

## St. Peter of Damaskos: The Two Kinds of Faith



*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*

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by St. Peter of Damaskos

in

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Inc., Winchester, MA, 1984, pp. 213-216.

St. Paul said that faith was the basis of all actions that conform to God's will, and that we have received it through holy baptism by the grace of Christ and not through works (cf. Col. 1:23; Rom. 11:6). According to St. Isaac [the Syrian], this is the first kind of faith, and it engenders the fear that is inherent in it. Such fear leads us to keep the commandments and patiently to endure trials and temptations, as St. Maximos [the Confessor] has explained. Then, after we have begun to act in this way, a second kind of faith is born in us, the great faith of contemplation, to which the Lord was referring when He said: 'If you have faith as a mustard seed...nothing will be impossible for you' (Matt. 17:20). Thus there is, first, the ordinary faith of all Orthodox Christians, that is to say, correct doctrinal belief concerning God and His creation, both visible and invisible, as the Holy Catholic Church, by God's grace, has received it; and there is, second, the faith of contemplation or spiritual knowledge, which is not in any way opposed to the first kind of faith; on the contrary, the first gives birth to the second, while the second strengthens the first.

We acquire the first kind of faith through hearing about it, inheriting it from devout parents and teachers of the Orthodox faith; but the second is engendered in us by our true belief and by our fear of the Lord in whom we have come to believe. For because of this fear we have chosen to keep the commandments and so have resolved to practice the virtues that pertain to the body--stillness, fasting, moderate vigils, psalmody, prayer, spiritual reading, and the questioning of those with experience about all our thoughts, words, or undertakings. We practice these virtues so that the body may be purified of the worst passions -- gluttony, unchastity and superfluous possessions -- and so that we may be content with what we have, as the apostle puts it (cf. Heb. 13:5).

It is in this way that a man finds the strength to devote himself undistractedly to God. He learns from the Scriptures and from people of experience about divine doctrines and commandments, and he begins to reject the rest of the eight leading passions. Perceiving the punishments that threaten man, he is not merely afraid of God: he fears Him as God, in the words of St. Nilos. As a consequence of this fear he begins to keep the commandments with true knowledge of why he does so. And the more he endures voluntary death for the sake of each commandment, the more he enters into greater knowledge and contemplates what is taking place in himself through the grace of Christ.

As a result he comes to believe that the Orthodox faith is truly glorious, and he begins to long to do God's will. He no longer has any doubts about God's help, but 'casts his burden upon the Lord' (Ps. 55:22). As St. Basil the Great says, he who wishes to acquire the higher kind of faith should not worry about his own life or death: even if faced by a wild beast or attacked by demons or evil men, he should not be at all afraid, since he knows that they are all the creatures of a single Creator and are co-servants with him, and would have no power against him if God did not allow it. He should fear God alone, for He alone has power.