

ON THE HOLY HESYCHAISTS

Question

You have done well, Father,¹ to cite the words of the saints in answer to my question. When I heard you resolve my uncertainties, I admired the evidence for the truth, but now this reflection has slipped into my mind: since every argument struggles with another argument, as you yourself explained, so another argument could in turn very well contest what you yourself have said. But I never fear this. I know that only the witness of the saints is incontestable, and I have known the saints to say the same thing as you. And he who is not persuaded by the saints, how will he himself be worthy of our confidence? How will he not find himself rejecting the God of those saints? It is He who said to his apostles, and through them to the saints who have followed them: 'He who rejects you rejects me' (Luke 10 : 16), which means they reject the truth itself (cf. John 14 : 16). How then can those who look for the truth approve those who set themselves against the truth? That is why I beg you, Father, to hear me expose each of these arguments which I have heard from these men who pursue the Hellenistic education during their life, then to tell me what you think, and to add finally what the opinion of the saints is on these matters.

Those men affirm that we are wrong to force ourselves to contain our intellect beneath the body. It is outside the body, they say, that it must take flight in every way. That is why they fiercely harass some of us. They write against them, because they exhort novices to pay attention to themselves and to make the intellect find entry into themselves through the inspiration of their breath. They say that the intellect is not separate from the soul: then, that which is not separated but united, how could one make it re-enter into the body? They add that our side talk of introducing divine grace through the nostrils and lodging it there. But I know that their allegations are calumnies, for I have not heard any of our people say such a thing, which leads me to think that in other domains they are equally perverse. It is the same thing to forge things which are not in front of men's eyes, and to twist and pervert what is before their eyes. But you, Father, instruct me: why do we chose so ardently to put the intellect inside us, and why don't we think that it is a bad thing to contain it into the body?

Answer

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE CHOSEN TO DIRECT THEIR ATTENTION TOWARD THEMSELVES IN THE LIFE OF

STILLNESS, IT IS NOT USELESS TO PUSH AND MAINTAIN THE INTELLECT INSIDE THE BODY.

Brother, have you heard the Apostle say: 'Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in us' (1 Cor. 6 : 19), and again: 'We are the house of God, just as God has said: I will live and I will walk in them and I will be their God' (2 Cor. 6 : 16). Why then, if one has intellect, be offended when the intellect lives in the place which will naturally become the resting place of God? And how is it that at the origin, God made the intellect dwell in the body? Did he make us so poorly? Such questions, brother, should be posed to heretics, those who say that the body is bad and that it is a work of evil. As for us, we think that the intellect is bad when it is involved in corporal thoughts, but that it is not bad in the body itself, because the body is not in itself bad. That is why, with David, each of those who attach themselves to God through all their life call on God: 'My soul has a thirst for you. How many times has my body desired you' (Ps. 62 : 2. LXX). And: 'My heart and my body rejoice before the living God' (Ps. 83 : 3. LXX). And with Isaiah: 'My flesh has sounded like a cithara, and what is inside me like a wall of brass which you have raised' (Is. 16 : 11). And: 'Through your fear, Lord, we have conceived the Spirit of your salvation' (Is. 26 : 18). We confide in him, we will not fall.

But they will fall who speak the language of the earth and who lie by attributing to the earth the words and the heavenly paths. For if the Apostle calls the body death (he actually says: 'Who will deliver me from this deathly body?' (Rom. 7 : 24)), it is because material and physical thinking really has the form of the body. That is why, comparing it to spiritual and divine thinking, he has justly called it the body, and not simply body, but the deathly body. Precisely this is demonstrated more clearly a bit further on: he accuses not the flesh, but the deceitful impulse aroused by transgression. He says: 'I am sold to sin' (Rom. 7 : 14). Now he who is sold is not a slave by nature. And again: 'I know that the good does not live in me, that is to say, in my flesh' (Rom. 7 : 18). You see, he does not say that the flesh itself is bad, but what lives in the flesh, namely the law which is in our body and which is opposed to the law of the intellect (cf. Rom. 7 : 23).

That is why we are opposed to that law of the flesh, we make it exit the body, and why we make the attention of the intellect remain. Through this we give to each power of the soul its law and to each of the portions of the body what is due to it. To the senses, we give what it ought to perceive, and in proper measure: this work of the law is called 'temperance'. And in the impassioned part of the soul, we arouse the best state, which is called 'love'. But we also improve the mind,

¹ Note to self, this text is from the *Triads*, C. I. ii. 1 ff.

by examining everything which stops the mind from raising itself toward God, and we call this part of the law 'stillness and watchfulness'. He who through temperance has purified his body, who through divine love has made an occasion for virtue out of ardour and desire, who through prayer has placed a plucked naked intellect before God, aquires and sees in himself the grace promised to pure hearts. It is then that he can say with Paul: 'God who has said "That the light shines in the depth of darkness" has made the light shine in our hearts, so that the knowledge of the glory of God can shine in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 4 : 6). But, he says, we carry this treasure in a vase of earth (2 Cor. 4 : 7): our body. If we train our intellect within the body, do we thereby act in a manner unworthy of the nobility of the intellect? Who could this be said of? Not the spiritual man, but rather of him who has an intellect stripped naked by divine grace, and at the same time a human intellect.

While each soul is a unique in existence, gifted with many powers, making use of the body, living naturally in harmony with it, as if making use of an organ, what organ does that power of the soul which we call 'intellect' make use of? Nobody has ever supposed that the activity of the intellect remains in the fingernails or eyelids, no more than in the nostrils or in the lips. Rather, everyone is agreed in thinking that it is deep within us. But some people have debated over which organ, among those which are inside us, it uses as its favoured place. Some place it in the brain, which serves as a kind of acropolis, overlooking everything else. Others propose for it the middle of the heart, that place in the heart stripped of terrestrial breath. As for us, we know precisely that our mind is neither inside us as if it filled us like a vase, for it is incorporeal, nor outside us, for it is attached to us; but rather that it is in the heart, in that particular organ. This is something we have not learned from a man, but from He himself who created man and who says in the Gospels: 'It is not what comes in, but what goes out through the mouth which soils a man' (Matt. 15 : 11). For 'it is from the heart, he added, that thoughts come' (Matt. 15 : 19). The great Makarios says the same thing, as follows: 'The heart directs the whole organism, and because grace occupies the pasturage of the heart, it reigns over all thoughts and all the parts of the body. For it is there that the intellect is and all the thoughts of the soul'.¹

Our heart is therefore the place of the mind. And it is the primary physical organism of the mind. So, when we force ourselves to examine and reform our mind with the rigor of watchfulness, with what will we examine ourselves, if we do not assemble our intellect so spread out outside by the senses, and do we not draw it back inside, toward this heart, the place of the mind? That is why Makarios, who was named well (since 'Makarios' means 'blessed'), after he had said the foregoing, added: 'It is there that he should look to see

whether grace has engraved the laws of the Spirit'.² What place does he mean when he says 'there'? In the directing organism, on the throne of grace, where the intellect and all the thoughts of the soul are, which is to say the heart. Do you see how much it is completely necessary, for those who have chosen to be attentive to themselves in the life of stillness, to hold down and to contain the intellect in the body, and specifically in this part of the body which is at the greatest depth of the body, and which we name the 'heart'.

If, following the psalmist, all the glory of the daughter of the king comes from within (cf. Ps. 44 : 13. LXX), why do we search for it outside? And if, following the Apostle, God has carried in our hearts his Spirit which cries: 'Abba, Father' (Gal. 4 : 6), how do we not pray with the Spirit in our hearts? If, finally, following the Lord of the prophets and the apostles, the kingdom of heaven is within us (cf. Luke 17 : 21), how can he not send himself out of the kingdom of heaven, anyone who forces himself to push his intellect out of the place which is within him? The upright heart, Solomon says, searches for a sense (cf. Prov. 15 : 14), and he affirms elsewhere that it is intelligent and divine, and toward it all the Fathers direct us, when they say: 'The properly intelligent intellect dresses itself with the intellectual sense. Do not cease to search for this sense both in us and not in us'.³

Do you see that if you make yourself opposed to sin, acquire virtue, find the reward of the war of virtue, or the proof of the reward for virtue - the intellectual sense - , it is necessary to lead the intellect within the body and within oneself. As for forcing the intellect, not only out of the bodily experience, but out of the body itself, so that one can achieve purely intellectual visions, that is the most grave and Hellenistic error, the root and the source of all falsehood, an invention of demons, a doctrine which gives rise to mindlessness and which derives from a complete loss of intellect. This is why those who speak under the inspiration of demons are outside themselves: they do not understand what they say. As for us, we despatch the intellect not only within the body and the heart, but also within itself.

Let them talk, then, those who say that the intellect is not separate from the soul, but that it is united to it, and who ask how it would be possible to send it back inside. They take no notice, it seems, of the fact that the intellect is one thing, and that its energy is another thing. Or else they know it, and yet chose to move among imposters, while playing on the similarity of names. For, refusing to accept the simplicity of spiritual doctrine, those who have been sharpened by dialectic for argumentation, following Basil the Great, they turn back the force of the truth with antitheses derived from false

² *Ibid.*

³ St John Klimakos, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 26 (P.G. lxxxviii); E.T., Fr. Lazarus Moore, *Missionary Society of St Paul*: (New York, 1982), Step 26 §22.

¹ *Spiritual Homilies*, St Makarios. XV, 20.

spiritual knowledge,¹ through the specious reasoning of sophisms. This is precisely what they are, those who are not spiritual and yet believe themselves worthy to judge spiritual things and to teach on them. For have they not forgotten in truth that the intellect is not like the eye, which sees other visible things, but cannot see itself? The intellect, it can work on other things which it is able to observe: this is what the great Dionysios calls its rectilinear movement. But it turns back on to itself and it works on itself, when it sees itself: this is what Dionysios calls its circular movement.² Now this movement is the best energy of the intellect, that which is proper to it. Because of this energy or this activity, it is permitted it to exceed itself and to be with God. For 'the intellect, says Basil the Great, 'does not spread itself outside'. Do you notice that it can go outside? Then if it goes out, then it can return back. That is why he adds: 'It comes back into itself, and by itself rises to God'³, as by a way which is never lost. Dionysios, that infallible contemplator on the intelligible, himself says that such a movement of the intellect cannot fall into any error.⁴

The father of error therefore always wants to deflect a man from this movement and send him toward the movement which bears his errors. Now to this day, as far as we know, he has not yet found anyone to help him and to make himself lead men toward such a movement by means of seductive language. Meanwhile he has, it seems, found auxiliaries, if what you yourself have said is true, that there are men who have composed treaties along those lines, and who have attempted to persuade the majority, and even those who embrace the most high life of stillness, saying that it is best to maintain the intellect in prayer outside the body. They do not even respect what John, who constructed the ladder leading to heaven, has said in a definitive and decisive manner: 'The one leading the life of stillness is he who strives to confine his incorporeal being within his bodily house':⁵ this is something which our spiritual Fathers have taught us unanimously with good reason. For if a man is not able to contain the incorporeal within his body, how would he be able to bear Him who united himself to a body, and who advances, like a natural form, across all organised matter? Exteriority and division would not correspond to the essence of the intellect at all, if in the end this matter did not receive life, and life is accorded to the union of matter and intellect in an appropriate way.

¹ St Basil the Great, *Homilium in principium proverbiorum*, (*Homily on the Beginning of Proverbs*); P.G., XXXI: 401A.

² St Dionysios the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* 4 : 9 (P.G. iii, 705A-B); E.T., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (Paulist Press: New York, 1987). p. 78.

³ St Basil the Great, *Letters*, 2 (2); E.T., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 8*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry

⁴ St Dionysios the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* 4 : 9 (P.G. iii, 705A-B); E.T., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (Paulist Press: New York, 1987). p. 78.

⁵ St John Klimakos, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 27 (P.G. lxxxviii); E.T., Fr. Lazarus Moore, *Missionary Society of St Paul*: (New York, 1982), Step 27 §6.

Do you see, brother, how John Klimakos has shown that it is not only in a spiritual manner, but also in a human manner, that it is possible to prove how much those who chose to be truly in themselves and to bear in the interior man the name of monk, should completely send and keep the intellect within the heart? So, to teach novices to look in themselves and to lead their own intellect inside, through inspiration of the breath, is never out of place. No man of good sense would try to stop the intellect which has never yet contemplated itself, from composing itself with itself, by certain methods. Since the gathered intellect continually escapes those who come to try it, rightly stripped naked for such a fight. It is necessary for them to keep trying continually. They don't know, because of their lack of experience, that nothing is more difficult to contemplate than the intellect, or more mobile than it. That is why there are those who recommend attachment to the breath, to the inspiration and expiration of the breath, and to withhold it a little, with the aim of retaining the intellect at the same time while observing the breathing, until, with the help of God, after having made progress, having blocked the intellect from making an exit toward what is around, and having purified it, they can gather it in a confined circle which unifies it. One can see there the spontaneous effect of the attention of the intellect, for such breath enters and exits peacefully when every thought which undertakes the spiritual combat is concentrated, above all in the case of those who live in the life of stillness in body and in mind. They are free to take part in the spiritual sabbath. They repose from all their personal selfish labours, as much as it is possible; they push aside the powers and faculties of the soul from their spiritual understanding, things changing and moving along in their diversity, all the perceptions of the senses, and in general all the activities of the body which depend on us. As for those activities which do not depend on us and our choice, such as respiration, they are stripped down, too, as much as it is in our power to make that so.

All of this happens without trouble, and without any thought, to those who have made progress in the life of stillness. For all of this is necessarily and spontaneously aroused through the perfect entry of the soul into itself. But among novices, nothing of what we have said will happen without tiring work. As patience is a consequence of love – for love bears all things (cf. 1 Cor. 13 : 7), and we have undertaken to exercise patience with all our power, so that, thanks to it, we can arrive at love – , it is the same here. But why say any more than this? All those who have the experience smiles at those who legislate and oppose themselves to them and their experience. For the master of such men is not words, but work, and the experience which comes from trials, something which brings a useful reward, and which refutes the sterile words of those who love merely to dispute and throw accusations.

One of the great monks says on this matter that 'since the fall of man, the interior man adapts himself naturally to external

forms and shapes'.¹ Since, he who forces himself to turn his intellect on to himself, so as not only to arouse the linear movement, but to arouse the circular and infallible movement, and does not allow his eye to wander here and there, why should he not find a great advantage by fixing his eye on his chest or on his navel, as on a support? In addition to the fact that the intellect will wrap itself up in a circle, the external world of the body must also wrap up, as much as it is possible, into the image of interior movement of the intellect, for which it is making way; so it will look down toward the heart, because such a disposition of the body will assist the power of the intellect to circle inward, when it usually looks and flows outward. For if the power of the intellectual beast sits at the centre of the belly (cf. Job 40 : 16), where the law of sin exercises its empire and finds its pasture, why should we not place the law of the intellect there, armed with prayer, to fight that law of sin (cf. Rom. 7 : 23), with the end that the evil spirit is chased by the water of the new birth and will not return to take accommodation again with the seven other spirits more evil still, and so that our final condition will not be worse than the first (cf. Matt. 12 : 45)?

Be attentive to yourself (cf. Deut. 15 : 19), Moses said, which means to yourself in full, not to one part of yourself and not to another. But using which organ? Assuredly, use the intellect. For with any other it is not possible to be attentive to the entire self. So place that vision on your soul and your body. It is by this that you will disengage easily from the harmful physical and psychic passions. So apply yourself to your self, watch over your self, examine yourself, or expose yourself, observe and verify. In this way you will submit the rebellious flesh to the Spirit, and ensure there will never be a hidden impulse or word in your heart (cf. Deut. 15 : 9).

If the spirit of the master, that is to say the harmful spirits and wicked passions, rise up against you, says Ecclesiastes, do not abandon your place (cf. Eccl. 10 : 4), which is to say, do not let any part of the soul, any limb of your body go without surveillance. You will raise yourself over the spirits which menace you because you descended to them, you will present yourself with assurance and without descending, but you will be stood before Him who descends into hearts and the reins (cf. Ps. 7 : 10). On this, Paul says: 'If we judge ourselves, we will not be judged' (1 Cor. 11 : 31). Experiencing this blessed passion of David, you also will speak to God: 'The darkness, thanks to you, will not grow darker, and the night will be for me as clear as the day, for you hold my reins' (Ps. 138 : 12-13. LXX). Not only, he says, have you made your own all that my heart desires, but if a fire in my body reanimates the flame of this desire, it returns toward the origin, and through that origin it throws itself toward you, it attaches itself to you and it unites itself to you. Likewise those who devote themselves to corruptible pleasures of the senses extinguish all desire of the soul in the flesh, and then the flesh becomes everything without any possibility of the Spirit of God

remining in in them (cf. Gen. 6 : 3), just so in those who have raised the intellect toward God have attached their soul to divine desire, the flesh is transformed and raised up equally, playing in the divine communion of the soul, and becoming also the dwelling place and the rest of God, ceasing to be hostile to God and ceasing to desire things contrary to the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5 : 17).

What, between the flesh and the intellect, is the place most comfortable for the spirit when from the depth it rises over us? Is it the flesh, in which nothing good lives, the Apostle says, unless the law of life has come to stay (cf. Rom. 7 : 18)? It is therefore the flesh over which one must be attentive without relaxation. How do we do it? How do we never abandon it? How do we stop the evil one from rising against it, above all we who do not know how to reject evil spiritually, by the very ways of the Spirit, save by leading ourselves along the ways of self-observation through a proper exterior attitude? But why speak of those who very rightly do this, when there are those yet more perfect who adopted this attitude during prayer and whom the divine has answered, not only among those who have lived since Christ, but among those who lived before he came among us? Elias himself, the most perfect of those who have received the vision of God, after having put his head on his knees and having worked hard, gathered his intellect in himself and in God, and put an end to years of drought (1 Kings 18 : 42-3).

But these men who you say, brother, that you have heard them speak so, they seem to me to have the illness of all pharisees. That is why they do not want to examine nor to purify the interior of the cup (cf. Matt. 23 : 25), which is to say their heart. Now because they do not follow the tradition of the Fathers, they demand for themselves the high seats looking over all things (cf. Matt. 23 : 6) like pharisaic teachers of the law. Disdaining that form of prayer which was justified by the publican (cf. Luke 18 : 9 -14), they exhort other not to adopt it when they pray. As the Lord says in the Gospels: The publican did not want to lift his eyes to heaven (cf. Luke 18 : 13). It is the publican that they imitate in their prayer when they apply their attention to themselves. And those who call them 'omphalics', clearly mean to insult and diminish them with such accusations. For, who among them has ever said that the soul is in the nostrils?

Thus, although they pronounce a manifest defamatory lie, they show what they are: men who outrage those who are worthy of praise, but who do not correct those who deceive themselves; for it is not for the cause of the life of stillness and for the sake of truth that they write, but for vain glory; and not to lead toward sober watchfulness, but so as to distance themselves from it. By all means, they force themselves to disqualify the work itself and those who give themselves to it as seems right to them. Such critics would easily fall to calling him a 'stomach psychic' who said: 'The law of God is in the middle of my stomach' (Ps. 39 : 9. LXX), and who confided to God: 'My belly will resonate like

¹ St Makarios, *Homilies XVI* : 7 xxxxxx.

a cithara, and what is in me like a brass wall which you crafted' (Is. 16 : 11. LXX). They englobe in the same accusation all those who represent, designate and investigate with corporeal symbols the things of the intellect, divine and spiritual things. By doing this they injure the life of stillness in no way. Rather they load them with blessing and multiply their crowns in heaven. And those who do this remain outside the sacred veil. They cannot even contemplate the shadows of the truth. And they should be worried that they will suffer in the eternal judgement, not only for being separate from the saints, but for having fought the saints with their words.

You know the life of **Symeon** the New Theologian. Almost all of it is miraculous, so much God glorified him with supernatural miracles. You also know his writings: if you call them 'writing of life', one would not veer far from the reality. You know **Nikiphoros** equally, this saint who passed long years in the desert in the life of stillness, then remained in the parts of the most desert parts of the Holy Mountain and, being consecrated to gather all the evidence of the Fathers, transmitted their practice of sobriety and of watchfulness. The one and the other taught those who chose this way which, as you have said, certain others reject.

And what do I say about the saints of other times? Of men who, a little time before ours, have witnessed and have proven that they had in them the power of the Holy Spirit, have transmitted to us things with their own mouths. Thus this renowned theologian of our days, this true theologian, the most pure contemplator of the truth of the mysteries of God, this **Theoliptos** 'who received from God', as his name indicates, I mean the bishop of Philadelphia, or perhaps better he who, like a chandelier, illumined the world. And that Athanasios who ornamented the patriarchal throne for many years, and whose tomb God honoured. And that Neilos, originally of Italy, the imitator of the great **Neilos**. And Seliotis and Ilias, who were in nothing inferior to him. And Gabriel and Athanasios, who were worthy judges of a prophetic charisma. It is of them assuredly that I want to speak, and of many others who were before them, with them and after them; I praise and exhort those who want to look on this tradition. As opposed to the new so called masters of the life of stillness, who do not know how to follow it, who seek to reject it, to deform it, to disqualify it, while admonishing others, not through their experience, but through their boasting, and without any profit for those who hear them (cf. 2 Tim. 2 : 14).

Now with these saints we have ourselves personally spoken, and they were our masters. How therefore can we characterise them as being of no value, men who received the instruction of experience and of grace, and gave place to those other men who teach with pride and so as to start disputes? This cannot be. You therefore, distance yourself from such men (cf. 2 Tim. 3 : 5), and say to yourself with David: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name' (Ps.

102 : 1. LXX). Let yourself be led by the Fathers, listen how they exhort you always to internalise the intellect.