

Letter 46. Reading the Holy Fathers

by Archbishop Theophan

Archbishop Theophan emphasizes the importance of discerning reading of the Holy Fathers for spiritual guidance tailored to individual life circumstances.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 4:23, 2 Timothy 3:16, James 1:22, 1 Peter 2:2

Topics: "Spiritual Guidance", "Christian Discernment"

Description

Archbishop Theophan emphasizes the importance of reading the teachings of the Holy Fathers that are relevant to one's way of life, distinguishing between informative reading and spiritual guidance. He suggests that while one can read everything, for spiritual direction, it is crucial to choose readings suitable for one's lifestyle. The Ecumenical Fathers and teachers of the Church, such as Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom, are recommended for spiritual guidance, with the possibility of extracting rules for spiritual development from other Holy Fathers cautiously. Archbishop Theophan highlights the significance of discerning what to read and how to read, encouraging careful consideration of spiritual matters and the essence of Christian spiritual life.

Transcript

You write, "Bishop Ignatius says: 'It is absolutely essential to read the teachings (of the Holy Fathers) that are relevant to one's way of life.' What does this mean? Should one limit one's reading of the Holy Fathers to those teachings pronounced for all of Christianity or can one read other teachings as well, such as, for example, those which discuss coenobitic life in monasteries?" My answer is the following. One must differentiate reading which is merely informative from that which guides one in spiritual matters.

Generally speaking, one may read everything. But for guidance in spiritual matters, one must choose that reading which is appropriate to one's way of life. The best spiritual directors for Christians dwelling in the world are those whom we call the Ecumenical Fathers and teachers of the Church: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom, and among the Russians, St. Tikhon of Zadonsk. One may extract rules to guide one's spiritual development from other Holy Fathers and teachers of the Church as well.

This must, however, be done with care. In particular, one must heed everything that is written about spiritual matters. We need not always heed their instruction on personal matters in so far as they are peculiar to a certain place or time. The works of St. Macarius of Egypt, for example, in so far as they disclose the essence of Christian spiritual life "in general," can play a significant role in the guidance of

any Christian. The works of St. Isaac the Syrian, on the other hand, since they focus on the spiritual life of a recluse, cannot have this sort of significance for any Christian.

This is partly true of the works of St. Symeon the Theologian also. Consequently, in this situation it is particularly important to talk not so much about whom one should read, as about how one should read whom. A discriminating reader can read everything, but a careless person should either read under the guidance of one who is discriminating or, in the absence of any such person, he should at first limit himself to reading the Ecumenical Fathers and teachers of the Church.

I will conclude this discussion with the words of the Muscovite hierarch Philaret: "For what reasons has the Lord illuminated the heavens of the Church with such a multitude of Orthodox Saints, the way he illuminated the earthly heavens with a multitude of stars, for what reason other than so that each of us could, at our convenience and according to our needs, receive their light and guidance on his path to heaven? Is there someone whose obedience it is to preserve the Holy Faith from lapsing into unorthodox practices?"

Let him find a model and guide for himself in the lives and words of instructors like Athanasius and Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom. Has someone chosen a life of isolation and great devotion to God and prayer? Let him vicariously reenact, through books and legends, both anchoritic and coenobitic spiritual life, and let him observe, even if from afar, the footsteps of the great ascetics, such as Anthony, Macarius, Pachomius, Ephraim and many others who have followed their path through the centuries.

Does God's Providence test someone's faith with deprivation and misery? Let him strengthen his conviction by the example of Job, who in deprivation and suffering did not cease to bless the Name of the Lord. Does someone worry about how he can be worthy and live in the faith in the midst of wealth and abundance? Let him behold the life of Abraham, who was humble and compliant, virtuous, a deliverer of those in misery, who was loving to strangers and hospitable to the Angels and to God.

If someone has been overthrown by passions and vices, he, too, will be shown hope and how to rise from the abyss by the thief who was saved on the cross and by others like him: Moses Murin, Mary of Egypt, and the many who were saved after falling into sin, who became Saints after being profoundly corrupt (Homily in commemoration of St. Sergius).

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