



# Spiritual Guidance on Mount Athos

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## Introduction

Spiritual guidance is the serious business of Mount Athos, the principal service that the Fathers offer to each other and to the world. Athonites have been purveyors of spiritual guidance for more than a thousand years in a tradition that goes back to the fourth-century desert fathers. The recent monastic renewal on the Mountain is testimony to the Fathers' continuing power to attract disciples and pilgrims to listen to what they have to say. The papers included in this volume examine some of the many aspects of this venerable tradition, as it has developed on Mount Athos, and as it has devolved upon monks and nuns, spiritual fathers and confessors, lay men and women, in other parts of Greece and in the world.

In an introductory chapter Metropolitan Kallistos Ware asks the question, 'what do we mean by spiritual guidance?' It is not about rules, it is about persons. What the spiritual father (or mother) offers is not a set of inflexible rules but a personal relationship founded upon love. He must above all be a good listener, sometimes in silence, *creative* silence. He is the physician who offers healing, not only by his words, but by his example and by his prayers. He shares the burdens of his spiritual children and is their soul-friend, but there can be no spiritual guidance without compassionate love.

Archimandrite Ephraim, hegoumenos of St Andrew's skete on Mount Athos, continues the introductory theme by describing what is meant by 'spiritual fatherhood on the Holy Mountain'. As Christians it is our privilege to address God as 'Our Father', as Christ himself taught us. But we may call other people 'father', starting with Abraham who is the spiritual father of us all. The grace to forgive sins is passed down from Christ through the Apostolic Fathers to bishops and priests who by the laying on of hands are empowered to serve the sacraments. Without this ceremony priests cannot

forgive sins, but on Athos not all the priests are also spiritual fathers and confessors, nor are all the monks priests. The Athonite pilgrim is not necessarily looking for a priest or an abbot but a Spirit-bearer or elder who can guide him to Christ. Such blessed elders are traditionally simple monks, such as St Silouan or Elder Joseph the Hesychast or Elder Paisios. They acted as elders to other elders, for even spiritual fathers need a spiritual father.

In his second paper Metropolitan Kallistos examines what the *Philokalia* has to say about the need for spiritual guidance. It is in fact one of the unifying threads that runs through the whole work. The care of other men's souls, says St Nilos, is the hardest thing of all; it is 'the art of arts'. The true elder, he says, is not self-appointed but is sought out by others; he needs experience and he should teach more by example than by his words; and he should remember that ultimately the only true spiritual guide is Christ himself. St Peter of Damaskos repeats the theme that the spiritual father acts in the place of Christ and emphasizes the importance of disclosing not just sins but thoughts, catching them before they have become sins. Symeon the New Theologian reiterates the teaching of his predecessors and, because the elder represents Christ, insists on complete obedience. He was writing for monks but he believed that laymen as well as monks could have a spiritual father. St Paisy Velichkovsky was taught that obedience was the essence of monasticism and for a long time he searched in vain for a spiritual father. He insisted that monks should submit to their spiritual father in all things and should confess their thoughts daily. In the absence of an elder, the disciple may seek the counsel of a spiritual brother; or as St Nil Sorsky advises, if a teacher cannot be found, then we should turn to the Scriptures and listen to the Lord Himself.

In a paper entitled 'spiritual guidance in Mount Athos and Russia and the theological notion of person', the twin brothers Methody and Kirill Zinkovskiy, both priest-monks from St Petersburg, consider the great importance in spiritual guidance of the theological notion of the divine and human person. Their main thesis is that it is only through the person and personal communion that the guidance patterns found in the Bible and in the holy tradition of asceticism can be understood. Various examples of the influence of the ascetic tradition of Mount Athos on Russian and European religious revivals are highlighted in the framework of personal guidance.

St Paisy Velichkovsky, the Optina elders, St Silouan, and Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), all of whom derived a rich experience from the Athonite treasures, are vivid exemplars of personal spiritual guidance in the Orthodox tradition. Due to its personal character this guidance possesses unique characteristics which distinguish it from other guidance experiences and techniques used in various human activities.

In a paper that looks to the future as much as to the past, Fr Maximos of Simonopetra writes about the phenomenon of charismatic eldership on Athos. It was the presence of a large number of charismatic elders that inspired the Mountain's renewal in the latter part of the twentieth century. Fr Maximos focuses his attention on just one of them, Elder Aimilianos, who was abbot of Simonopetra from 1974 to 2000. Tonsured a monk in 1960, the young Aimilianos was placed by his bishop in the monastery of St Vissarion in Thessaly where he had a life-changing religious experience. One night he was granted a mystical vision of the glorious light of God which inundated him and everything around him at the hour of the Liturgy. The progress of the vision, from darkness to light, from the cell to the Liturgy, became the basis for his reorganization of monastic life. Transformed overnight from a young monk to a charismatic elder, he decided that each monk was now to spend several hours in his cell practising the Jesus Prayer in preparation for the sacramental encounter with God in the Liturgy. The monk's nightly rule of prayer was expanded into a vigil of four to six hours and was followed by a daily, communal celebration of the Divine Liturgy. By introducing the spirit of hesychasm into the rhythm of a cenobitic monastery Aimilianos was setting the pattern for a renewal that was to overtake the whole of Athos. Most of the architects of that renewal have now left the stage, leaving their successors to wonder who will take their place. But what Elder Aimilianos offered was a spiritual education in a spirit of exceptional freedom, and it is this balance between freedom and community that attracts young people today and is likely to continue to resonate with future generations.

Fr Liviu Barbu is not a monastic but a married priest from Romania serving an Orthodox parish in Norwich. He is therefore well qualified to write about 'spiritual fatherhood in the world'. A spiritual father, he writes, is an icon of the Good Shepherd, a true disciple of our Father in

heaven, entrusted with the task of translating God's love and care into the life of the Church and of each Christian. Spiritual fatherhood is not just for monastics: it is open to all, single or married, man or woman, child or adult; but the monastic spiritual father did grow into a towering figure, a prophet who knows the mind of God and the hearts of men, and charismatic leadership is still the most revered virtue in the spirituality of the desert. Spiritual fatherhood may have grown out of the early Christian practice of confession of sins and, though they are distinct, the two complement each other. The purpose of spiritual direction is to heal the wounds of sin. It therefore comprises sacramental as well as charismatic elements and is, in the view of the Church Fathers, the essence of priesthood. In the writings of the Fathers obedience is considered one of the principal Christian virtues and obedience is manifested in the advice of the spiritual father. Few people are good judges of themselves. It is through our spiritual father that we learn to see our true self, and it is in communion with him that we accomplish our spiritual journey. The spiritual father does not demand total submission but rather offers advice in the form of an open dialogue, and so he is to be regarded as a fellow traveller or 'soul-friend' on the road to perfection.

Fr Andreas Andreopoulos is also a priest serving a parish in the UK as well as being Reader in Orthodox Christianity at the University of Winchester, but he writes about 'the challenges of spiritual guidance' in his native Greece. Athos, as he reminds us, holds a position of special authority, especially since its recent revival, but nowhere in Greece is far from an active monastery and these monasteries operate like a network of 'spiritual hospitals' throughout the country. The individual monk has no such special authority: any authority that he does have is defined by his obedience, his humility, and his asceticism. The monk and the layman are governed by the same spiritual principles and share the same spiritual struggle: through their need for each other spiritual guidance can be seen to flow in both directions and can sometimes contradict the natural order and hierarchy, as is demonstrated in the stories of the nineteenth-century Greek writer Alexandros Papadiamantis. Most pilgrims do not go to Athos to find the intellectual solution to theological problems but to participate, if only for a few days, in the liturgical life of the monastery. The latter may

well lead on to an experience of spiritual guidance, which the former will not. There was a fragmentation of Greek society in the twentieth century which compromised the parish structure and resulted in the emergence of a number of para-ecclesiastical organizations such as *Zoi* and *Sotir*. Spiritual guidance has suffered in the same way as the parish structure and there is now a greater need for it in Greece than ever before. The resurgence of monasticism may indicate a way forward, but it is noticeable that the new generation of monastics has found more spiritual nourishment in the works of Papadiamantis than in the pietistic pamphlets circulated by organizations such as *Zoi* and *Sotir*.

Sister Theoktisti, by contrast, has migrated from her native England to Greece where she is a nun of the monastery of St John the Forerunner on Mount Ossa. Her paper on 'the renewal of women's monasticism in the twentieth century' begins with a summary of the history of the Church of Greece in the previous century when monasticism was all but stamped out and over 500 monasteries dissolved. The revival of women's monasticism in the last sixty years owes much to the work of St Nektarios whose monastery on Aegina was founded on Athonite principles. He formed a particularly close bond with Elder Daniel of Katounakia, but other Athonite elders have inspired and supported women's monasteries in other parts of Greece, and many such monasteries have placed themselves under the spiritual direction of Athonite spiritual fathers. The paper ends by identifying six basic principles on which monasticism is grounded. The essence of monastic spirituality is to enter into the love of God and of our neighbour. Cenobitic monasticism provides the context in which monastics work out how to love and be loved, and to elevate that love to a participation in divine love.