

# PHILOKALIA

## **Philokalic terms: Compunction, Discrimination, Contemplation, and Stillness.**

From my depth I have cried and I continue to cry unto you, O Lord. The sands of my desert, depth, are waiting for your deifying graces to transform them unto temples of your kingdom. Here, in this desert, your graces will construct a foundation that will never be shaken. I am knocking down the city I built that you may find emptiness and nothingness on which your kingdom overtakes the entire of my deserted depth.

The four philokalic terms: Compunction, Discrimination, Contemplation and Stillness are the fruits of God's graces. They are the results of the graces' works on the sands that are ready and awaiting the coming of the revelations. They are different states of the construction of the inner self that stamp the person in his entirety.

These philokalic terms are used by the philokalic fathers expressing their synergic experiences with the deifying graces. Although, they are terms that are known to the general public and were used so often, their meanings surpass the intellect of the ordinary human being. They are the expressions of God's actions in the deserted souls of the fathers who stretched the kingdom of God to the inhabited limits of the earth; as well as to those who lived their lives according to God's commandment of love in the midst of the society. They are the cries of their depths.

Thirsting for God is the common foundation of these four terms, the four virtues; they receive their meanings and actions from God. The dictionary<sup>1</sup> defines compunction as "the pricking of conscience," discrimination as "a choosing with care," contemplation as "concentration of the mind on an intellectual or religious item," and stillness as "to quiet; to make silent" while the fathers, through the Philokalia (the lovers of beauty), transform them; they become the reflections of their state of mind, heart and soul.

Although, I will take the endeavor of discovering their meanings, certainly I will not discover and express the experiences and the intentions of the fathers for I am far away from their experiences and my being is still occupied with the high scrappers of my city. My desert is still waiting for my ascetic endeavors that will destroy the city which exists

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<sup>1</sup>*The New Lexicon: Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, Encyclopedic Edition 1988, New York.

on its sands, and along with the powers of God's graces, it renders it a place ready for compunction, discrimination, contemplation and stillness that will build the kingdom of heavens.

### **Compunction**

This is a state where the sins of a person who goes into his inner deep, meet the hope of the resurrection. A state where the tears of the human being, in his entirety, are assured of becoming the purifying waters of the second baptism that are sanctified by God's grace of forgiveness. A state where sorrow is melted by tenderness; sadness and depression are overtaken by joy and hope. Compunction is a pivotal point of a creature's transformation towards its Creator where it receives comfort, support and assurance. It is the synergic point where man's ascetic work meets God's tenderness, compassion, love and mercy.

Through compunction the fire that burns, turns into a light. This light of compunction "opens the intellect...[in order] to understand the profundities of the holy scriptures and thus perceive the nature and inner essence of everything that exists."<sup>2</sup>

The pricking of conscience becomes the pricking of God Himself and forces the tears to flow as rivers; God's compassion answers respectively by allowing these rivers of tears to purify the person in his entirety. These tears invite God's purifying graces to act and change the situations of distress and iniquity to situations of peace and goodness.

Tears that are derived from humility are one of the tools that lead to the state of compunction. They are tools of cleansing and purifying. These are the tears of sorrow and repentance of the unworthiness and the state of spiritual illness and the distortion of the image and the likeness of God. Meanwhile, compunction leads to tears of joy "filled with inexpressible tenderness and delight"<sup>3</sup> because the unworthy received God's mercy and restoration. These two kinds of tears are not the same. The first wipes the sins while the second makes the soul "yield a bountiful crop of spiritual knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

But these two kinds of tears are not the same as compunction. The tears are the visible flow of the invisible inner feeling and state of the soul, mind and heart while compunction is the invisible flow of God's purifying graces. "It descends from above as the divine dew of the Spirit, comforting and refreshing the soul that has but recently

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<sup>2</sup> Philokalia IV, Nikitas Stithatos, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

entered with fervor into the depth of humility and attained the contemplation of the unapproachable light.”<sup>5</sup> For “where there are compunction and spiritual grief, there is also divine illumination”<sup>6</sup> and prayers through “fervent compunction transcends the passions and conceptual thoughts” leading to the union with God.

The state of compunction determines who is penetrating our entirety and residing in our desert. This is why the philokalic fathers are remembering their sins at all times and remain in deep penitence. They experience in this state, the joy of God’s presence and His protection and support. They remain vigilant in order to be surrounded by the angelic powers as Ilyas the Presbyter describes: “bees surround their queen among fresh meadow-flowers; and the soul that is unceasingly in a state of compunction is surrounded and assisted by the angelic powers, for it is kindred to them.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Discrimination**

While discrimination is understood through visible differences between colors, races and physical forms, the philokalic fathers have understood and experienced discrimination and discernment through invisible thoughts and spirits. They consider discrimination as “the greatest gift of God’s grace.”<sup>8</sup> It is the gift of the Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:11)

Discrimination is the virtue that keeps the person “from being harmed by the nets of the devil and his deceit.”<sup>9</sup> It is the gift of discern between fantasies and visions. It is the gift to differentiate between what is true and real, to what is false and vice. In such discrimination, the man learns to “walk along the royal road, swerving neither to the right through immoderate self-control, nor to the left through indifference and laxity.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, discrimination is the lantern that guides man through the divine path to the divine. It is the eye that sees the needle’s eye and goes through it in a straight path for if it does not enter, it will fall away in the grandiose of the deceits of evil.

Nothing should be done without discrimination for no virtue can stand or remain firm without its application. Jean Cassian says: “Wisdom, intellection and perceptiveness are united in discrimination; and without these our inner house cannot be built, nor can we

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Philokalia IV, Symeon the New Theologian, p. 53

<sup>7</sup> Philokalia III, Ilyas the Presbyter, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Philokalia I, John Cassian p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

gather spiritual growth.”<sup>11</sup> But this discrimination should gush out from true humility and not from the knowledge of the self itself. It is not the result of our own judgment but the fruit of trust in God and his knowledge through the teachings of the Church.

Every person should make every effort to acquire the gift of discernment “which keeps us from the excess” of the extremes, for discernment is the true gift of guidance that will keep the person focused and bewildered by his own conceptions and way of life.

Thus discernment is the gifts of guidance and illumination that through its application the sands of my desert will be formed by the hands of God in His Image and likeness and His kingdom is established on its soil.

### **Contemplation**

The thrive of the society, including Christians, towards contemplation on intellectual and religious items is easily fulfilled from the contents of the Philokalia. Our fathers have already lived, achieved and set the ascending stages for a person to reach the contemplation of God. Above all things, this contemplation is a gift from God who revealed and keeps revealing Himself to humanity, and secondly it is the fruit of the ascetic work of the person himself. *Theoria* (contemplation) for the fathers, is the fruit of *Askesis* (ascetic *or* practice). It is the synergic works of the love of God to man and the love of man to God. It is the virginal intercourse.

Peter of Damaskos speaks about eight stages of contemplation<sup>12</sup> in which the first three stages are suitable for those who are still engaged in ascetic practices while the remaining five stages are for those who are advanced and vigilant over the activities of their souls and bodies.

But the contemplation of God is on the highest stage. It is reached after the seeker starts climbing the ladder of contemplation. The first stage is the opening gate to the other stages and definitely to the last one. Through the first stage of contemplation the seeker recognizes his fallen nature. He distinguishes the two words: Paradise (Kingdom of God) and the fallen world. He identifies himself with Adam who was driven out from Paradise by the Angel. Therefore he realizes the seriousness of his reality, which provokes his intestines to cry out loudly: “O Merciful One, have mercy on me” and he begins to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Sinai speaks also on the eight stages of contemplation in a different sequence of order, see Philokalia IV, p. 248.

lament and weep for the lost life. He looks at himself with pity and disappointment. He sees it as not a thing, a worm and dry land. His soul bends on its knees and becomes contrite and his intellect is rendered very sensible and becomes aware of the tribulations of the world and its fallen state.

The contrition of the soul in the first stage allows the seeker in the second stage to make his intellect aware of his own shameful faults and sins through a deep search of the seekers' actions throughout his life. This is a dramatic stage in which the bleeding soul of the seeker reflects on the bounties of mercies and blessings that it missed and neglected throughout the course of its life. She becomes aware that she is the source of her own destruction because of her ignorance, transgressions, hypocrisy and evil acts.

The second stage is the acknowledgment of the true self in its depth, the transparency of the seeker's thoughts in front of God and therefore, he begins, as the prodigal son, begging for his return through forgiveness and clinging to God, though his condemnation is very severe. The seeker begins lamenting his own sins rather than the lost of paradise in this stage.

Then at the third stage of contemplation, the seeker contemplates on what will take place at the time of death, when the soul separates from the body and finds no one to help her. He reflects on the trillions of possibilities that were available to him to fulfill his baptismal promises and living in imitation of Christ. He reflects also on the lost opportunities of repentance that he missed, and then from his depth, he cries out as the unworthy publican. He begins begging for God's graces to enter and dwell in him, cleansing and purifying his soul that he may render thanksgivings and praises to God all the times.

Then, through God's grace, he asks for God's mercy and begins to ask God to have mercy on the entire world and renders his thoughts on worship alone until God's grace kindles a deep penitence in the heart where the mouth stops reciting psalms and the mind is made captive in a 'blessed captivity.' The seeker starts his initial turn towards living in accordance to God's commandments as a result of this stage of contemplation on death. He enters a state of peace with God and with his neighbor through the activities of God's purifying graces.

The fourth stage is the first stage for those who have completed the three previous stages of contemplation and as a result, became peaceful and aware of the importance of being in good terms with God. It is the stage of meditation in which the seeker directs his thoughts and wonders towards God alone. Here, the advanced seeker will be overtaken by the wondrous mystery of the Lord's incarnation and inhumanity. His mind will be surpassed by the mighty actions of God towards the unworthy humanity that refused to live with Him. He will be amazed by the insistence of God to seek humanity and to share its nature. This marvelous and unspoken act captures the seeker and forces him to long and direct all his longings towards Christ in order to cling to Him. Thus the seeker clings to the ceaseless conversations with God through the Holy Scriptures. He begins to recognize and understand how God's wisdom renders difficult things that are easy, so gradually it deifies man and man becomes god by divine adoption. The words of the scriptures become the illumination of the seeker so he can understand the way to live as Christ-like.

Therefore, Christ becomes the primary goal for the seeker and not the riches and gold and other gods; he becomes detached from the worldly influences and peer pressure. This detachment makes him raise above all things that prevent him from being peaceful, and he begins to accept joyfully anything. All things, as they happen, render meaningless because he has Jesus Christ, the only essential thing in his life.

After this stage of realizing and acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the only treasure that is needful for his life, the seeker arrives to the fifth stage of contemplation. In this stage, the seeker realizes that all worldly treasures are vanities. The Gold, success, health, sickness, sorrow, poverty, power, richness, joy and etc are but vanities. They arrive with time and they go with time. Not a thing remains save God who is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega.

Therefore, the seeker demands urgently the things that are above his understandings. He goes beyond himself and his materialistic needs and he searches for the things that do not last. He wants to climb, jump and fly to expand his horizon of knowledge. He launches his entirety to search, seek and to discover the 'fountain of life' (Gen 2:6) in order to be remolded again in the image and likeness of God.

This urgent demand makes the seeker to become like a newly born child who looks at everything around him in surprise and with wonder. It leads him to the sixth stage of contemplation where the seeker, the newly born, becomes like the wanderer, the tourist, who gets amazed by the tinier things he encounters, which forces him to find out their secrets, mysteries. Through his wanderings, he looks up for guidance, for a knowledge that is above his knowledge as the newly born looks at explanations from those he trusts. The seeker looks then, in the sixth stage, for the spiritual knowledge after he has dismissed the capability of his own human knowledge to understand the mystical things and after he has rejected the demonic knowledge influences.

So, the sixth stage of contemplation according to the philokalic fathers, and especially to Peter of Damascus, is the stage of acquiring the spiritual knowledge from the angels themselves. It is the stage of the “dispassionate contemplation of things [which] is the mid-point between two precipices, protecting the intellect and enabling it to distinguish between its true goal and the six diabolic pitfalls that threaten it.”<sup>13</sup> It is the stage where the intellect, the *Nous*, accepts the fact that it is still ignorant though it has obtained some knowledge, and humbly and freely it submits itself to the spiritual knowledge. The *Nous* in this stage “through persistent hope and faith reaches its goal, neither hating anything completely as evil, or loving anything beyond measure.”<sup>14</sup>

In this stage, the seeker contemplates and marvels at God’s creation. He looks on man, the image of God, who is limited for a time by a body. He contemplates on the intellect that can travel into everything, that can store events, words, thoughts and can create and foresees marvelous things. He looks at the senses and how light and air travel and transmit through them. He discovers the potentiality of man and at the same time he considers his weaknesses and limits as a process to learn humility and obedience. He also gets amazed by the obedience of the senses to the intellect and their functions according to his wish and desire and therefore submits his intellect to the wisdom and the will of God his Creator

At this stage, the seeker also contemplates on the good use of riches and God’s gifts. He notices in the nature’s changes (rain, storms, seasons, sky, stars, rivers, mountains etc...)

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<sup>13</sup> Philokalia Vol. III, Peter of Damaskos, p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

the work of God's care to his creation. His contemplation transforms him into a lover of God's beauty. It transforms him into a *Philo Kalos*. He begins to see "in all things the order, the equilibrium, the proportion, the beauty, the rhythm, the union, the harmony, the usefulness, the concordance, the variety, the delightfulness, the stability, the motion, the colors, the shapes, the forms, the reversion of things to their source, permanence in the midst of corruption."<sup>15</sup> He realizes that there is nothing that was created incidentally but with wisdom and care for man's sake. They are God's blessings.

Although the seeker reaches the secrets of things and understands spiritually God's actions and creation, he learns at this stage to stay humble by admitting his ignorance. He, therefore, continues his ascetic labor of love to purify himself that he may obtain more spiritual knowledge. He begins to accept and absorb freely and humbly every trial as a progressive walk of and for his wonders. These trials, sufferings, become for him his contemplation from wonder to wonder and, diligently and with patience, he awaits for God's mercy.

The sixth stage has prepared the seeker to understand the order of visible creation and has allowed him to recognize the capacity and the greatness of man and his weakness. He understands that there is also an invisible creation that is higher in status than the visible one, which lives closer to God and transmits his power. So the seventh stage of contemplation is the contemplation, through grace, of the multitude of the incorporeal powers.

The seeker contemplates, at the seventh state, on the angel's nearness to God and how they transmit His illumination to each other in hierarchal order and thereafter to man. He realizes that God (The Shepherd) has left the angels (99 sheep) and sought man, the lost sheep. (Matthew 18: 12-14).

This stage has uplifted the seeker upwards. His intellect wondrously wanders at the invisible. He is detached from the delight of sensibility and visibility. He is in the midst of the illumined. He arrives at the eighth stage armed with spiritual knowledge, ascetical progress and prayer and he freezes. His intellect seizes to wonder and it becomes seized. The seeker submits his entirety without any knowledge of what is going on. He does not even want to understand neither does he wants to acquire any other knowledge. He

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<sup>15</sup> Inid., p. 137.

becomes captured by silence, by the worldless and inexplicable manifestation of beauty which is a supra-beauty. At this moment, he becomes satisfied with his dissatisfaction and happy with his ignorance and speechless explanations. He realizes that only the Uncreated can know the Uncreated and there is only one Uncreated being, the Holy Trinity.

The seeker, at this stage, realizes that his terminology is inadequate and a mere explanation of what has taken place through the incarnation of the begotten Son. It is a tiny human understanding of the work of God's Holy Spirit that makes the seeker distinguish between God's uncreated energies and the Only Uncreated One who bestows and incarnates His energies into the visible world.

### **Stillness**

While compunction and discrimination are stages of contemplation, stillness is a prerequisite for, a stage of, and the last stage of contemplation. The first two statuses are requested from the seeker while the third status is forced on him. The seeker is in control of the first two while he loses his will and even himself in the third.

Thus, the seeker begins to still his outward movement until he stills his passions and through compunction, discernment (stages 3 and 4 of contemplation) and contemplation he arrives to the eighth stage where he becomes captured and seized in stillness.

The physical stillness is required for the beginners in their spiritual path. When these beginners master their control, through the acquirement of the purifying graces of God, over their thoughts and passions, they become practitioners of stillness and silence while they are in the midst of total action and noise. They become engulfed by the kingdom that they do not want to lose. This kingdom bestows its blessings, majesty and awe on the seeker and obliges him to hold his breath allowing God's breath to breathe in him.

Stillness begins in a physical and outward form. The will of the seeker controls it. This physical form is transformed to an inward and invisible form through the stillness of passions. The will of the seeker and God's grace are in synergic control of this stage. Then, through contemplation, stillness captures the seeker. He loses control and becomes abdicated by the moment of Grace that is God's will.

“Sit in your own cell and your cell will teach you everything.”<sup>16</sup> “Stillness alone engenders knowledge of God, for it is of the greatest help even to the weakest and to those most subject to the passions.”<sup>17</sup> It “is an undisturbed state of the intellect, the calm of a free and joyful soul, the contemplation of light, the knowledge of the mysteries of God...”<sup>18</sup> in such words, the philokalic fathers have experienced, practiced and described stillness.

The philokalic terms took us in a pilgrimage to our depth. They opened to us the secrets of our life and the ways to attain them. They allowed us to delve into our depths and make them cells in the desert. They showed us the importance to and how to clean them and purify them. They encouraged us to live like the waiting sands of the desert for the fountain of life to transform them into temples of God in His Kingdom.

*Submitted with God's grace by Deacon Jean El-Murr*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., quoted by Peter the Damaskos, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Philokalia, Vol. IV, Nikitas Stithatos, p. 125.