

# STUDIES AND ARTICLES

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
59 (2), pp. 10-24, 2014

## Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon

Archimandrite. Conf. PhD. Teofan Mada

### Teofan Mada

„Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad  
E-mail: teofanmada@yahoo.com

### Abstract

Fathers of the Desert are “gods by grace” and “enlighteners of discernment. “The belief that the words of a Father come by inspiration is a very general expression of the faith that in the practice of the guidance – a duty to the disciples and visitors (worshippers) who were in his care – a Father receives the divine guidance and assistance. The discovering of the thoughts to a Father has a decisive role in the formation and education of conscience. In this process, “diacrisis” – i.e. spiritual discernment – is fundamental, is the “queen of all virtues”. Discernment is inspired judgment, is required in the moral and spiritual life, because it is the source, the root, head and link of every virtue.

### Keywords

guidance, redemption, conscience, Abba, disciples, spiritual life

### a) Guidance from above

A more precise form of divine guidance in advising, easier to be illustrated than the belief in inspiration to which are often made explicit references, are visionary experiences they many Fathers had and helped them discover the hidden causes of the issues that tormented their disciples. The divine

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

guidance of the Fathers is well illustrated by two specific examples. A brother came from an Abba to ask to pray for him because he was tempted by fornication. After a while, the Father began to worry because the disciple could not find peace and asked God to show him how his brother lived in his cell:

“And God showed him how was his brother. He saw him seated and the spirit of fornication standing beside him. An upset angel stood beside because he has not bowed in front of God, but he found pleasure in his thoughts and mind dedicating himself to this work”.<sup>1</sup>

Following this discovery, the Father confronts the disciple and told him that the problem occurs because his consent to these thoughts and teaches him how to fight them, so the brother will find peace “through the prayer and teaching of the Fathers”. Of course this apothegm is intended to warn those who have heard it and read it several times and to remind them that their temptations persistence was often a result of their power of will and their consent with the sin, rather to the severity of the temptation itself.<sup>2</sup>

However, we must not believe that the visionary element from the story could not be considered as an indication of how a Father would get the necessary knowledge to be able to help the disciple and lead him. In this context, we mention that the apothegms are full of references to the way of life as monk and his cell as place of living his life. Escaping into the desert leads to a place of stability: “Just as a tree cannot bear fruit if it has been moved thus no monk who keeps going from one place to another can bear the fruit of virtue”.<sup>3</sup> First action of a newcomer in the desert was either to build a simple cell with a single room or join an already established monk. The idea of living in a cell is continuously stressed. “Go and

<sup>1</sup> *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings from the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, SLG 95, Cistercian Publications, Oxford, 1986, xi-xii, N 169. Cf. N 532 (*Ἐβεργεντικός*, 1.21.6.5) about a similar story.

<sup>2</sup> There are two kinds of temptations, voluntary and involuntary. Of these, involuntary temptations are permitted by God as test, the voluntary are designed by the devil, who expects the man to accept, and then end up in sin, damaging his soul and staggered it within from living in a personal a true faith in God. Verbs “permitted” (God) and “designed” (devil) suggestively expresses Who is hiding behind the “involuntary” and who behind “voluntary” temptations.

<sup>3</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 72.

sit in your cell, leave your body in the care of its walls and don't get out of it".<sup>4</sup> "A man came to Sketis to see Abba Moses and asked for advice. The old man said, «go, sit in your cell and it will teach you everything»".<sup>5</sup> Why they saw this cell stability as vital in their asceticism? Because there and only there they learn that God exists, because if God is not here and now, in this moment in this place, then He is nowhere. Remaining in his cell meant to be in the midst of human suffering and discover that God is there, within the cell there is life and not death, redemption and destruction, light and not darkness. The Kingdom of God is not life after death, but a present reality. If someone lives for God, and overcame his sinful ego, then he is not afraid of bodily death because it will be continuance of the present and happy life he lives with Christ. They said: "the cell of a monk is oven of Babylon, but there's also the place where three sons found the Son of God; is like the pillar of cloud, where God spoke to Moses".<sup>6</sup> The cell is the place of the hardest ascetic.<sup>7</sup> Abba Serapion once visited a famous Amma who always lived in one small cell and asked, "Why do you stay here?" And she replied: "*I do not stay. I travel*".

Let's go back to another long story about a discovery about Abba Macarius. Macarius lived alone in the desert, but near a region where there were many brothers.<sup>8</sup> Once "the Father was watching the road and saw Satan came in human form and passes by". Macarius, having this vision, the asks the devil what is doing and it answered that it goes to provide to the disciples from the desert to give devilish suggestions to the brothers (ὕπομμνήσκειν): it carries with it all sorts of food (i.e. temptation of thought) to them, hoping that everyone will take at least one. After a while, Macarius sees it returning and asks him how things went. Satan answers that only a man is friendly with it: "when he sees me, he changes like the wind". Macarius asks about brother's name, and when the visitor leaves, he goes to see the brother in question. Thanks to his vision, he knows that this brother is tempted and asks insistently about his temptations, though brother is embarrassed at first and replied that everything is in order. After

<sup>4</sup> *Aporhthegmata Patrum* 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, PG 65, 76A-440D, Avva Moises 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Aporhthegmata Patrum* 74.

<sup>7</sup> Φώτιος Ν. Παπανικλάου, *Η έρημος και η πόλη στην ασητική γραμματεία των πρώτων αιώνων*, Θεσσαλονική, 2008, p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Macarius 3.

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

he admitted that he had sinful thoughts Macarius tells him how to oppose them “fast until late in the evening, fight it, meditate on the Gospel and other Scriptures, and if you have a thought, do not look down, but up and God will help immediately”.<sup>9</sup> Finally, we find that this brother is not subject to the attacks of Satan, but he became the most determined opponent of it. This story says a lot about understanding the activity of demons by Fathers understand how their various temptations can be rejected.<sup>10</sup> The answers of our Saviour to the temptation of the devil on the mountain of Carantania are canons for the monastic life – the three votes of freedom. That is why the fight with temptations of the demons is an aspect that no one can ignore the spiritual life. A more detailed instruction can be found in the text quoted above, after the comment about the role of the spiritual father adds: “Someone who has committed himself to God, should not worry about any thoughts, or to fight them, or to allow them to sneak in ones mind. If, however, appears, lift your thoughts to God and say «I have nothing to do with it; my Father knows»”.

The attention directed towards God banishes the thought, for no thought “can come when your mind is to thy Father and God”.<sup>11</sup> The knowledge of temptations is not impossible. If in parallel, near repentance, we put fear of God, then man does not pass through any danger from demons. St. Symeon the New Theologian says: “He, who fears God, is not afraid of the attacks of the demons, or the threats of the cunning of men”.<sup>12</sup> In the view of St. Maximus, “during temptations” we must face the “manliness waves of the thoughts”; that *manhood* means patience and hope, knowing that the temptations are given by God in His *oiconomia* that has the ultimate goal of improving and spiritual benefit. Moreover, St. Maximus says that “faultless is the one who is struggling with voluntary temptations, by temperance, and involuntary ones, by patience”.<sup>13</sup> It added that the fight should not be given only with manhood, but also with “thanksgiving”.<sup>14</sup> Also Saint

<sup>9</sup> Avva Macarius. About entrusting to God (expressed in different ways), cf. Avva Agathon 21, Avva Pimen 146, N 174.

<sup>10</sup> Learning how to fight certain demons is the subject in Evagrius *Praktikos*, 43, 50, 58-9. By comparison, little has been written about demonology in *Apophthegmata*, see Regnault, *La Vie quotidienne*, p. 196-207.

<sup>11</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Macarie 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Λόγοι πρακτικά και θεολογικά*, 100, 68, S.Ch., p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Προς Ταλασίος*, 58, PG 90, 593 D.

<sup>14</sup> *Λόγοι για την αγάπη*, II, 46.

Basil teaches us patience and hope in facing grief or sadness.<sup>15</sup> Courage, as a way of confronting the temptations, we meet also in the writings of St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril of Alexandria. Also, St. Symeon writes about joy, patience and hope during times of temptation.<sup>16</sup> Of course is not easy to face such temptation, because all this require an advanced spiritual state. There are cases where, although the temptation is known, however it cannot be tackled and this can happen even to those “faultless”<sup>17</sup>, except when they struggle with temptation, they know its power and are not surprised. Thus gradually the one’s soul is receiving the Holy Spirit – in the charisma of Whom all of us “rejoice in temptation”<sup>18</sup> – while his heart is filled with gratitude and strength “to endure the troubles till the end”.<sup>19</sup>

But again, the visionary element of the Fathers of Paterikon is to be taken seriously, no matter how disturbing it may seem. The ability to see demons or understand the ways in which they work was an important aspect for Fathers of the Desert, of their viewing experience. An elder may request in prayer be allowed to see the work of demons<sup>20</sup> or after receiving the gift of the ability to see “what happens” could tell that he saw a demon that cannot enter the cell of a brother and resist as long as he continues to meditate (probably at the advice of Abba Macarius, about the Scriptures). In the case of Macarius, his vision about the demon is used in efficient guidance. These visionary experiences accompanied some of the Fathers since their coming into the wilderness. They had a role in their conversion.

Pure prayer is the prayer of the Spirit within the soul, and it has nothing in common neither with sentimental – pietistic reverie or intellectually and cerebral meditation. Prayer is the voice of God in pure hearts: “While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God with these words: «Lord, show me the way to redemption» and a voice answered, «Arsenius, go away from the people and you will be saved». After retiring in the solitary life he uttered the same prayer and heard a voice saying: «Arsenius,

<sup>15</sup> *Για τη Νηστεία* 2, 1, PG 31, 185 C. Regarding the grace that man receives through temptation, Saint speaks in his work *Για τη βάπτιση*, II, 13, S.Ch. 31, 1265 D.

<sup>16</sup> *Λόγος ηθικός*, 4, 97-99, S.Ch. 129, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Προς Ταλασίος*, 58, PG, 593 D.

<sup>18</sup> *Κατήχηση* 2, 273-277, S.Ch. 96, p. 264.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 394, 395, p. 274.

<sup>20</sup> *Aporhthegmata Patrum* N 369. An element of caution is induced when God says to the monk: “You do not need to see them.”

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

flee, sit in silence, pray always, because these are the sources true life»<sup>21</sup>. These apothegms attributed to Arsenius contain several aspects that make up the essence of spirituality of the desert: the unique desire of salvation; immediate practical action, not just meditation; command to run, removal of all that is familiar; then the idea of silence and solitude represented by the wilderness; desire unceasing prayer throughout the life. It adds, however, the *voice*, the call, the guidance that comes from God at the beginning of this conversion, the first and perhaps the most vital ways of spiritual understanding in this tradition.

There are many stories about how Fathers decide to start their lives of asceticism and shunning of passions and always find this voice one way or another, this command or revelation from God. For Arsenius, it's an answer-call during a prayer. For others, the voice is mediated by one of the many ways in which a Christian might expect to hear God's will. For example, Anthony the Great – father of the hermits, heard the word of the Gospel read in church: “go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow Me” (Mark 10, 21). This time a word of Scripture pierced his heart and followed the same reaction as Arsenius. “Antony immediately left the church and gave to the people from his village the property he had ... then dedicated all his time to ascetic life,” and after a while he withdrew deeper into the desert.<sup>22</sup> A practical action and then the departure, the withdrawing, removing from the familiar world of the village as Arsenius ran from the king's palace.

This pattern of being moved by the work and inspiration of God, to leave the familiar place, and let oneself in the God's will in solitude and silence is the first step in desert towards praying and conversion of heart. What follows until death is the hard work of becoming a new man in Christ: “One of the Fathers asked Abba John the short «What is a monk?» And he said: «it is hard work. A monk toils in everything he does. That means to be a monk»<sup>23</sup> This “toil”, the “hard work” held for a lifetime, and guidance must be followed consistently. It was and still is the hard way and in order to follow it, a disciple had to see that the cross of Christ, as a succession

<sup>21</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Arsenius 1 and 2 .

<sup>22</sup> Μ. Αθανασίου, *Βίος και πολιτεία του οσίου πατρός ημών Αντωνίνου του Μεγάλου*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2006, 2, 3 and 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva John 36.

of injuries in order to get really to receive new life in the Holy Spirit. “A man once asked an old monk: How can I be redeemed?” The latter took off his clothes, has unveiled its small of the back and raised his hands toward heaven, saying:

“This is to be a monk: stripped of all worldly things and crucified. In a competition, the athlete is fighting with his fists; in his mind, the monk stands with arms outstretched in the form of a cross, calling God. The athlete is stripped during a race; the monk is naked and stripped of all things and anointed by his Father and taught how to fight. Thus is how God leads us towards victory»”.<sup>24</sup>

The required abdication of the selfish itself - that John Licopolis see as a snake coiled around the heart of people, so deeply implanted that it was impossible to be removed by one self - demands the full attention of the ascetic, every day and every minute, for life. First of all, the literature of the desert does not speak only of about all kind visions and mystical experiences, but also about the long process of the breaking of the heart. Only few Fathers - and they will be great lights in the history of Christianity - who had such visions, while in the Egyptian desert lived tens of thousands of monks who defined themselves as sinners, as penitents, those who were and always will need mercy. These visions are a great charisma from God, given for the spiritual benefit of others.

As an apothegm<sup>25</sup>, few sayings involve visionary experiences of a Father in perception of the spiritual condition of a disciple, in the purpose of a helpful guidance.<sup>26</sup> Another important function of visions is to affirm and to criticize the quality of the spiritual life of the community as a whole. Not all visions serve any of these purposes,<sup>27</sup> but in some cases, as illus-

<sup>24</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 169.

<sup>26</sup> In *Apophthegmata Patrum* 454 (Εύεργετινός, 2.28.7.8) an elder encourages a brother to resist temptation after he learned in a vision that God will reward him. In N 521 (Εύεργετινός, 2.32.7.22) an old man discovers in a vision that a brother had the gift of tears and remorse, while for another it was hard to get rid of their sins and repent. Thus he is able to urge the latter to make greater efforts. N 85 and N 359 also involve visions that reveal the spiritual nature of the monks. Apothegm about Abba Paul the Simple claims he “saw the state of all souls” and shows him using this charisma (χάρις) to discover that a brother repented of his sins and called all the others to give thanks to God for that brother.

<sup>27</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Ammona 7 ἢ Avva Zenovius 5.

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

trated here, visions are really helpful for an Abba in his personal task of guidance and forming others.<sup>28</sup>

**b. Discernment at Fathers of the Paterikon**

Although the examples of the role of the visionary experience in the practice of spiritual guidance are quite numerous, they are still in a relatively small proportion of the examples contained in *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Many of the examples involve exhortation about the same sensitivity to the needs of the disciple and his perception about demons in apothegms to which we have referred, are the result of visions and discoveries, but with no reference to these experiences. One apothegm<sup>29</sup> regarded as relevant for disclosure of thoughts we find a good example of this sensitivity. Here Abba Zenovius sees that his brother suffers from his thoughts and he knows that his problem is such that a confession to the Father can solve it; then he tells his brother that he knows about his long suffering and expects him to explain what was wrong. Father clearly applies here his personal pedagogy on how to approach his brother, but it seems that he does not really know what the problem is. Perhaps the sensitivity that a Father must show to the spiritual condition and limit of the disciple is best illustrated by two contrasting stories about a Father who has this quality and the one that lacks it.

“A brother came to Abba Pimen to say that he had been tempted to fornication and that another Father had told him «do not let the thought to dwell».<sup>30</sup> The answer is no use to the disciple who

<sup>28</sup> As can be seen in Gould, A Note on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, p. 135, interpretation of Scripture could be seen as a manifestation of visionary skills: N 360, 362, 363. In N 314 an angel reveals to a brother the meaning of a text; Abba Antony in 26, God sends Moses to interpret a passage of the Scripture. See the comment of Dörries, *Die Bibel in ältesten Mönchtum in Wort und Stunde I: Gesammelte Studien zur Kirchengeschichte often vierten Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1966), p. 271. Using this kind of viewing experience obviously serves as a strong support for practical guidance. Interpretation of Scripture is seen as a charisma.

<sup>29</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 509.

<sup>30</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Pimen 62 (Eth. Coll. 14.44). N 183 is just the opposite: here, a brother is outraged by what one Father says about freedom coming from the ascetic, but another encourages him to go back and find out what the Father really wanted to say. N 174 speaks of a different kind of conflict in advice. Abba



just cannot get rid of thoughts. Pimen answers, excusing the other Abba, and establishing a bond of shared experience between him and the disciple. «the acts of Abba Ivistion it up to the angels and he cannot understand that you and I are subject to fornication» Then he gives to the disciple a description of the ascetic life which is more specific and easier to reach than the counsel of Abba Ivistion and therefore more suitable to the needs of the brother. «If a monk masters his stomach and his tongue and becomes a stranger, make sure that he will not die».<sup>31</sup>

In another example, a brother asks an Abba if someone who has a particular thought will be redeemed. The answer of the Abba is no.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the brother sinned himself, but said that an old mad did it. It is up for another Father, Silvan, to convince him that redemption is possible for those who are repentant and tell the other Abba that he was wrong. The first Father has not realized that his brother was talking about himself and therefore fails to give the right answer to the question. His mistake is serious, because it contradicts the important principle that the repentance and the chance to start all over again are always able to bring useful results for a sinner.<sup>33</sup> Repentance is a God-given charisma; it is the guarantee of salvation.

In this text, the first Father is described as “inexperienced in discernment” (ἀπειρος ὢν διακρίσεως), and the conclusion of the apothegm is that it is dangerous to reveal thoughts or sins to a ἀδιαρίτοις, someone who doesn't discern.<sup>34</sup> The apothegm sets a close relationship between good teaching practice, guidance, training and the virtue of discernment.<sup>35</sup> Abba Isaac points out that advice must be sought from the spiritual people who

---

Paphnutius 5 is another case of consultation of “other opinions” but Father's advice is confirmed by consulting others. Steward, ‘Radical Honesty about the Self’, p. 37, makes a mistake in characterizing a normal process pejoratively as a “stirring” one Father against another.

<sup>31</sup> There is often a link between food and fornication, in Avva Daniel 2, Avva John Kolonos 4, N 94, N 532 (*Εὐεργετινός*, 1.21.6.5), Eth. Coll. 13.33, 38, 14.24, 26, 27 (= N 173), 48, 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Αποφθέγματα Πατρῶν* 217.

<sup>33</sup> *Αποφθέγματα τῶν ἁγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Pimen 86, 99, Avva Sisoë 38, N 208, N 187.

<sup>34</sup> Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, 1993, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Φώτιος Ν. Παπανικλάου, *Η ἔρημος και η πόλη στην ασητική γραμματεία των πρώτων αιώνων*, p. 182.

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

know the passions of this life, not those who speak only in theory: “Do not ask for advice from someone who does not follow the same life as you, even if he is wise. Obey your mind to someone untrained who has a better experience with things, than to a philosopher who speaks in theory without experience of living”.<sup>36</sup>

But it can happen that the spiritual father to be wrong. He does not and cannot (always) have an absolute discernment. When something like this happens, it’s good “to expect God’s judgment”<sup>37</sup> to know the accuracy of it. It is not the spiritual father’s duty to know every will of God. Sometimes, Providence has so many other ways to reveal His intentions! But the spiritual father must know very well *the will* of his spiritual son, his own bad tendencies and inclinations (new or old); then he must help him destroy the sin, “this solid wall between man and God”.<sup>38</sup> After that, he should see how God’s voice is heard in a clear conscience, to follow this process without disappearing from the spiritual life of his son. The process of observation is not without concern for “the one who does not have the gnostic will, always does his own will”<sup>39</sup> - in true and not fictitious sense. Who hasn’t a gnostic, selfish will, does always good, free and from conscience, but he does this as long as the grace of discernment is heard in conscience. And he does all this as long as the grace does not leave him. Therefore, in the whole patristic tradition the greatest effort of ascetics was to *not lose the grace of God*.<sup>40</sup> St. Seraphim of Sarov who, after

<sup>36</sup> Λόγος 56, Ed. Pigopoulos, Thessalonic, 1977, p. 191.

<sup>37</sup> Άννα Doroteos, Διδασκαλία 5, 68, p. 265-267.

<sup>38</sup> Διδασκαλία 5, 63, p. 253-255.

<sup>39</sup> Διδασκαλία 1, 20, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> The ultimate reason of the loss of grace is pride, the root of original sin and the seed of death in mankind. As Fathers showed in their lives, especially contemporary Abba Siluan, the ultimate goal of Christian asceticism, its deep specific meaning, its key, is focused on acquiring humility (= path to pure prayer). And the path on acquiring humility is the path towards the following and similarity, to identify with humility, kenosis and the redeeming descent of Christ into hell. Only those who follow Him in prayer with blood sweat and tears in Gethsemane, in excruciating pain, loneliness and abandonment of all and in the descent through darkness and death to the ultimate depths of hell, only those can honor light and joy of the Resurrection and Ascension to heaven with Him. It’s the only path, there is no another path in Christianity. The Christian life can not be other than the life of Christ on earth. Inevitably, it encounters temptations, leaving, persecution, the cross, and the descent into hell without which nobody reaches resurrection and ascension.

he experienced the loss of grace of God Who appeared to him during the Divine Liturgy, remained for a thousand days on a rock in a desert place is constantly praying: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”.

The importance of discernment in *Apophthegmata* is illustrated by several short stories which explicitly emphasizes the need for such quality. It can be said that it is “bigger than all virtues”<sup>41</sup> and is seen as an important key of spiritual life, without which a man will not be able to live properly. Abba Anthony said, “There are many who have exhausted their body through asceticism but because they did not acquired the discernment are far from God”<sup>42</sup>. Apothegms such this does not provide a definition of what the discernment means for a Father. For that we should consult other apothegm<sup>43</sup>, which mention the discernment in the context of narratives or stories. Important for a Father to have discernment is clear from this text, as well as many other apothegm, although not explicitly mentioned the term διακρίσις. Broadly, the discernment means knowing how to act best in any given situation - which sometimes involves acting contrary to general expectations. Abba John Kolovos found it’s better to allow to be served by an older person when everyone expected him to refuse, since he was the youngest of them all.<sup>44</sup> This decision is explicitly attributed his discernment.

A more complicated situation has Abba Pimen as protagonist who, along with some old, visited the house of a certain “friend of Christ” who offered them meat.<sup>45</sup> Pimen refused to eat: “Elders were astonished that he had not eaten because they knew his discernment. They asked him: «“You, Pimen, did that?” The old man replied: “Forgive me. You have eaten and no one will be shocked; but if I would have eaten those many brothers coming to me would hurt themselves saying *If Pimen eat meat, why should not we do the same?*»”. And they were amazed by the power of his discernment”. Here, old Abba Pimen is expected to eat the meat that is offered. Two apothegms that clarify this situation should be retained. One of these

<sup>41</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 106.

<sup>42</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Antonie 8 (cf. Pimen 106). See also Pimen 35, 52 (Eth. Coll. 13.18, 14.56; Amma Syncletica 17).

<sup>43</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 217.

<sup>44</sup> Avva John Kolovos 7, cited in Cap. 3, p. 94. see S. Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London, 1984), p. 15. Avva Antonios 35 is another excellent example of discernment: a monk must be conscious of his goals (cf. Avva Pimen 143); unfocused activity is useless.

<sup>45</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Pimen 170.

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

is a simple warning of an Abba to a brother, telling him that if he wants to maintain its standing ascetic should stay home; if visiting someone will stumble upon host rules and will not “reveal their own way of life”.<sup>46</sup> The other talks about a priest who just refused to interrupt his hosts ascetic way of loving during a visit not heard the hosts singing psalms and praying, “because their work was hidden” – i.e. they continued to follow their normal life in secret.<sup>47</sup> The point of the story is the inability of the visitor to understand the way of life of its hosts, which he believes is <sup>48</sup>loosely. Eventually he discovered the mistake, as well as his host, who “learned the discernment. He became friendlier and got used to eat everything that was offered to him and taught him to work in secret”. As we return to apothegm about Pimen: we can see from the examples mentioned why the old man, famous for his discernment, was expected to eat the meat brought before him to avoid displaying their own ascetic way of life or (involving a refusal) to judge the food prepared by the host. He is aware of the bad impression that would make on his disciples, and therefore opposes to the habits and refuse to accept what the host gives him.

In another apothegm which explicitly mentions the discernment, an Abba praises a man who, having sinned, answers to demonic temptation to renounce the monastic life with these words addressed to his own thoughts: “Why do you come and trouble me, to lose hope? I have not sinned. I say again, I have not sinned”.<sup>49</sup> Of course, he doesn’t deny that his has fallen, but simply is looking for a way to fight the temptation of despair. Discernment always includes this element in response to a need or a specific situation. Let’s see how the Father to uses the discernment of practical guidance, although it is impossible to quote in this context more apothegm relevant to the subject. An important role of discernment, parallel to that of vision, is how brethren learn how to understand and respond better to the temptations to which they are subjected; this may involve informing brothers about harmful or wrong ideas. Someone asked Abba Pimen how demons fight against him. He replied:

<sup>46</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 257; cf. N 256. See also Avva Serinus I.

<sup>47</sup> Avva Evlogios; cf. Avva Pimen 138 și Eth. Coll. 13.7 see also Eth. Coll. 13.2 Abba Pimen rejects the idea (that was suggested by a brother) to make his way of life a topic for teaching.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Apophthegmata Patrum* 229, 242.

<sup>49</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 50 (another situation in which an abba has a vision about another brother’s spiritual life and advices him).

“The demons are fighting with you? They are not fighting against us as long as we do our will. For our own desires become demons and they trouble us because we satisfy them. If you want to know who the demons are fighting with those are Moses and others like him”.<sup>50</sup>

Here the brother is convinced not to focus too much on what demons do. Trying to defeat his will is more important. Abba Pamvo tells a brother not to say that demons prevent him to do good but to accuse himself he did not strive not enough. If he blames demons, “makes God a liar” because God said, “I give you power to crush with your feet snakes and scorpions and the power of the enemy”. God promises victory over demons and it’s our fault if we fail.<sup>51</sup>

To live in a harmonious communion with God and all his creation, the ascetic must achieve inner peace and harmony through deeper self-knowledge. That conflictual *something*, anxious, that something that *wishes* for *more* must be heard and appreciated. All our effort is how to not sin. Our pathos is entirely related to our *penthos*<sup>52</sup> inasmuch we must clearly touch the first, to allow the second to evolve. The deeper the fall is, the more clear and honest is the awareness of the need for God. Fathers expressed a great love - sometimes a preference - for the humble sinner who repents, whereas thirst for God proportionally increases with human alienation and decay.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the most depraved of sinners are received by Christ and His Church with open arms if they sincerely repent. Thus all our effort is living with God and gaining life in its whole contents: holiness and sanctification.

Fighting against thoughts is a topic of great interest to Fathers in Apothegm. Discernment undoubtedly includes the ability of a spiritual father to distinguish between different spiritual gifts of people and to handle properly their temptations. This is implicit in the answer of Abba Pimen to the brother who is worried about teaching given by Abba Ivistion about the possibility of defeating fornication. An account of the discussion included in the anonymous series deals with various capacities of judgment

<sup>50</sup> *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, Avva Pimen 67 (PJ 10.62). See also Pimen S 12 (Guy, *Recherches*, 30). See T. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 89-91.

<sup>51</sup> *Αποφθέγματα Patrum* 383 (PJ 10.66).

<sup>52</sup> Φώτιος Ν. Παπανικλάου, *Η έρημος και η πόλη στην ασητική γραμματεία των πρώτων αιώνων*, p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> *Κατήχηση* 6, 289-291, S.Ch. 104, p. 38.

*Vision and Discernment to Parents Paterikon*

of the Fathers in general.<sup>54</sup> Starts with a man asking if someone has a sinful thought is or not “defiled”. Some say yes, others no, but what really matters is not to commit the sin that the thought encourages and not the experience of temptation.<sup>55</sup> We must say that temptation and sin are not the same, as stated by Messalians<sup>56</sup> but for the temptation to lead to sin, is needed man’s consent.<sup>57</sup> Then temptations and passions are closely related; if the temptations discourages the man, when passions are inflammatory and damage the soul; but if man is not discouraged, the temptations become “cautery”<sup>58</sup> says St. Simeon, which located in passions, burn and destroy them, so the soul finds again his true freedom and cleanliness.<sup>59</sup>

The brother who started the discussion if a thought is sinful or not “defiled” is confused and goes to a Father to learn the truth. The later supports the second answer, explaining that “Everyone is required by his measure [μέτρον]”; someone who has achieved μέτρον a high level of spiritual life when is tempted by the desire to get something banned will not allow the thought to dwell, but casts it and thus will not be defiled. But even someone who has not yet reached this level should not be considered dirty: even if he likes the subject and will be attracted to it, he will not take it. This does not mean it’s not wrong to want to keep all kinds of sinful thoughts or brings pleasure; but refers, obviously, to those who simply are not able to “chase” their thoughts, i.e. to liberate the minds of temptation. They are victims thought that they cannot control, but going through the experience without ultimately consent to sin. Experience of successful resistance to temptation it can be transformed into virtue: “Not the thoughts that come to mind is what we condemn in judgment, but how we use them. Because through thoughts we can sink or we can win”.<sup>60</sup> “Crowning” that a monk

<sup>54</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, Mowbrays, 1966, p. 202-203.

<sup>55</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 216; cf. N 454 and Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 74-5.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Irenée Hausherr, *L’erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme*, Orient. Christ. Periodica 1 (1935), p. 235-236.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. G. Mantzaridis, *Παλαμικά*, Tesalonic, 1973, p. 201.

<sup>58</sup> *Κατήχηση* 14, 89-94, S.Ch. 104, p. 210.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 289-291, S.Ch. 104, p. 38.

<sup>60</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 218. Apophthegms that distinguish the various ways the presence of temptation and how we respond to them are common: N 167 argues that it is impossible to get rid of your own passions only through resistance. See Abba Anthony 4 (Pimen 125) and Pimen 28 (10.55 PJ). Abba Pimen 15, 20 (Eth. Coll. 14.47), 21 (Eth. Coll. 13.84, albeit with a slightly different message) claim that passions are ineffective if ignored or endured with patience; they present themselves, but can be rejected (N

might expect is the reward for defeating temptation. The value of discernment in the work of guidance is finally illustrated by a story about a brother who suffered from vision caused by demons. An old man tells him that the appearances are demonic and send him advices on how to fight them. But demons appear again, telling him that the Father is a liar and bring as evidence that once the spiritual father drove away an old man who wanted to ask to borrow him some money and he didn't, although he could. The brother tells the Father the vision, and he recognizes his act: "For I knew that if I will loan the money to the man we both will lost our souls. I thought it's better to break one commandment than ten and endure suffering. And about you do not listen to the demons that will lead you down the wrong path".<sup>61</sup>

The goal of demons is to destroy the relationship between spiritual father and disciple, thus leaving the disciple defenceless their attacks. But the spiritual father mentioned above demonstrates discernment to both disciples.<sup>62</sup> He is open and sensitive to the spiritual condition and needs of both - realizing in a case (although we are not told how) that the first brother intends to use the money for something dishonourable or that the loan will be the source of future hostilities; in the other case, seeing that it will please the disciple if he answers honestly and sends him to fight the demons who made this accusation. This kind of consciousness is the essence of discernment in what concerns the Father, and the Father brings a good example of effective practice of the advice.

---

185). But N 220 states that the cessation of sinning must be followed by cessation of like sin; cf. N 83 and N 429 (Εὐεργετικὸς, 2.28.7.3). The fact that we are ready or not to temptation is a measure of what use we made of our spiritual life: Eth. Coll. 13.44. For a discussion of fighting thoughts, see Regnault, *The Beatitudes in the Apophthegmata Patrum*, ECR 6 (1974), p. 36-9; also Spidlik T., *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (CSS 79; Kalamazoo, Mich., 1986), p. 233-66.

<sup>61</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum* 224. For another example of a Father who shows to some brothers that their visions are demonic, vezi Avva Antonios 12 (PJ 10.2a).

<sup>62</sup> Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, p. 52.