

Why these readings, and why in Lent, when our attention heightens the most? The following texts explain:

Kallistos and Ignatios, *Instructions to Hesychasts*, 94

How one must listen to and take note of the spiritual sayings of the fathers.

Above all, you should take note of the spiritual sayings of the fathers and listen to them with faith and due reverence. For St. Makarios says, “Spiritual realities are beyond the reach of those who lack experience. But the Holy Spirit enters into communion with the sanctified and faithful soul so that it apprehends them. For the heavenly treasures of the Spirit are revealed only to those who have actually experienced them. They cannot in any way be perceived by the uninitiated. Listen, then, with devout attention to what is said about them until you attain such faith that you come to experience them yourself. Then you will know by the evidence of your soul’s eyes how great are the blessings and mysteries in which the souls of Christians can participate even in this life. With this knowledge you will swiftly reap the fruits and the bounty of what you have read and heard. And from being under instruction and discipline you will come to teach others and to guide them through your experience towards what is more divine and beyond the understanding of the majority. May this be your lot, since you rely on the all-powerful hand of the Lord Jesus Christ and are guided by Him. Amen”.

But since too many words are as bad for the ears as too much food is for the body, and moderation in all things is best, we too must avoid excess and embrace moderation. We will add only what in effect is a brief recapitulation of the present treatise, and then we will drop anchor.¹

Barsanuphios, *Letters*²

LETTER 370

Question: “If I ask to receive a command, but the elder does not intend to give me one—or perhaps the opposite even occurs, and I did not ask to receive one, and yet he still gives me one—is this reckoned as a command, and should I keep it by all means? Since there are ecclesiastical canons and certain sayings of the fathers, which are written documents, are we also obliged to observe these as strictly and in the same way as the command?”

Response by John: “If the person asked did not intend to offer a command, then this is not actually reckoned as a command for you, even if in fact you asked for a command. If, however, he thought it was wise to offer you a command, even if you did not happen to request one, then this is in fact a command and you are obliged to keep it.

One should also accept as a command whatever the dogmatic canons have prescribed and the responses of the fathers expressed in the form of a statement. Nevertheless, give assurance to your thought in regard to these matters by asking the fathers; for you are not always able to understand the proper meaning of their words. Therefore, you should be convinced by their response and by that alone, which you should keep without transgression, with the assistance of the kind and loving God and through the prayers of the saints. Amen.”

LETTER 547

A brother asked the Great Old Man: “I have certain books on dogmatic issues¹⁰⁷; when I read these, I feel that my intellect is transferred from passionate thoughts to the contemplation of dogmatic concepts. There are times, however, when my thought rebukes me, saying: ‘You should not read such things; for you are wretched and impure.’”

¹ *The Philokalia Volume 5: Kallistos and Ignatios, Method of Prayer* (trans. T. Pino), accessed at academia.edu.

² All texts are from Barsanuphios and John, *Letters* (2 vols.; trans. John Chryssavgis; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, 2015).

Response by Barsanuphius: “I would not like you to meditate on these because they raise the intellect upward; I would prefer you to meditate on the words of the Old Men because these humble the intellect downward. I am not saying this to shame you, but simply to advise you. For there is a distinction between instruction and indulgence.”

107. Other references to the availability of such books in the monastery of Seridos may be found in Letters 49, 228, 326, and 327.

108 The Greek text plays on the words trophe (spiritual nourishment) and tryphe (sensual nourishment).

LETTER 689

Question: “When I am talking to someone about the Lives of the Fathers or their Sayings, my heart conceives great things. So tell me how I may speak with humility, as well as to whom I should speak, and with what purpose.”

Response: “When you are speaking about the Lives of the Fathers or their Sayings, you should condemn yourself, saying: ‘Woe to me! How can I speak about the virtues of the fathers, when I have not acquired any of them? I have not even begun to make progress; yet I am sitting down and speaking with others for the sake of their benefit! If only the words of the Apostle had not been fulfilled in me: ‘You then that teach others, you do not teach yourself.’¹⁴¹

And when you say this, your heart will burn, and you will find a way to speak with humility. You should also be careful in the matter of whom you actually speak to. If you observe that this person wants to benefit, then speak; but if not, then there is no need to speak. For it is written: ‘Blessed is the one who speaks to the ears of those who listen.’¹⁴²

May you never be found to offer holy things to dogs or cast pearls before swine.¹⁴³ May the Lord grant you prudence, brother, so that you do not deviate from the way of humility.”

141. Rom 2.21.

142. Cf. Sir 25.9; Mt 13.16.

143. Cf. Mt 7.6.

LETTER 694

Question: “If I am sitting in the company of certain fathers, and they are discussing the faith of one of them, that perhaps he is not thinking correctly, should I participate in the conversation as well or not? For my thought tells me that if I am silent, I am betraying the faith. And if they are having a simple conversation about doctrinal matters, should I say what I happen to know, or should I keep silent? Moreover, if I am asked [to say something], what should I do?”

Response: “Never take part in conversations about the faith; for God will not demand this of you, but only whether you believe correctly what you have received from the holy church at the time of your baptism, and whether you keep his commandments. So maintain these things, and you shall be saved.”

John of Sinai, *The Ladder*

23.15

Such people [i.e., proud people] can make good use of submission, a more rigorous and humiliating life, and the reading of the supernatural feats of the Fathers. Perhaps even then, there will be little hope of salvation for those suffering from this malady.

26.111

Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed to God with faith and honest simplicity, and having asked the fathers or even the brothers with humility of heart and no thought of doubt, they should accept their advice as from the mouth of God, even if their advice be contrary to their own view, and even if those consulted are not very spiritual. For God is not unjust, and will not lead astray souls who with faith and innocence humbly submit to the advice and judgment of their neighbour. Even if those who were asked were brute beasts, yet He who speaks is the Immaterial and Invisible One. Those who allow

themselves to be guided by this rule without having any doubts are filled with great humility. For if someone expounded his problems on a harp, how much better, do you think, can a rational mind and reasonable soul teach than an inanimate object.

Symeon the New Theologian

Fifth Ethical Discourse

However, now I will ask you something and you will answer me intelligently. Those who have written about these matters, from where do they get their knowledge? And he who writes now, whence does he know? Tell me, so that I not give you again the impression of talking vaingloriously, whose are these words? Take careful counsel and surely you will come to some conclusion and deliver me from disputations. “They come from a man, certainly,” he says. O my! The vision does not come to you by hearing, does it? Rather, you remain one who hears and sees nothing at all. You say these words come from a man? If they do, then you are obliged to say how they do, since a man is incapable of knowing or expressing not only someone else’s reasonings and moods, but even the impulses and states of an animal’s being. With regard to the inner state of a soul, “What person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is within him?” [I Cor 2:11]. And if it is difficult for one man to know well the impulses and conditions of another man, and even of irrational animals, where or how is it possible for anyone to know what is from God, I mean, the change and condition which is effected in the saints as a result of the vision of Him, not to speak for now of the activity which accomplishes it? But in particular, if the words are a man’s then clearly so are the concepts. With respect to these matters, however, the concept ought not to be called a concept, but instead a vision of what truly exists, because we speak from that vision, and one ought rather to call what is said an account of things which have been seen. A concept or thought, on the other hand, is properly spoken of as concerning something non-existent, or as a purpose which is born of the mind’s intention, such as to do something good or bad which we have not yet actually done, and from the thought one is led to action such that the thought becomes the principle of our future deed, as in: “First God conceives the angelic and heavenly powers, and the thought was deed.”³

Consider, then, that all our words and explanations concerning these matters are not about some non-existent and uncertain things, but instead concern what has already taken place, and will take place in the future, and that they derive from the vision of these things. Someone who explains something about, for example, a house or a city or a place and its arrangement and condition, or again, about some theater and what goes on inside it, is obliged first of all to have seen the places and have learned well about them, and then afterwards to speak carefully and accurately about what he wants to cover. If he were not to have seen it beforehand, then what in fact could he really say about it? What notion regarding something he had not seen at all could he otherwise provide for his account? Tell me, what consideration or cleverness or learning, and what wisdom, thought, notion or rationale could he reasonably find to discourse on something he does not know? To say anything about matters which one knows nothing about or has not seen is obviously unreasonable and ill-bred. Therefore if no one is able to talk or lecture about visible and earthly things unless he has been an eyewitness to them, how, O my brothers, could anyone be empowered to talk or lecture about God and the things of God, or even the saints and servants of God, and the nature of that relationship which the latter have with God, and about what sort of vision of God it is which comes ineffably to pass in them? It is that vision which spiritually introduces into their hearts an inexpressible activity, concerning which human speech does not allow one to say anything more unless one has first been enlightened with the light of knowledge, in accordance with the tenor of the commandment [cf. Hos 10:12].

But, that we may lead you to the light in every respect, when you hear “light of knowledge,” do not imagine that this is mere knowledge of what is said and no light at all. The prophet did not say an “account” or “lecture about light,” but “light of knowledge” and “of knowledge light” [Hos 10:12]. There is no other way for anyone to know

³ Gregory of Nazianzen, Oration 38.9, PG 36.320.

about God unless it is by means of the theoria of the light which is sent by Him. It is just as in the case of someone who is telling some others about some man or city. He first talks to them about what he has seen and heard. His listeners, who have not seen either the man or city about which they are hearing, cannot by merely hearing about them know them in the same way as the man who has actually seen them and is telling them about it. It is just the same with regard to the Jerusalem on high and the invisible God Who dwells within it, or concerning the unapproachable glory of His countenance, or about the energy; and power of His all-Holy Spirit—in other words, His light. No one can say anything unless he has first seen the light with the eyes of his soul and knows precisely its illuminations and activities as they occur within himself. But if in the Holy Scripture he should hear something from those who speak of seeing God, then it is uniquely through the Holy Spirit that he is taught about these things. Thus neither again is he able to say that “I am come to knowledge of God by this act of hearing alone.” For how can he have received knowledge of what he has not seen? If seeing alone does not suffice to cause in us complete knowledge of what is seen, how could merely hearing bring about the knowledge of God in us? God is light and the vision of Him is as light. Thus, in the vision of the light there is knowledge first of all that God is, just as in the case of a man there is first hearing about him, then sight of him, and with the sight of him the knowledge that the man about whom one has heard does in fact exist. Nor does the matter stop here. While someone may tell you about a man, when you see him you are unable to know for sure who he is and be assured that this is he about whom you have learned by mere hearing. Instead, your soul is divided by doubt, and either you ask him himself or someone who knows him, and so learn for certain that this indeed is he...⁴

Fourth Ethical Discourse (excerpt)

[People]... display every zeal and concern for the following three things. I mean for wealth, honor and glory, together with the freedom and joy and enjoyment which these procure for us, these are the first of what our Master and God richly bestows on those who cast all aside, take up the cross, and follow in Christ's footsteps without turning back. Instead of corruptible wealth, God gives them God's entire Self. Do you not understand the power of this saying? Do you comprehend its dreadful wonder? Just as the wealthy of this world squander their money..., so, too, our good Master gives Himself to His true servants and fills their every desire and longing, as much as they want and beyond, and fills them with every good thing, keeping nothing back, and generously provides them unceasingly with incorruptible and everlasting delight. And first of all they are filled with ineffable joy, because it is not the world or anything in the world which they have acquired, but the Maker of all things, and Lord, and Master. Then they are clothed with the light, with Christ God Himself, wholly, throughout their entire bodies. They see themselves adorned with ineffable glory, with a divine robe of lightning splendor. They hide their gaze, unable to bear the vision of their vesture's incomprehensible and unendurable luster, to such a point that they look for a place to hide in order to go there and be delivered from the great weight of their glory.⁵

Ninth Ethical Discourse (excerpt).

The Holy Spirit, not human learning, leads to the knowledge of God

Now is a good time to say with David, and say it the more loudly: “The Lord looks down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there is any who is wise, that seeks after good” [Ps 14:2]; then “They have all gone astray, and become useless; there is not one that does good, no not one” [v.3]. “Where then,” that I may add the words of the Apostle to the foregoing, “is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world” [1 Cor 1:20] such that, by means of it, one is able to know the true wisdom, the God Who truly

⁴ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life, The Ethical Discourses* (3 vols.; intr. and trans. Alexander Golitzin; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 2:50-53.

⁵ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life*, 2:19-20.

is? Brothers, if the full knowledge of the true wisdom and the knowledge of God were going to be given to us through letters and formal study, what need would there be then for faith, or for divine Baptism, or even communion in the mysteries? Obviously, none whatsoever:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe [1 Cor 1:21].

This is what the herald of the Church says, the man who leads her to her Bridegroom, Christ.

For my part, I will naturally grieve and weep at the breaking up of my own members, my own race, of brothers according to the flesh and spirit, because we who have put on Christ through Baptism account the mysteries of Christ as nothing. We think we will receive the full knowledge of God's truth by means of worldly wisdom, and fancy that this mere reading of the God-inspired writings of the saints is to comprehend Orthodoxy, and that this is an exact and certain knowledge of the Holy Trinity. Nor is this all, but the more august among us foolishly suppose that the contemplation which comes to pass only through the Spirit in those who are worthy is the same as the thoughts produced by their own reasoning. How ridiculous! How callous! Indeed, these people, who have plunged sacrilegiously into the depths of God and hurry on to do theology, when they hear of God that in the Trinity there is light among three suns, right away picture three suns in their imagination, united in the light which is the essence and distinguished in the hypostases, and then stupidly imagine that they see the divinity itself, and that the holy, consubstantial, and undivided Trinity is just like their imagined paradigm. But it is just not so, not at all! For no one is able to think or speak properly about what concerns the holy Trinity from just reading the Scriptures. One instead accepts it by faith alone, abides with what has been written, and does not dabble with anything more. As for those who are curious and dare to meddle cheerfully with divine things, [they should understand that] it is not possible to say anything at all outside of what has been written and taught by the fathers.

Listen to what Christ says in confirmation:

No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him [Mt 11:27].

With these and similar sayings He therefore shuts up the shameless and flapping mouths of those people who say and think that by exterior wisdom and book-learning they know the whole truth, know God Himself, and possess knowledge of the mysteries hidden in God's Spirit. For if no one knows the Son except the Father, neither does anyone know the Father except the Son and whomever the Son may wish to reveal the Former's depths and mysteries to. In effect, He says that "My mystery is for Me and My own". Who then among men on earth, wise men, or rhetoricians, or mathematicians, or others, save those who have cleansed their intellect by the supreme philosophy and asceticism, who thus bring to the task a soul whose perceptions have been thoroughly stripped, could ever know the hidden mysteries of God from merely human wisdom and without the revelation which comes through the Lord from on high? These are the mysteries which are unveiled through an intelligible contemplation enacted by the operation of the Holy Spirit in those to whom it has been given—and is ever given—to know them by virtue of the grace from on high. Knowledge of these things is for them whose intellect is illumined daily by the Holy Spirit on account of their purity of soul, whose eyes have been clearly opened by the rays of the Sun of righteousness, whose word of knowledge and word of wisdom is through the Spirit alone, whose understanding and fear of God, through love and peace, are preserved firmly in faith by the sanctity and goodness of their way of life. Of such people is the knowledge of divine things, and to them, as to the Apostles whom they imitate, Christ says: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of God, but for others they are in parables" [Luke 8:10].⁶

Hymns of Divine Eros 21 (excerpt)

⁴⁵ For you have heard the expressions: He walks, and remains,

⁶ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life*, 2:112-115.

He turns his face, and looks, (Ps 9.32)
He descends, and again goes up,
He is present, and flies away again,
and many other things <concerning> the divine energies,
⁵⁰ of which all the divine Scriptures speak rhetorically,
of which the Spirit proclaimed,
the All-Holy Spirit, inexpressibly proceeding from the Father,
and sent by the Son to the human beings.
But not to the faithless, nor to those who love glory,
⁵⁵ not to the orators, nor to the philosophers,
not to those who study the writings of the Greeks,
not to those who are ignorant of Scriptures within our tradition,
nor to those who are practiced in theatrical life,
nor to those who speak smoothly and at length,
⁶⁰ not to those who have been granted great names,
not to those who are loved by the famous,
not to those who illegally take part in crimes,
not to those who summon, nor to those who are summoned,
and not to those who entertain; nor to those who are entertained,
⁶⁵ but to those who are poor in spirit and in life, (Mt 5.3)
to those who are pure of heart and body, (Mt 5.8)
to those of simple speech and more simple life,
and to those who have simpler thought,
to those who flee glory like the fire of Gehenna,
⁷⁰ and who from their soul flee the flatterers
(for the Spirit does not receive flatteries
nor bear to hear what is not),
to those who look only to the glory of the soul,
and the salvation of all the brethren, (2 Macc 12.25)
⁷⁵ and not even by a tiny movement of the heart
do they have feelings toward any worldly thing,
like praises or human glory, (1 Thess 2.6)
or all the other pleasures and passions.
For such as these are as dead while living by truth,
⁸⁰ because they are true but <considered> deceivers. (2 Cor 6.8–9)
These are humble of spirit and of heart, (Mt 11.29)
they are meek and zealous for the Lord. (Acts 22.3)
They are ungodly to the ungodly,
but the scent of life to the Lord's chosen. (2 Cor 2.16)
⁸⁵ They are unchaste to the unchaste at heart,
but like angels to those with virgin souls.
They are humbled amidst glory,
and in poverty they are glorified.
They regard thrift as a kingdom,
⁹⁰ and a kingdom as poverty.

When nibbling they are in self-control,
and when fasting they are filled in every way.
They do not have dealings with injustice,
nor can they disregard one who is afflicted and
⁹⁵ oppressed by the rich.
They do not stand in awe before the face of humans, (Mt 22.16)
for they see the face of the Lord.
They are not broken-hearted over gifts,
nor do they disregard the law of justice, (Rom 9.31)
¹⁰⁰ for they have inviolate wealth
and they reckon all things of the world as dung...
Seek the Spirit, be outside the world!
Do not give total sleep to your eyes,
¹⁴⁰ do not be concerned about the present life!
Weep, mourn for the time you have ruined! (Jas 4.9)
Equally God may console you, (Mt 5.4)
and just as He already granted you to see the world,
and the sun, and the light of day,
¹⁴⁵ so also shall He deign to illuminate things of the present day
and to show to you the rational world,
and to enlighten you by light, by the Triple Sun,
Whom if you will see, then you shall know what I say,
then you shall know the grace of the Spirit.
¹⁵⁰ Because even when absent He is present by his power,
and when present He is not seen in his divine nature,
but He is both everywhere and nowhere.
For if you will seek to see Him in a sensible manner,
where will you find Him? "Nowhere," you would certainly say.
¹⁵⁵ But if you will be able to contemplate Him mentally,
or rather He shall enlighten your mind,
and open the pupils of your heart,
then you shall no longer deny that He is everywhere.
But through Him you shall be taught everything, (Jn 14.26)
¹⁶⁰ even if you are an uneducated peasant.
But if you do not know that the eye
of your intellect has been opened and is seeing the light,
if you have not the sweetness of the divine,
if you have not been enlightened by the divine Spirit,
¹⁶⁵ if you have not wept tears painlessly,
if you have not seen your mind cleansed,
if you have not known your heart was purified, (Mt 5.8)
and was shining bright reflections,
and you have not found Christ within you even when un hoped for,
¹⁷⁰ and you were not astounded on seeing the divine beauty,
and did not forget human nature,

seeing yourself entirely transformed,
tell me, how do you not tremble to speak about God?
How dare you, you who are yourself all flesh,
¹⁷⁵ and have not yet become spirit like Paul, (Rom 8)
to speak or to philosophize about the Spirit?
You hear that He does not dwell in such persons
because they are flesh, according to the saying. (Rom 8.9)
But I have written this so that you may know how I believe.
¹⁸⁰ And if you wish, you may trust me and be sorrowful.
For if you truly do not have the treasure, (Mk 10.21)
which the world cannot contain, (Jn 14.17)
if you have not yet received the glory of the fishermen,
which those who receive truly received God,
¹⁸⁵ you shall leave the world and the things in the world, (1 Jn 2.15)
you shall hasten, you shall run before the gates of life
and the gates of the theater here below close on you, (Mt 25.10)
and before the market is dispersed, alas,
and the sun darkens, and the stars,
¹⁹⁰ and the earth passes away, and hell is opened, (Mt 24.35)
and all shall become darkness and chaos,
and then you shall know, beloved soul, and learn
that those who do not have the divine Spirit
shining in their intellect like a torch,
¹⁹⁵ and dwelling in their heart inexpressibly,
are sent away to eternal darkness. (Jude 13)⁷

⁷ *Divine Eros. Hymns of St. Symeon the New Theologian* (intr. and trans. Daniel K. Griggs; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010).