

The 6th Form of Bodily Discipline: St. Peter of Damascus



St. Peter of Damaskos, a monastic father from the 11th or 12th century AD. He is known almost exclusively from his extensive, lucid, and very valuable writings in the Philokalia, where he provides a wealth of information on the spiritual life in a very readable style.

Icon of St. Peter of Damascus, author of theological texts in the Philokalia

From "A Treasury of Divine Knowledge", "The Seven Forms of Bodily Discipline," by St. Peter of Damaskos

in

G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, K. Ware, editors,

The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, Vol. 3., Faber & Faber, Inc., Winchester, MA, 1984, pp. 91-92.

[Note: The 11th-12th century monastic writer St. Peter of Damascus gives us a wealth of information on the deep spiritual life of Orthodox Christians, and

especially of monks. Here is an excerpt from his "Treasury of Divine Knowledge" from the Philokalia which concerns spiritual knowledge from reading. [There is the wisdom of experience here.]

"The sixth form of discipline consists in reading the writings and lives of the fathers, paying no attention to strange doctrines, or to other people, especially heretics. In this way we learn from the divine Scriptures and from the discrimination of the fathers how to conquer the passions and acquire the virtues. Our intellects will be filled with the thoughts of the Holy Spirit, and we will forget the unseemly words and conceptions to which we gave our attention before we became monks. Moreover, through deep communion in prayer and reading we will be able to grasp precious meanings: for prayer is helped by reading in stillness, and reading is helped by pure prayer, so long as we attend to what is being said and do not read or recite carelessly. It is true, however, that we cannot properly understand the full significance of what we read because of the darkness induced by the passions; our presumption often leads us astray, especially when we rely on the wisdom of this world which we think we possess, and do not realize that we need knowledge based on experience to understand these things, and that if we wish to attain knowledge of God mere reading or listening is not enough. For reading and listening are one thing and experience is another. One cannot become a craftsman simply by hearsay: one has to practice, and watch, and make numerous mistakes, and be corrected by those with experience so that through long perseverance and by eliminating one's own desires one eventually masters the art. Similarly, spiritual knowledge is not acquired simply through study but is given by God through grace to the humble. That a person on reading the Scriptures may think that he partially understands their meaning need cause no surprise, especially if that person is at the stage of ascetic practice. But he does not possess the knowledge of God; he simply hears the words of those who do possess the knowledge. Writers like the prophets often did indeed possess divine knowledge, but as yet the ordinary reader does not. So it is in my own case: I have collected material from the Holy Scriptures, but have not been found worthy of learning directly from the Holy Spirit; I have learnt only from those who did learn directly from the Holy Spirit. It is like learning about a person or a city from those who have actually seen them."