an argument that Athanasios of Alexandria had also made to link together those two particular topics.³²

Zonaras further supported the purity of marital intercourse in his canonical commentaries. Despite his criticism of the monks, he too believed that married couples should occasionally abstain from sexual intercourse for religious purposes, but not out of fear of ritual pollution. In his commentary on canon three of Dionysios of Alexandria, Zonaras linked such abstinence to prayer and fasting, narrowly defined. Couples were not required to abstain every time they prayed but only when they wished to devote themselves to prayer ‘accompanied by tears and suffering’, while fasting was here limited to the ‘set times’ and before communion.³³ What is more, the decision to abstain was one that they could make themselves, rather than having it dictated to them by zealous monks: they could be their own judges. This was because the question again was moral rather than physical. The seminal emission itself was not impure, but sexual intercourse could be distracting, by ‘weakening one’s soul and confounding one’s reasoning’.³⁴ Husband and wife could

³⁰ Fögen, ‘Unto the Pure All Things Are Pure’, pp. 272-74.

³¹ The Old Testamentary precedent for this came from Exodus 19.15, where Moses asked the people to abstain from sex for three days in preparation for God’s appearance to them on Mount Sinai, and I Samuel 21.4-6, where the priest asked David and his men whether they had abstained before giving them holy bread.

³² For Athanasios’ comment in the case of nocturnal emissions, see the translation below. For his comment on marital sex, see *Syntagma* IV.67-68.

³³ *Syntagma* IV.10 ‘ἀλλ’ οὐ περὶ πάσης προσευχῆς ἐνταῦθα φησὶν ὁ Ἀπόστολος, περὶ δὲ γε τῆς σπουδαιότερας, ἣν ἐν δάκρυσι καὶ κακοπαθείαις δεῖ γίνεσθαι [...] νηστείαν δὲ λέγει, τὴν γινομένην ἐν καιροῖς ὠρισμένοις, ἢ ὅτε μέλλει τις τῶν ἁγιασμάτων μετέχειν’.

³⁴ *Syntagma* IV.10 ‘δεῖ γὰρ τοὺς νηστεύοντας ἡδυπαθείας πάσης ἀπέχεσθαι, ὅτι χαννοῦν τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ συγχέειν τὸν λογισμὸν αἰ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἀπολαύσεις πεφύκασιν’. For the same idea in John Chrysostom, see Chapter 10: ‘I Corinthians 7 in Early Christian Exegesis’ in Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, pp. 277-78.

receive communion when they felt again able to focus on God. This is similar to the advice that Zonaras gave in the case of nocturnal emissions: ‘And let everyone have a good conscience in these matters, and feel able to converse with God freely, in accordance with their own judgement, when they approach God’.

Therefore Zonaras’s attitude towards nocturnal emissions fits squarely within his wider views on purity. Irrespective of whether he was taking part in the struggle between monastic and secular clergy, and I do not deny that he was, his refusal to see the emission of sperm as impure in the context of both wet dreams and marital intercourse suggests that his ‘enlightened’ attitude was not simply opportunistic, but something he consistently believed in. The topic of nocturnal emissions was more than ‘a good peg on which to hang a broader concern’.³⁵

MANUSCRIPTS AND EDITIONS

The treatise on nocturnal emissions survives in at least four manuscripts:

- 1) Basel, Universitätsbibliothek A III 6, fols 267-269^v (13th-14th c.)
- 2) Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana Plut. 5.2, fols 346-348 (14th c.)
- 3) Hagion Oros, Monê Megistês Lauras, Θ 220, fols 756^v-762^v (14th c.)
- 4) Sofia, Naučen Centăr za Slavjano-Vizantijski Proučvanija « Ivan Dujčev », D. gr. 211, fols 327^v-330 (17th c.)

The two most accessible editions of the text are in the *Patrologia Graeca*, where a Latin translation is also provided, and in Rhalles and Potles.³⁶ The *Patrologia Graeca* edition is a reproduction of the text edited in 1596 by Johannes Löwenklau, while the Rhalles and Potles edition is based on Löwenklau’s text, Enimundus Bonafidius’ 1573 edition, and is said to also have been supplemented by a manuscript at the Austrian National Library in Vienna.³⁷ The Löwenklau edition, in turn, presented itself as an augmentation and correction of Bonafidius’ edition, but does not seem to have used extra manuscripts.³⁸ Bonafidius’ edition was based on the Basel manuscript, given to him by the Amerbach family of that city.³⁹ I have collated the manuscript held in Florence with Rhalles and Potles’ edition, and found very few significant improvements on the text; these can be found in the footnotes of the translation.

³⁵ In Fögen’s words: ‘This concern, I think, was not to help a more adequate concept of purity on the road to success, but to single out the monks as unwelcome rivals in the business of religious discipline’. See Fögen, ‘Unto the Pure All Things Are Pure’, p. 274.

³⁶ PG CXIX.1011-1032; *Syntagma* IV.598-611.

³⁷ *Syntagma* IV.ζ-η. The online catalogue of Greek manuscripts in Vienna (<http://search.obvsg.at/>) does not clarify which contains our treatise.

³⁸ *Juris Graeco-Romani*, ed. by Löwenklau, pp. 4, 351-361.

³⁹ Bonafidius, *Toῦ ἀνατολικοῦ νομίμου*, pp. 2-3, 216-37. See also Burgmann, ‘Die Gesetze der byzantinischen Kaiser’, p. 83.

TRANSLATION

[598] A Speech by John Zonaras, monk and former Great Drungarios of the Vigla and Protasekretis against those who think that the natural emission of semen is an impurity, and who for the same reason forbid those who have experienced an emission of sperm not only from participating in the holy reception of the divine mysteries, but even from touching the divine icons.⁴⁰

Do not become too righteous or more straight than the rule.⁴¹ These are the opinions of the nobler kind of wisdom, as well as our own. Also, if one should thread alongside them a saying of the profane (for not all of their views should be rejected), ‘Nothing in excess’.⁴²

The reason why these phrases stand as my prelude will be stated right away. Many of those who are thought to follow the monastic state in a notably exact way, and who one might say are inclined to be particularly spiritual, consider the natural emission of semen to be a pollution – and not only when it happens alongside exercise of the imagination, but even without the imagination. And they consider the man who has experienced this to be so polluted that they not only bar him from receiving holy communion, but some of them even prohibit him from touching a divine icon. Such is the strength of their judgement that the natural secretion of semen is an impurity.

One must explain and demonstrate to these people that neither is this experience always free from sin, but nor should the man who has experienced it be put under penance indiscriminately. The first idea is an incitement to passion, the other paves the way for an attitude of resignation. For if the man who undergoes an emission of the secretion involuntarily, being subservient to the power of his nature and lacking a passionate disposition, is judged impure and is barred from rituals, according to those among learned men with a reputation for exactness, how could a man avoid feeling resigned about his salvation when he has fallen into a similar experience out of passion or even intentionally slipped with regard to intercourse?

Now, my good men, if you have made these decrees and arrangements

⁴⁰ The editors decided to keep only a shortened version of the original title, omitting Zonaras’s characterisation as a ‘monk’ as well as any reference to the holy icons. The title found in both the Laurenziana and the Basel manuscript reads: ‘Ἰω(άννου) μοναχοῦ τοῦ Ζωναρᾶ τοῦ γεγονότος μεγάλου δρουγγαρίου τῆς βίγλας καὶ πρωτασηκρητῆς λόγος πρὸς <τοὺς > τὴν φυσικὴν τῆς γονῆς ἐκροὴν μίασμα ἡγουμένους καὶ κωλύοντας τοὺς παθόντας σπέρματος ἔκκρισιν οὐ μόνον τῆς ἀγίας τῶν θείων μυστηρίων μετέχειν μεταλήψεως ἀλλὰ μηδὲ τῶν θείων θιγεῖν εἰκόνων διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν αἰτίαν’.

⁴¹ For the first part of the sentence see Ecclesiasticus 7.16. The idea expressed in the second part was also a commonplace found in several other authors, such as Gregory of Nazianzus and John of Damascus.

⁴² Ancient Greek saying, not attributed to specific author, carved into the temple of Phoebus Apollo at Delphi.

out of ignorance of the canons,⁴³ it is not appropriate for you to teach, receive confessions, and mete penance to those who err – just as it is not appropriate [599] for those ignorant of the medical profession to be doctors. If, on the other hand, you are aware of the canons – both of when the emission of semen is punished by them and when it is not – but still let them fall into abeyance, like the *Laws* of Plato,⁴⁴ and take it upon yourselves⁴⁵ to mete penance to those under your authority, and legislate against the legislators, and oppose the divine and holy Fathers, then you will not only be condemned to be stripped of your role as protectors of souls, but you will receive the further sentence of undergoing the canonical penances, according to the holy decrees about these matters. For one cannot add anything to them, according to Holy Scripture, and one cannot take anything from them.⁴⁶ The great Paul even condemns with an anathema one who preaches something different to what we have received,⁴⁷ even if he is an angel.⁴⁸ You, however, even if you think you have travelled to the heights of virtue, are still a far remove from the angelic dignity. And if the divine apostle put under anathema angels who introduced something other than what had been handed down,...⁴⁹ I will say nothing bad, but you I am sure understand, even if I personally spare you it.

When the holy canons are cited, those of you who know them will fall silent, ‘putting an ox on your tongue’,⁵⁰ to use that proverb, while those of you who do not know them will learn the fact that you oppose canons when you bar indiscriminately those who have had sexual dreams from communion (I leave aside the further point about touching the divine images). The canons are those of the approved Fathers, which synods also strengthened and which pious emperors decreed to be valid with the status of laws. The sixth ecumenical synod, which was convened in the domed room of the imperial palace,⁵¹ in making an enumeration of the canons which ought to have force, and of the divine and holy Fathers who set them forth, enumerates alongside the rest the inspired men who responded to questions on the topic at hand,

⁴³ Fögen used this passage to argue that Zonaras objected the use of the penitential of John the Nестeutes. She based this on her translation of the phrase ‘τῶν κανόνων ἀγνοία ταῦθ’ ὑμῶν νενομοθέτηται τε καὶ ᾠκονόμηται’: ‘Without speaking explicitly of Nестeutes – he says the book “which was granted and given to you [the monks] as law by ignorance of the canons”’. This, however, does not follow. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Zonaras had any specific penitential in mind. See Fögen, ‘Unto the Pure All Things Are Pure’, p. 273.

⁴⁴ Plato’s last and longest dialogue setting forth a more practical and realistic approach to government than the one presented in his *Republic*.

⁴⁵ The Laurenziana’s ἀφ’ ἑαυτῶν is a slight improvement.

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 4.2.

⁴⁷ Reading ὁ παρελάβομεν, with the Laurenziana.

⁴⁸ Galatians 1.8.

⁴⁹ There appears to be an aposiopesis. Zonaras refuses to think up something worse than an anathema for his opponents, but says that they will still get the point of his comparison.

⁵⁰ This was a common proverb, meaning to remain silent, which can be found in authors, such as Michael Psellos, Christoforos Mytilinaios, and Konstantinos Manasses.

⁵¹ The council in Trullo, which took place in 691/2.

namely the great Athanasios who was wise in sacred matters, and Dionysios, and Timotheos who presided over the Church in Alexandria.⁵² And the ecumenical synod which was the second convened at Nicaea said that it gladly embraced the divine canons, [600] those composed both by the divine trumpets of the holy Spirit – by which I mean the wise Apostles – and by the six holy and ecumenical synods, and regional ones in addition to these.⁵³ It further added those of our Holy Fathers, for all these, having been enlightened by one and the same Spirit, defined (the synod says) such things as were expedient. It continues: those whom they place under anathema, we also anathematise; those whom they depose, we also depose; those whom they excommunicate, we also excommunicate; and those whom they give over to penance, we too subject to the same.

Now of these inspired men who were approved by the holy synods in addition to the rest, the renowned Dionysios in his letter to Basilides gives the following instruction:⁵⁴ ‘Those who have experienced an involuntary nocturnal emission should follow their own conscience and examine themselves regarding whether they have any doubts or not, as the man speaking of foods says, he who has doubts is condemned if he eats.’⁵⁵ And let everyone have a good conscience in these matters, and feel able to converse with God freely,⁵⁶ in accordance with their own judgement, when they approach God.’ And the God-bearing Timotheos, when someone asked if a man who has had a sexual dream should receive communion or not, has given the following answer: ‘If he is subject to desire for a woman, he should not. But if Satan is tempting him so that he may be alienated from the divine mysteries on this pretext, he ought to receive communion, since the blasphemer will not stop attacking him during the time when he ought to be receiving communion.’⁵⁷

The great and holy Athanasios, writing about this to the monk Ammoun, composed a letter which had many lines, from which we will only mention now the parts most relevant to our subject, passing over the rest.⁵⁸ It says as follows: ‘For the pure all things are pure, but for the unclean even the conscience is completely defiled.’⁵⁹ I marvel at the craft of the devil, in that, although he is corruption and destruction, he suggests thoughts apparently of purity. But his action is an ambush more than a test: in order to distract ascetics from their customary and salutary study, and to appear to hold sway

⁵² Canon 2 of the council in Trullo.

⁵³ Canon 1 of Nicaea II, which took place in 787.

⁵⁴ *Syntagma* IV.1-13.

⁵⁵ Romans 14.23.

⁵⁶ Reading *εὐπαρρησίαστος* with the manuscripts of Dionysios, rather than *ἀπαρρησίαστος*. See *Syntagma* IV.13 and IV.74.

⁵⁷ See also *Syntagma* IV.338.

⁵⁸ For the rest of Athanasios’s letter, and for Zonaras’s and Balsamon’s commentaries on it, see *Syntagma* IV.67-77.

⁵⁹ Titus 1.15.

in this respect, he stirs such thoughts that buzz in the brain. For tell me, beloved, what sin or uncleanness is there in a natural [601] secretion, as if anyone wants to make a crime out of the mucus expelled from the nostrils, and the sputum of the mouth, and also the secretions of the belly? But if we believe that man is the handiwork of God, following the divine Scriptures, how was it possible for a work produced by a pure power to become polluted? And if, following the divine Acts of the Apostles, we are God's offspring,⁶⁰ we have nothing unclean in ourselves. For we only become polluted at the moment when we commit the most impious sin. But whenever a natural excretion happens unplanned, we experience this, alongside other things, by the force of nature.' And a little later: 'Someone may say with good reason, a natural secretion does not bring us before Him for punishment. And possibly the sons of doctors will defend these people by saying that there are certain necessary passages given to the animal for the dismissal of the superfluity of what exists in each of the body-parts nourished within us – for example the superfluities of the head (hair and the watery secretions from the head) and the excrement of the belly and, more to the point, that superfluity of the seminal ducts. In what sense then is it a sin before God, when the Master himself who created the animal body made these parts have such passages?'

These are the decrees of the above-mentioned Fathers. But you, the exacting guardians (as you think yourselves) of extreme purity, punish the emission that comes about without imagination, and think that the natural secretion of semen is an impurity, and bar from communion those who have this experience when no passion causes it: why do you not then hide your faces, when your instructions oppose the great Athanasios (not to mention the rest just now), and your actions oppose the writing of that man whose words have been taken as definitions and axioms by the great Fathers and by those who have travelled to the peak of both profane wisdom and our divine one, the lights and teachers of the world on whom the faith of our time is grounded? Oh, your madness, your silliness, and, to speak more pertinently, your ignorance! Are you not even aware that in this particular opinion [602] you are following Judaic customs and renewing the orders of the Old Testament, which the Saviour has abolished by becoming human?⁶¹ For it is a law in that [Testament] to consider men subject to a flux of semen to be impure. But you, I suppose, judge impure even the man who has slept with his own wife, when he rises from his bed; and you will not admit him to prayer but will even close the doors of the church against him. Nor will you take into account that

⁶⁰ Acts 17.29.

⁶¹ See for example, Deuteronomy 23.10-11; Leviticus 15.1-15. Despite Zonaras's complaint here that the monks were following Judaic custom, he did exactly the same when it came to menstruation. He believed menstruating women to be too impure to receive communion and happily traced back the root of the prohibition to the Old Testament. *Syntagma* iv.7-8. The difference perhaps was that menstruation had been uniformly considered impure in the Eastern tradition, while the impurity of nocturnal emissions had been debated early on.

marriage is said to be honourable and the bed undefiled.⁶² Rather, since there is an emission of sperm in this case too, and indeed a pleasurable one, you will condemn an innocent man. And you will not shrink from thinking that someone who has touched a dead body is polluted, and you will expel from the city the man whose body has erupted with leprosy.⁶³

Granted, you lot, that you have deemed the man who secretes semen in his sleep not to be clean. What then of those who have an emission of semen while they are awake? What is your opinion and instruction about them? This experience happens to many men, with semen either following urination, or simply being secreted spontaneously. If you separate these men too from the clean, you obviously follow Judaic customs. For they are the ones whom Moses said had a ‘flux of seed’, and who he ordered should be considered impure. If on the other hand you go near them and think that their secretions do not defile them, what is the reason why you exclude men who have experienced an emission of sperm during sleep, without any imaginings, from the reception of communion, while you let the experience go unpunished for those who have had it while awake? Both secretions are natural and both happen involuntarily.

‘But if’, one of my adversaries⁶⁴ might say, ‘this is your comment on an emission of sperm befalling people without any act of imagination, what would you say about those who have had a sexual dream, imagined touching a woman (or something else that rouses fire in the flesh), and reached the point of an emission of semen? Will you not judge these people to be certainly polluted?’ If, adversary, the man who experiences this had a preexisting passion, nourished desire for a woman in his thoughts, turned this over in his mind, and hence the visions followed in his sleep, even I do not judge the man to be blameless. In fact, he himself is utterly to blame for his experience, and is polluted not so much in his body through the emission of sperm (for this excretion is not impure), as [603] in his thoughts through consent to carnal desire. If however nothing of this kind was the precedent cause of a man secreting semen, and his thoughts were not implicated in such a passion but the vision and the secretion of semen came on spontaneously, or was brought about even by a satanic attack, as the divine Fathers say, with the enemy ambushing the ascetics,⁶⁵ then I will not imitate your impious piety on this point. For the flesh is not polluted by the secretion of seed. Everything created

⁶² Hebrews 13.4.

⁶³ These avoidance rules also had their roots in the Old Testament. See Leviticus 13.1-4; Leviticus 21.11; Numbers 19.11.

⁶⁴ The editions have ἀνθρωπιθέντων, ‘of those who have been made human’, the Laurenziana ἀνθρωπιθέντων. These are difficult to make sense of. Dr Thomas suggests that in an original ἀντιθέντων the bar of tau was misunderstood as the horizontal line used to indicate the standard abbreviation ἀν- for ἀνθρωπ-. The restored text matches the apostrophe ἀντίθετε (‘adversary’) that follows.

⁶⁵ This refers back to Athanasios’ letter to Ammoun.

by God is good,⁶⁶ and for Christ we are a perfume among those who are being saved, according to the great Apostle.⁶⁷ And if the thought of the person who has had a sexual dream is also free from passion, then it too is undefiled. What then will keep this person from approaching the sacred, if neither his thought is polluted by passionate desire, nor his flesh after being sprayed with the secreted sperm?

Suppose this man who experienced an emission has visited in his imagination the bed of a married woman: I infer that you will condemn him also for adultery, and assign the man the penance of an adulterer; and if someone imagines in sleep that he has killed someone, you will judge him guilty of homicide and put him under the penance assigned to murderers, or even hand him over to the magistrate for punishment. Again, based on the converse idea, I infer that you count among the martyrs a man who has undergone trials in his dreams on behalf of piety, and that you crown for chastity the man who in sleep has avoided an improper encounter. If these actions do not deserve honours, nor do the former deserve punishments. For one party would be wronged, unless in fact we account as a dream and devalue as a vision both the excellent and the abominable image, or alternatively unless the former is honoured as good and the latter likewise punished as evil even though it was a dream in both cases.

It will not be displeasing to add a certain weight to the argument based on a historical parallel.⁶⁸ Here is the story: A man was madly in love with a licentious woman. The woman's name was Thonis, and she did not easily approach her admirer. Because he loved her, he promised to give her a great reward, but she scorned the offer. Enflamed with desire, he increased the offer, but even so she thought she might raise the price again and scorned it. [604] As time wore on in this state of affairs, the admirer dreamed that he had intercourse with his beloved, and the flame of desire was thus extinguished.⁶⁹ She, however, when she heard this, asked for her promised payment, and when she did not receive it she went before the magistrate. His name was Bocchoris, and he was the ruler of that people. The erstwhile lover denied that he owed payment, on the grounds that his beloved had at the time refused intercourse. 'But', she said, 'your desire has ceased after you dreamed of having intercourse with me, and what would have resulted from waking intercourse has occurred, so you owe me my reward.' The arbitrator of the case asked for the quantity of gold promised for payment to be brought out into public view. When it had been, he ordered that the purse that contained it should be carried to and fro in direct sunlight, and he wisely adjudged that the

⁶⁶ I Timothy 4.4.

⁶⁷ II Corinthians 2.15.

⁶⁸ Life of Demetrius in *Plutarch Lives, Volume IX*, trans. by Perrin, pp. 66-7. Zonaras has here embellished the story with more details and has concealed part of its original context in which an objection to the argument was made. As such, we may assume that he did not expect his opponents to have read Plutarch.

⁶⁹ The Laurenziana has the correct form ἀπέσβη.

woman should lay hold of its shadow, as the admirer had enjoyed nothing more than a shadow through his dream-visions. For truly a thing imagined is a shadow of the truth. And a man will not be praised on the grounds that he seemed to do something good, nor condemned if it was evil.

Do you not know that the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh, as the great Apostle says in his epistle to the Galatians?⁷⁰ By ‘spirit’ he means spiritual thought which imagines spiritual things and is occupied by religion, and by ‘flesh’ that which is carnal and material and involved with such things. These two are indeed opposed to each other. On the one hand carnal thoughts, when the flesh has its natural inflammation, lead to strange desires. But spiritual thought, an emperor given to us by God, cuts short the urges of the flesh, which are aroused in it through the opposing thoughts, and restrains the flesh’s jaws as in a muzzle or bridle, and so represses its sinful, high-spirited champing. At any rate, when the flesh is on fire but thought restrains it, and the soul is not allowed to be high-spirited because the bridle does not give it slack but reins in and checks its urges with all the hands’ strength, like an uncompliant horse of unbalanced jaws,⁷¹ [605] and when the soul is manhandled in this way and titillated, or under attack from the wicked one, if the man who undergoes the war of the flesh (suggested by impassioned thought, which spiritual and salutary thought then drove away) should imagine something during his sleep, and if semen should be emitted alongside the vision, what condemnation will he face from a person of discernment, unless someone were to criticise the very attack on his thoughts? The holy Fathers did not ascribe blame even to wrestling: of the four events said to make up sin – I mean attack, wrestling, consent, and act – the first two are without blame, according to the God-bearing Fathers. Consent is blameworthy in that it introduces the sin of the mind, while the act is actually punishable. But why would the person who has evaded both of these, through the victory of salutary thought, be subject to condemnation? If, after thought has attacked and incited him to indecent desires, the sufferer accepted the idea gladly and kept his mind dwelling and as it were luxuriating upon it, and studying its implications, and while the person was disposed in this way imagination has come in the night, he is not without blame, even if he happens to have escaped the emission of semen. For his thought was not free from passion, but was wounded by the arrows of the attack, and slipped towards the sin of the mind after being weakened through lack of effort. If, however, the idea attacks him but is immediately beaten back, or even if both kinds of thought fall to wrestling and are weighed as in the balance, and the better proves to be the weightier, but then because of the power of the flesh and the assault of our foe, a nocturnal vision shall incite the flesh and cause a secretion

⁷⁰ Galatians 5.17.

⁷¹ The image of the horse with unbalanced jaws derives eventually from Xenophon *Re Eq.* 1.9. In the tenth-century *Suda* Lexicon the description is said to refer to someone who is disobedient or greedy and eats with both jaws.

of seed, he who has experienced this is not polluted. How could he be, when he preserved his thought from passion caused by consent?

The Prophet and divine father, David, will agree and cast his vote with me about this, saying, ‘The thought of man will be confessed to you, and what is left behind of that thought will hold a celebration for you’.⁷² If, he is saying, a wicked idea comes to a person and dwells happily in his thoughts, if they luxuriate in the study of it and commit the sin of the mind, [606] such a man needs repentance and confession, to cleanse his thought thereby from the filth rubbed off on him by the pollution of the sin of the mind. But should the idea which attacks him be left behind, that is to say rejected, and if it remains unfulfilled without having polluted the mind, its abandonment and the mind’s removal of the wicked thought will be considered a celebration for God. For nothing pleases the Lord like purity, and nothing is dearer to the pure man than purity. For this is pleasing to God beyond a young calf,⁷³ and beyond any sacrifice, and the bringing of fragrant incense and luxurious perfumes.

Furthermore, the great father and lover of wisdom, Maximos, in allegorising the phrase ‘The Lord will not punish the children to the third and fourth generation’⁷⁴ and offering a more anagogical interpretation,⁷⁵ says that the attack and the wrestling are not punishable, but the consent and action are worthy of retribution.⁷⁶ For this set of four has been understood by the divine and most wise Father in the set of four generations.

If however, in your view, the man who has overcome a wicked idea through thought, but has experienced the imagination of a sexual dream and secreted semen, has been deemed unworthy of partaking in the bloodless sacrifice, then it is time for you to exclude from participating even the person who is fasting in order to partake of communion, if he has a dream, caused by his flesh’s search for nourishment, which brings him the vision of food and drink, on the grounds that he has not fasted. For it is a common occurrence for a thirsty person to think in his sleep that he stands near water, draws from it, and fills his belly. Let Isaiah also verify this, where he says: ‘as when a thirsty person, like the hungry, has a dream, but wakes up still thirsty, and his soul has hoped in vain, so will it be also with the wealth of all the nations’.⁷⁷

I have come across one of the holy Fathers and found him equating with martyrs those who grapple in their thoughts and do not stoop in the face

⁷² Psalms 75.11.

⁷³ Psalms 68.32.

⁷⁴ Exodus 20.5-6.

⁷⁵ An anagogical interpretation focuses on the spiritual sense behind the literal meaning of a given text.

⁷⁶ *Maximi confessoris*, ed. by Declerck, Section 1, 31. Contrary to Zonaras, however, Balsamon stated that there were three, not four, steps leading to sin: temptation, consent, and result. ‘Τριῶν γὰρ ὄντων τρόπων, δι’ ὃν παρὰ τοῦ Σατανᾶ πολεμούμεθα, προσβολῆς, συγκαταθέσεως, καὶ ἀποτελέσματος’ Syntagma IV.76.

⁷⁷ Isaiah 29.8.

of their violent force.⁷⁸ For he likened impassioned thoughts to tyrants. And just as those men used to force their captives to bring libations to idols, so too do the thoughts compel one to stoop to unlawful actions. And as the tyrants brought every suffering upon the martyrs who did not obey, [607] the invisible tyrant likewise brings every suffering upon those spiritual wrestlers who do not give in to the attack, through the titillation and inflaming of the flesh. And as those men are now counted among the martyrs if they did not stoop to compulsion, even if they did not suffer death by the sword or fire or torture (there have been many such martyrs), similarly the martyrdom of the conscience has been achieved by those who did not relax the intensity of their objections during the attack of impassioned thoughts. If, he says, after being conquered by the violence of his burning desire, a man should give in and through consent commit the sin of the mind, then come to his senses and understand where he is headed, and distance himself from acting, and if he shall brace his thought to object, and repel the idea, he says that not even this man is deprived of the martyrdom of his conscience. After all, neither will someone be dismissed from the rewards of martyrs if they have yielded in the face of violent punishments and promised to sacrifice, but then when brought to the altar abstain from sacrificing.

However, some claim that those who lay down the law and teach about these things say that even Basil the Great, when asked about this, excluded such men from receiving communion. In my view, those who use the answer of this holy Father to support their own objection are either wilfully shutting their eyes to the truth, or do not understand the intention of the answer. It is necessary to cite verbatim both the original question and that wise and holy Father's answer to it.⁷⁹ The question goes as follows: 'whether one should dare to admit someone into the communion of the holy, while habitual and natural occurrences are affecting them'.⁸⁰ The answer is as follows: The Apostle showed that he who in baptism was buried with Christ is stronger than nature and habit.⁸¹ At one place he says that our old human self was crucified with him so that the body of sin may be abolished and that we may no longer serve sin.⁸² At another he commanded, 'Mortify therefore your earthly limbs and fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and the covetousness which is idolatry; because from these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons [608] of disobedience'.⁸³ Elsewhere he expounded a definition, by saying,

⁷⁸ It is not clear to which Holy Father Zonaras is referring here. The idea expressed in 'λογισμοῖς πικτεύοντας' is quite a common one, but the combination of the specific words appears to be more rare. One possible option is Nilus of Ancyra who addressed this topic in his letters. See Book 3 Epistles 43 and 71 in PG LXXIX.408-413, 421.

⁷⁹ For Basil's text, see PG xxxi.1301-4.

⁸⁰ In the PG edition, Basil's question reads *παρέρχασθαι* rather than the *παραδέχασθαι* of Zonaras's editions and of the Laurenziana.

⁸¹ Romans 6.4.

⁸² Romans 6.6.

⁸³ Colossians 3.5-6.

‘Those who belong to Jesus Christ crucified their flesh along with their passions and lusts’.⁸⁴ I myself know that these things were truly accomplished, by God’s grace, in both men and women, through genuine faith in the Lord. For a man to approach the Holy despite being in a state of impurity is a matter whose judgement will be terrible, as we are taught even by the Old Testament; and if the current situation is ‘greater than the temple’,⁸⁵ clearly it will be more terrible. The Apostle will teach us by saying, ‘He who eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation upon himself’.⁸⁶

Now from the words of this answer it is clear that this great Father has not spoken about an emission that came about without imagination, nor about one that happened with the imagination but without passion, and which desire did not precede; or even if perhaps desire did precede, yet it was rejected and defeated by virtuous thought, so that not even the sin of the mind was committed. For the words of the Apostle which he produces as testimony mention sin, impurity, and evil desire. Then he brings in his own opinion, saying: ‘For a man to approach the Holy despite being in a state of impurity’, and so on. And no one would say that Basil the Great called the seminal secretion which happens without passion an ‘impurity’, given that this is libel towards the flesh, and he set forward many fine arguments showing that the body is not evil, nor an origin of evil, as some thought. Nor should anyone think that he patently contradicted the great Athanasios, who made all the comments about this seminal secretion that I have already mentioned above in my argument. All the holy Fathers have considered that man’s words to be the canon and rule of exactitude in everything. Furthermore one must consider that both of these Fathers were bearers of the Holy Spirit, and talked and wrote under the inspiration of one and the same Spirit. How then is it plausible for those moved by the holy and virtuous Spirit to oppose each other? Hence it is shown as clearly as can be that Basil the Great too did not call the seminal secretion an impurity, but the wicked desire, through whose leadership the sin of the mind is committed through [609] consent, and so imagination takes place during sleep, and the secretion of semen. For in this way he can avoid seeming to contradict himself by saying that the body is evil and unclean, nor will he be thought to decree the opposite to the great Athanasios. Also, from the phrasing ‘I myself know that these things were truly accomplished, by God’s grace, in both men and women’, it is implied, or rather demonstrated pure and simple, that he is talking about a secretion of semen which has been accompanied by the imagination, preceded by impassioned thoughts and the sin of the mind. For the thing accomplished, in cases where it is accomplished, is not the avoidance of desire, meaning no attack of thought (for this is a matter of nature), but the avoidance of submitting to desire, or assenting to the

⁸⁴ Galatians 5.24.

⁸⁵ Matthew 12.6.

⁸⁶ I Corinthians 11.29.

thought, or committing the sin of the mind. Not even an avoidance of emission of sperm was ‘accomplished’, since expelling this is a work of nature, because it is a superfluity – rather, an avoidance of the secretion being accompanied by passion based in the imagination which is created by evil desire, from which the mind is polluted.

Thought, sir, is polluted through consent, but the secretion of the seminal superfluity is not impure, since God is the creator of the body, and among the things established by God there is nothing impure. Those who are of the opinion that semen is an impurity will give the impression of being Manicheans, or of sharing the heresy of the Bogomils, since the latter also clearly act like Manicheans in so far as they introduce twofold powers and say that the body is a creation of the wicked. Those who think and say that the secretion of semen, from which the master craftsman God contrived to compact our flesh, is a pollution must therefore restrain themselves, in case they appear to participate in this impious heresy. For if semen is impure, the flesh which is created from it will also certainly be impure. Just as no stream from a turbid and muddy source can come forth clean, but is filthy and turbid, in the same way if semen is polluted the flesh which has gained its substance from it is also polluted and impure. Again, turning the argument around, if seed is an impurity, the body from which it is evacuated is also impure; hence our body will be accounted a creation of evil. For none of the things brought into being by God is evil, [610] but what is polluted is evil, and if evil it is not a creation of God. Thus the conclusion, if we grant these propositions, is that flesh is the work of evil, which, as has been said, belongs to the Manichean heresy. The Bogomils also participate in this, though they have also introduced a further and more unholy point. They talk nonsense about demons actually abusing human bodies during the imaginings of sleep, either acting on those experiencing the vision or being acted on by them. In any case, if some people were to think that those who consider the secretion of semen a pollution share this foul opinion, would the latter not be thought to have abandoned correct judgement?

Someone may say, ‘You have strongly attacked those who think the emission of semen is polluting, exhausting a long discussion about these cases. But you have not added what they ought to do or how those who fall into such rashness should be disciplined. Criticism is available to anyone who wants, but to correct the person who has erred is best.’ So that we may not give anyone the opportunity to say this, we declare that the issue of which of the nocturnal visions is blameless and which ought to be punished has essentially been included in what has already been mentioned, but it will also be restated more clearly.

If the secretion of sperm takes place without the imagination, through nature expelling a superfluity, or if this happens alongside imagination but while the thought stays dispassionate and has not been previously polluted by consent, the experience is not punishable, no penance is given, and such men

shall neither be excluded from participation in the bloodless sacrifice, in accordance with the Holy Fathers, nor accounted to have undergone pollution. For if their thoughts have not been polluted – either because wicked ideas have not attacked a man, or were not welcomed if they did attack, or did not remain if they were in fact accepted, but were ‘left behind’ (as the Psalmist says; in other words, given up and dismissed)⁸⁷ – and if the body is not polluted by the secretion of sperm (since flesh is not an evil, as it is a creation of God, nor are its secretions, which are also its constituents), for what reason will penance or the prevention of participation in communion be defensible?

If on the other hand a passionate thought was the cause, and a wicked idea which attacked, was welcomed, remained and dwelled happily in the mind, [611] and if its contemplation grew so⁸⁸ pleasurable that the sin of the mind eventually took shape, and a nocturnal vision followed, and an emission of sperm has resulted, men in this situation will be subject to both blame and penance, not because of their emission of sperm, but because of the sin of the mind and the pollution of their thoughts. For even if neither a nocturnal vision nor an emission of semen is the result, they are nonetheless polluted in their thoughts and will not escape penance.

There are also men who, without preceding passionate thoughts and without committing the sin of the mind, imagined something in their sleep and secreted their excess of sperm, and who are not without blame. Who is this man? It is the one who through incontinence regarding food and drink made his stomach heavy and muddled his mind, and who while sleeping the sleep which is the brother of death has fallen into a vision and secreted semen. This man too is himself the person responsible for his vision, because of his incontinence. The man who directs that person’s spiritual affairs may impose such penance as he knows is profitable for them.

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⁸⁷ This goes back to Psalms 75.11 mentioned above.

⁸⁸ Reading οὐτῶ not αὐτῶ.

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