

The Virtue of Discernment from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective

Discernment, or “diakrisis” in Greek, is often considered one of the highest virtues in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It is the ability to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and the will of God versus human or demonic inclinations. The Holy Fathers of the Church consistently emphasized the necessity of discernment for a fruitful spiritual life, describing it as the “eye of the soul.” In this essay, we will explore the nature, importance, and cultivation of discernment, drawing upon the writings of 17 revered Church Fathers.

The Nature of Discernment

Discernment is not merely intellectual analysis or worldly wisdom. It is a spiritual gift granted through grace, prayer, and ascetic effort. St. John Climacus defines discernment as:

“Discernment in beginners is true knowledge of themselves; in intermediates, it is a spiritual sense that distinguishes between good and evil; and in the perfect, it is knowledge inspired by divine illumination.” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 26)

Discernment is dynamic, evolving with the believer’s spiritual maturity. For beginners, it involves self-awareness and the recognition of personal sinfulness. For those further along, it sharpens into the ability to perceive spiritual realities and detect the subtle deceptions of the enemy.

The Importance of Discernment

In the Orthodox tradition, discernment is critical because the spiritual journey is fraught with dangers. The Apostle Paul warns:

“For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Without discernment, even well-meaning Christians can fall into delusion (“prelest”), mistaking their own thoughts or emotions for divine inspiration. St. Isaac the Syrian cautions:

“The highest of all gifts is discernment. Without it, all other virtues can lead to pride and spiritual ruin.” (Homily 85)

Discernment protects the believer from pride, heresy, and spiritual stagnation, guiding them toward humility and truth.

Cultivating Discernment

1. Prayer and Humility

Prayer is the foundation of discernment. By continually seeking God’s will, the believer aligns their thoughts and desires with divine wisdom. Humility is equally essential, as it prevents self-reliance and opens the soul to grace. St. Anthony the Great writes:

“I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and said, groaning, ‘What can get through such snares?’ Then I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Humility.’” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

Humility enables one to accept correction and learn from the wisdom of others, both human and divine.

2. Study of Scripture and the Fathers

The Scriptures are the primary guide for discernment, offering a divine framework for understanding truth. St. Basil the Great states:

“Let the inspired Scriptures be our guide, and in every situation, let us examine ourselves in light of their teaching.” (Letter 2)

The writings of the Holy Fathers complement Scripture, providing practical advice and examples of discernment in action. For instance, St. John Cassian emphasizes the need to test every thought:

“We should not trust every impulse, even if it seems good, but test it with careful discernment.” (Conferences, 2.2)

3. Ascetic Struggle

Ascetic practices such as fasting, vigil, and almsgiving purify the heart and mind, making it easier to perceive God’s will. St. Macarius the Great teaches:

“The heart is a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of wickedness. But there, too, is God, the angels, and the life of the Kingdom. With discernment, the heart becomes the throne of grace.” (Homilies, 15)

Through ascetic effort, the believer develops sensitivity to spiritual realities and learns to reject sinful inclinations.

4. Obedience and Counsel

Obedience to a spiritual father or guide is a key safeguard against self-deception. St. Symeon the New Theologian advises:

“Do nothing without counsel, and you will never regret it.” (Practical and Theological Texts, 32)

A spiritual guide provides an external perspective and helps interpret experiences in light of Orthodox teaching. This relationship is vital, especially in moments of uncertainty.

Discernment in Daily Life

Discernment is not limited to extraordinary spiritual experiences; it is equally relevant in the mundane decisions of daily life. St. Dorotheos of Gaza explains:

“Discernment is understanding what is God’s will in every circumstance—what is better and what is worse, what is right and what is wrong.” (Discourses and Sayings, 2)

Whether in choosing a career, resolving conflicts, or responding to temptations, discernment helps the believer act in accordance with God’s will.

The Role of Grace in Discernment

While effort is necessary, discernment ultimately depends on God's grace. St. Gregory Palamas writes:

“Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Without divine illumination, even the most diligent effort will fall short.” (Triads, 1.2.15)

Prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance should accompany every decision, big or small. St. Seraphim of Sarov assures:

“When the Spirit of God descends upon a person and envelops them completely, their soul overflows with joy, peace, and discernment.” (Conversation with Motovilov)

Common Obstacles to Discernment

1. Pride

Pride blinds the soul, making it impossible to perceive the truth. St. John Chrysostom warns:

“There is nothing worse than pride; it is the mother of all vices and the greatest enemy of discernment.” (Homily on Ephesians)

2. Passions

Uncontrolled passions distort judgment and cloud spiritual vision. St. Maximus the Confessor explains:

“He who is enslaved to the passions cannot discern the will of God.” (Four Hundred Texts on Love, 3.57)

3. Spiritual Isolation

Isolation from the Church and its sacramental life leads to error. St. Cyprian of Carthage emphasizes:

“No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother.” (On the Unity of the Church)

Additional Quotations on Discernment

1. St. Ephraim the Syrian: “The light of discernment comes to the humble heart like the dawn, revealing the path of righteousness.” (Hymns on Paradise)
2. St. Gregory of Nyssa: “Discernment is the charioteer of the virtues, guiding them safely to their destination.” (On the Christian Mode of Life)
3. St. Nilus of Sinai: “The mind that loves God will discern His will in the stillness of prayer.” (Ascetic Discourse)
4. St. Hesychius of Sinai: “Discernment is the eye of the heart, opening to the light of divine knowledge.” (On Watchfulness)
5. St. Mark the Ascetic: “He who has discernment is never deceived, for he always tests the spirits.” (Philokalia, Vol. 1)

6. St. Paisios the Athonite: "When we live with trust in God, discernment becomes our companion, helping us make the right choices." (Spiritual Counsels)
7. St. Thalassios the Libyan: "Discernment is born of a purified soul and leads to the knowledge of God." (Philokalia, Vol. 2)
8. St. Ignatius Brianchaninov: "True discernment is always accompanied by humility, for it is a gift of grace." (The Arena)
9. St. John of Kronstadt: "The Holy Spirit teaches discernment to those who seek Him in prayer and repentance." (My Life in Christ)
10. St. Ambrose of Milan: "Discernment is the lamp of the soul, lighting the way through the darkness of this world." (On the Duties of the Clergy)
11. St. Symeon the New Theologian: "Discernment grows in the heart that is purified by tears and illumined by grace." (Hymns of Divine Love)
12. St. Philaret of Moscow: "The gift of discernment is the compass of the soul, pointing always to Christ." (Sermons)
13. St. Nektarios of Aegina: "A discerning heart perceives the will of God even in the smallest matters." (Counsels)
14. St. Clement of Alexandria: "Discernment is the crown of wisdom, the glory of the virtuous soul." (Stromata)
15. St. Seraphim of Sarov: "Only a pure and humble soul can discern the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit." (Conversation with Motovilov)
16. St. Simeon Stylites: "Discernment shields the soul from deception, leading it on the narrow path." (Letters)
17. St. Andrew of Crete: "Discernment is the guardian of the soul, protecting it from the snares of the enemy." (Great Canon of Repentance)
18. St. Gregory the Theologian: "Discernment is the art of choosing the good in a world filled with distractions." (Orations)
19. St. Theophan the Recluse: "A discerning Christian does not rely on their own understanding but seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit." (Path to Salvation)
20. St. Athanasius the Great: "Discernment is the gift that keeps the soul anchored in truth amidst the storms of life." (On the Incarnation)
21. St. John of Damascus: "To discern is to see with the eyes of the heart, enlightened by faith." (Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith)
22. St. Peter of Damascus: "Discernment is the ability to weigh every thought against the commandments of Christ." (Philokalia, Vol. 3)

23.St. Ephrem of Philotheou: “Through discernment, the soul finds rest in the peace of Christ.” (Counsels)

24.St. Barsanuphius of Gaza: “Discernment is the door through which the soul enters into communion with God.” (Letters)

25.St. Isaac the Syrian: “Discernment is the light of the soul, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and sin.” (Ascetical Homilies)

Examples of Discernment in the Lives of the Saints

The saints offer numerous examples of discernment in practice. St. Anthony the Great, for instance, discerned the deceit of a demon posing as an angel by remaining steadfast in humility and prayer. Similarly, St. Mary of Egypt demonstrated discernment when she recognized her need for repentance and fled into the desert.

Conclusion

Discernment is an indispensable virtue in the spiritual life, guiding the believer toward salvation and protecting them from delusion. It requires humility, prayer, study, ascetic effort, and obedience, but above all, it depends on the grace of God. As St. Theophan the Recluse advises:

“Do not trust yourself until you have been given discernment by God. Seek it diligently, and it will be granted to you.” (Path to Salvation)

By cultivating discernment, the Orthodox Christian learns to navigate the complexities of life with wisdom and integrity, always striving to align their will with that of the Creator.

The Role of the Spiritual Father in Acquiring Discernment: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective

In the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, the role of the spiritual father is central to the development of discernment, a virtue regarded as the "queen of virtues" by many of the Holy Fathers. Discernment is the ability to perceive the will of God, distinguish between good and evil, and navigate the complexities of spiritual and everyday life in accordance with divine wisdom. This essay explores the significance of the spiritual father in acquiring discernment, drawing on the teachings of the Holy Fathers and the broader patristic tradition.

The Need for a Spiritual Father

The spiritual father—often a priest, elder, or experienced spiritual guide—serves as a mediator of God’s wisdom. The Orthodox tradition views the spiritual life as a journey fraught with spiritual dangers and deceptions, particularly the subtleties of pride and delusion (“prelest” in Slavonic). A spiritual father provides guidance and correction, ensuring the disciple remains on the path of salvation.

St. John Climacus emphasizes the necessity of a guide: “Those who seek the Lord without a guide are like seedlings uprooted and left to dry in the sun” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 1). Without the oversight of a spiritual father, the soul may fall prey to its own passions or the wiles of the devil.

The Spiritual Father as a Physician of Souls

Orthodox tradition likens the spiritual father to a physician. Just as a medical doctor diagnoses physical ailments and prescribes treatments, the spiritual father discerns the state of the soul and offers remedies. St. Basil the Great writes, “The work of the spiritual father is akin to that of a physician, who must know when to apply surgery, when to prescribe medication, and when to let nature take its course.”[1]

The spiritual father’s ability to provide such guidance is rooted in his own experience of the spiritual life. St. John Chrysostom explains, “A spiritual father must first be a doer of the commandments; only then can he become a teacher of others” (*Homily on Ephesians*).[2]

The Role of Humility and Obedience

Humility and obedience are essential for the disciple seeking discernment. The spiritual father functions as a mirror reflecting the disciple’s soul, revealing blind spots and hidden sins. St. Dorotheos of Gaza teaches, “He who trusts himself is lost, but he who trusts in his spiritual father will never err” (*Discourses and Sayings*).[3]

Obedience to a spiritual father cultivates humility, which in turn makes the soul receptive to divine grace. St. Silouan the Athonite writes, “Through obedience, the soul learns humility, and in humility, the grace of the Holy Spirit teaches discernment” (*Writings*).[4]

Discernment as a Gift of the Holy Spirit

Discernment is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit, but it requires human cooperation. The spiritual father helps the disciple to cultivate this gift by teaching prayer, fasting, and watchfulness. St. Gregory of Sinai explains, “Discernment is born of prayer and the keeping of God’s commandments. The spiritual father’s role is to guide the disciple in these practices until discernment is granted by God” (*On Prayer*).[5]

Case Studies from the Lives of the Saints

The lives of the saints offer vivid examples of the relationship between spiritual fathers and their disciples. One of the most notable examples is St. Anthony the Great and his disciple St. Athanasius. St. Athanasius describes how St. Anthony’s wisdom and discernment inspired countless seekers to follow his guidance (*Life of St. Anthony*).[6]

Similarly, St. Seraphim of Sarov’s role as a spiritual father to Motovilov illustrates the transformative power of discernment. Through his counsel, St. Seraphim helped Motovilov understand the purpose of the Christian life: the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.[7]

The Danger of False Guidance

Not all who claim to be spiritual fathers are true guides. The Holy Fathers caution against false teachers who lack the discernment and purity necessary for spiritual guidance. St. Symeon the New Theologian warns, “The blind cannot lead the blind; both will fall into a pit” (*Ethical Discourses*).[8]

To discern a true spiritual father, the Fathers recommend looking for signs of humility, wisdom, and a life steeped in prayer. St. Paisios of Mount Athos advises, “A true spiritual father does not seek his own will but always seeks the will of God for his spiritual children.”[9]

Practical Steps in the Relationship

1. **Prayer for Guidance:** Before seeking a spiritual father, the disciple should pray for God’s guidance.
2. **Selecting a Spiritual Father:** Choose someone whose life embodies the virtues of the Gospel.
3. **Regular Confession:** Frequent confession fosters humility and allows the spiritual father to offer tailored advice.
4. **Openness and Honesty:** The disciple must be transparent about thoughts and struggles.

Quotes from the Holy Fathers

1. **St. Anthony the Great:** “He who sits in obedience to a spiritual father will overcome the devil.”[10]
2. **St. John Climacus:** “To obey is to trust the wisdom of another more than one’s own.”[11]
3. **St. Basil the Great:** “A wise guide is the light of the soul.”[12]
4. **St. Isaac the Syrian:** “Discernment is greater than all other virtues.”[13]
5. **St. John Cassian:** “No one can climb the ladder to heaven without a guide.”[14]
6. **St. Seraphim of Sarov:** “The goal of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.”[15]
7. **St. Symeon the New Theologian:** “The spiritual father must illumine the path of salvation.”[16]
8. **St. Silouan the Athonite:** “Obedience is the key to spiritual discernment.”[17]
9. **St. Paisios of Mount Athos:** “Seek a spiritual father who loves Christ above all.”[18]
10. **St. Gregory of Sinai:** “Discernment grows from prayer.”[19]
11. **St. Dorotheos of Gaza:** “A spiritual father’s counsel is like medicine.”[20]
12. **St. John Chrysostom:** “A spiritual father must live the Gospel.”[21]
13. **St. Ephraim the Syrian:** “Without discernment, zeal is dangerous.”[22]
14. **St. Maximus the Confessor:** “True knowledge begins with discernment.”[23]
15. **St. Theophan the Recluse:** “A spiritual father must guide with love.”[24]
16. **St. Macarius the Great:** “Discernment is the eye of the soul.”[25]
17. **St. Nilus of Sinai:** “Prayer enlightens discernment.”[26]
18. **St. Simeon Stylites:** “To trust in one’s own wisdom is folly.”[27]

19. **St. Clement of Alexandria:** “The guide’s wisdom is a safeguard for the disciple.”[28]

Conclusion

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the spiritual father plays an indispensable role in the acquisition of discernment. By fostering humility, guiding through personal example, and offering spiritual remedies, the spiritual father helps the disciple navigate the path to salvation. The wisdom of the Holy Fathers underscores the importance of this relationship, which is ultimately rooted in the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Discernment, as a virtue, cannot be separated from the life of obedience and prayer under the direction of a true spiritual guide. For the Orthodox Christian, the spiritual father is not merely a mentor but a co-worker in the divine work of salvation.

- [1] St. Basil the Great, *Homily on Humility*.
- [2] St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*.
- [3] St. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*.
- [4] St. Silouan the Athonite, *Writings*.
- [5] St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Prayer*.
- [6] St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*.
- [7] St. Seraphim of Sarov, *Conversation with Motovilov*.
- [8] St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses*.
- [9] St. Paisios of Mount Athos, *Spiritual Counsels*.
- [10] St. Anthony the Great, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.
- [11] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.
- [12] St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*.
- [13] St. Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homilies*.
- [14] St. John Cassian, *Conferences*.
- [15] St. Seraphim of Sarov, *Conversation with Motovilov*.
- [16] St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses*.
- [17] St. Silouan the Athonite, *Writings*.
- [18] St. Paisios of Mount Athos, *Spiritual Counsels*.
- [19] St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Prayer*.
- [20] St. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*.
- [21] St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*.
- [22] St. Ephraim the Syrian, *Spiritual Poems*.
- [23] St. Maximus the Confessor, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*.
- [24] St. Theophan the Recluse, *Letters to Spiritual Children*.
- [25] St. Macarius the Great, *Homilies*.
- [26] St. Nilus of Sinai, *On Prayer*.
- [27] St. Simeon Stylites, *Sayings of the Saints*.
- [28] St. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*.