

The Spiritual Life & the Five Senses

The Text: St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain: A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel.

The Author: Nicodemus (1749-1809) was a monk. He was the compiler/author of the 5 volume Philokalia. He re-worked Unseen Warfare. He was a compiler of the Rudder which is still one of the church's main sources for canon law. He published the worked of Symeon the New Theologian & Gregory of Palamas.

The Audience: This work on the five senses was prompted by a request of a cousin and bishop (Ierotheos) who wanted advice on how to remain faithful in his duties as a Bishop.

Setting: By the 18th and early 19th century, the Greeks had been living under Turkish rule since 1453 the fall of Constantinople. Learning was limited and religious life became "routine" and "formal."

I. Anthropology:

1. Mankind as a "Macro-cosmos" = *a greater world within the small one*

Man includes in his world both the visible and invisible: we are physical and spiritual.

"then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Genesis 2:7)."

Spiritual Counsel: "The Body as a Royal Palace"

"The body is likened to a royal palace built by the superb architectural skill of a Creator having infinite awareness, understanding and insight. This palace includes the "upper room" which is the head, the inner most chamber which is the heart; the messengers are the thoughts; the passageways which are the tube-like nerves; and the doors of this palace are the five senses. The mind (soul) must be understood as a sort of king who is upheld by the three more general powers, that of the spirit, of the mind, and of the will. This "king" is found in all parts of the body (p. 68)."

"St. John Damascene stated that the soul is found in the whole body as fire is found in the whole of a red-hot iron. He wrote that, 'the whole soul is joined to the whole body and not a part to a part; nor is the soul contained by the body, but rather it contains the body as fire contains iron.' (P. 68)

2. The Soul before & after Baptism

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with an ever-increasing glory (2 Cor. 3:18)."

"Before holy baptism, the soul. Being covered by the darkness of the ancestral sin, does not see clearly. But after holy Baptism the soul becomes all light, reflecting the supernatural light of divine grace (p. 68)."

3. The natural attributes of our Spiritual & Physical natures

A.) The Soul

“The natural and essential attribute of the soul (mind), because it is soul, is to always be preoccupied with the spiritual matters related to it; because it is immaterial with the immaterial...with what is truly good and to have only these good things nourish it (p. 69).”

B.) The body

“By contrast, the natural attribute of the body, because it is body, is to be inclined always to the bodily things; because it is physical to the physical; because it is material to the material. In one word the body is inclined to what is only pseudo-good and has these things for nourishment, growth, life and pleasure (p. 69).”

4. The difference between a Rational and an Irrational soul

“The irrational soul is led and ruled by the body and the senses, while the rational soul leads and rules the body and the senses. . .Man, however, being rational leads nature rather than being led by it. Thus when he would desire something, he has the authority either to overrule that desire or to follow it (St. John of Damascus).”

5. The Initial Purpose of the Senses:

“God has chosen to create the five senses of the body to serve as so many openings to the world around us. I am talking about the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, the mouth and the common sense of touch, through which the soul can generally receive unto itself primarily spiritual nurture and pleasure.” (p.70)

Wisdom of Solomon on the creation

“From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.” (Wis. 3:5)

St. Paul on the created world

“Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Rom 1:20).”

St. Peter on Holy Scripture

“No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:21).”

THE SENSES ARE MEANT TO BRING US IN COMMUNION WITH GOD!

II. THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE

A.) Human Development: Childhood

“The physical senses are complete and strong while the mind is not yet active...thus the mind, which is intended to rule, is made subservient to the senses. . . During the childhood period of about 15 years, when the mind (soul) is in a sort of stupor and led by the senses, the irrational and instinctive senses receive their fill of physical pleasure, as they are indulged without the restraint of reason. (p. 76).”

“Once the eyes become accustomed to looking passionately upon the mature beauty of living bodies; once the ear drums are accustomed to the pleasing sounds of certain songs; once the sense of smell is delighted by the fragrances of myrrh and aromatic things; once the tongue and the mouth taste or rather become accustomed to the rich and tasty foods; and finally, once the sense of touch is accustomed to fine and soft clothing- who will be able after that, even if one is most eloquent and persuasive, to convince people that what they have up to now enjoyed is not a true and rational pleasure, but on the contrary an irrational and temporal one? (p. 77).”

B.) The Attacks from our Adversary

“ . . . but the devil himself, who rules over the carnal pleasures, in turn excites the mind and the heart, and the senses even more. The holy Fathers have said that the devil, though bodiless, finds his pleasure in enjoying the bodily pleasures of men. And metaphorically speaking, these are but the dirt and the dust that he was condemned to eat through the serpent: “And dust you shall eat all the days of your life” (Gen 3:14) St. Gregory the Sinaite wrote on this point: “Humanly speaking, because the devils lost their angelic joy and were deprived of divine pleasure, they have acquired a sort of materialistic nature through their physical passions and suffer to eat, as we do, the dust of the earth (P. 78).”

III. THE VICTORY

“The soul (mind) cannot continue to be a co-prisoner with the senses and a contradiction: the king becoming a slave; the ruler becoming ruled; he who by nature is self-ruled and in authority becoming the obedient subject. The soul, cannot bear to receive such harm that will gradually bring it to annihilation and to hell (p. 79).”

1. Spiritual discipline/ the struggle for perfection

“At first it seeks (our soul) to show that it was created by God to be the ruler and the king of the body. That is to say, it seeks **through the assistance of divine grace** and all of its courage, all of its will, and all of its knowledge to uproot out of the senses of its body those long-standing and entrenched habits which they have acquired among physical things (p. 79).”

2. How are the senses liberated from physical passions and in turn placed under the obedience of the soul.?

Spiritual Counsel:

“When a certain king plans to subdue easily an enemy city that is fortified by strong walls, he cuts off the food supplies to those people in the city and thus causes them such hardship

that they in time decide to surrender themselves. The (mind) uses the same strategy in subduing the senses. Little by little, the mind deprives every sensory faculty of its customary bodily and pleasurable passions. It no longer permits them to indulge themselves and thus easily and in a short period of time brings them under its control. . .By receiving a certain ease and freedom from bodily concerns, the mind turns to its own natural and spiritual nourishment which is the reading of Sacred Scripture, the acquirement of virtues, the practice prayer, the understanding of the purposes of the physical and spiritual creations, and all the other spiritual and divine thoughts and deeds which are to be found in the writings of the holy Fathers (p. 79-80).”

3. Spiritual Counsel On True Pleasure:

a.) The souls now must lead the body

“The mind, now seeks purposely through the enjoyment of the immaterial and spiritual realities to uplift the body also from its physical heaviness, and in a sense to make it into spirit. St. Maximos: ‘When the soul is attracted against its vary nature toward matter through the body, it insinuates upon itself the earthly form. Knowing this, the saints seek to move toward God through the natural tendency of the soul, while at the same time they try appropriately to familiarize the body with God through the practice of virtues, hoping thus to beautify the body with divine outward appearances (p. 80).”

b.) Why the soul is joined to the body (St. Gregory the Theologian)

“One reason is that by struggling against the lower things, the soul may inherit eternal glory. . . The other reason is so that by drawing the lessor unto itself and to a degree releasing it from its material thickness, the soul may draw the body upward toward God. Thus, that which God is to the soul, the soul becomes to the body, instructing and guiding through itself its fellow servant, the material body, to become familiar with God.”

c.) The mutual interdependency between soul and body

“There is an interaction and mutual influence of the soul toward the body and vice versa the body toward the soul. . .The attributes of each communicate with each other because of the ineffable bond which unites the soul and the body, even though the exact reason for this union remains essentially unknown to all philosophers and theologians (p. 80).”

d.) The definition of true pleasure:

“What should be called true pleasure, namely that which by nature and reason cannot be condemned and which lasts and is ever more active, bringing joy and gladness to the heart even after it is fulfilled (p. 83).”

IV. GUARDING THE FIVE SENSES

1. Our Sense of vision:

The Spiritual dimension of the eyes:

A.) “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound your whole body will be full of darkness (Matt 6:22-23).”

St. Basil: “The eyes are two “bodiless arms with which the soul may reach out and touch from afar the visible things it loves. For whatever we cannot touch with our hands, these we can touch and enjoy with our eyes.

“anyone who looks at a woman (or a man) lustfully has already committed adultery with her (him) in his heart (Mat. 5:28).”

The Spiritual Counsel: “Cut-Off and Redirect”

“We must cut off the vision of those beautiful bodies which tempt the soul to shameful and inappropriate desires.”

a.) Be watchful of our sight

“Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you (Prv. 4:25).”

Plan of attack

Seek God’s Help-take refuge in prayer, “Deliverance comes only from the Lord (Ps 3:8).”

For extreme cases: peel away the skin and imagine what is under the skin.

The Liturgical Usage of Vision

A.) The Structure of the Church: Space, Form, Shape, Color - rhythm and order

2. The Sense of Hearing

A.) Listening to “slander” do not condemn others.

St. Basil: “Each slanderer is unjust to three persons: to himself for lying, to the hearers who may be misled and deceived, and to the person slandered for destroying his good reputation and honor.”

B.) Our Sense of Hearing during a celebration of Holy Communion.

* Hearing the Gospel/Encountering God through his living Word.

“Wisdom. Arise. Let us hear the holy Gospel. Peace be with all.”

*The “Kerygma” - Proclaiming the “Good News.” ie. Message of redemption offered freely by God.

* The Hymnology

* Melismatic Singing - in this form of music the melody takes precedence over the words being sung. Melismatic singing expresses the experience of worship as a real contact with the Divine reality of Gods’ Kingdom. The main hymn of this type of singing was the chanting of “**Alleluia/Praise God!**” This “expression” is an exclamation made in reaction to Gods’ very presence, His coming. It is sung because of Christ’s presence in the “Assembly of the Faithful” and his “opening up of the eyes of our hearts” and Now He Speaks!

*Psalmic Singing - the Chanting of Psalms, scriptures, and prayers

3. The Sense of Smell

A.) Spiritual Counsel to guard and keep pure:

“One must not be carried away by the fragrances of the perfumes, for they not only weaken the manly character of the soul and give it an effeminate air (unbecoming delicacy or over refinement), they also may incite the soul toward fornication and other moral licentiousness (p. 101).”

*** Changes in the body produce changes in the soul**

Biblical References to incense during liturgical celebrations

“And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. (Rev. 8:3-4)

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." (Isaiah 6:1-7)

Our Liturgical Prayers:

“The burning of incense expresses the creature’s adoration of the Creator and His holiness, present among the people (Fr. Schmemmann).”

“We offer You incense, Christ our God, as an offering of spiritual fragrance; receive it upon your heavenly altar and send down upon us the Grace of your Holy Spirit (Prayer for the blessing of the Censor).”

“That our loving God who has received them (the bread & wine our gifts) at His holy, heavenly and spiritual altar as an offering of spiritual fragrance, may in return send upon us divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit, let us pray (From the Divine Liturgy).”

St. Paul:

“The (Christians) are obliged by their very nature to exude a spiritual fragrance upon all those who approach them. St. Paul wrote: We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Cor 2:15) p. 104.”

Tradition:

“The odor of an ascetic monk living alone is most sweet, and to encounter him brings joy to the heart of those who have discernment (St. Isaac p. 103).”

4. The Sense of Taste

Spiritual Counsel

“Even though the sense of taste is fourth in line, I consider it to be first in terms of power. Be careful therefore to shut out of this door of your senses the negative effects of so many varieties of food. Avoid, then, the sumptuous meals. What are indeed the effects . . . greedy licking, satiety, and gluttony are the first . . . if we go deeper we find drunkenness, ravenous, obesity. . . if we go even deeper. . . fornication, homosexuality and virtually all of the carnal and irrational passions (p. 107).”

The Liturgical Tradition:

“A meal is still a rite- the last ‘natural sacrament’ of family and friendship, of life that is more than eating and drinking. To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that something more is, but they nonetheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for a sacramental life.” (Fr. Schmemmann, For the Life of the World, p. 16)

“O Taste and see that the Lord is good (Communion hymn, Psalm 34:8).”

- **Food is meant for communion with God and is not to be an end in itself.**
- **Fasting periods of the Church**
- **Monastic vegetarian diet**

5. The Sense of Touch

Spiritual Counsel:

“It is only right that the modesty and reverence that we feel when in a holy Temple be also felt for ourselves, since we are the temple of the living God. . . St. John Chrysostom taught also that our bodies are even more honorable and more revered than a temple. We are a living and rational temple. . . For this reason, then anyone who would dare to degrade the holy temple of his body by committing some sinful deed will in truth be more sinful than those who desecrate the most famous temple (2 Cor. 6:16).”