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Death & the Future Life Pages...

## The Taxing of Souls

by Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos)

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Also related to the foregoing is the teaching of both Holy Scripture and the holy Fathers about the taxing of souls. At this point we shall examine the subject thoroughly, as it has a bearing on the terrible mystery of death. We find this topic in the whole biblico-patristic tradition and it corresponds to a reality which we need to look at in order to prepare ourselves for the dreadful hour of death. What follows is written not in order to arouse anxiety, but to prompt repentance, which has joy as its result. For he who has the gift of the Holy Spirit and is united with Christ avoids the terrible presence and activity of the customs demons.

According to the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, the soul at its departure from the body, as well as when it is preparing to leave, senses the presence of the demons who are called customs demons, and is possessed with fear because of having to pass through customs.

Of course we must say from the start that the customs demons have no sovereignty over the righteous, those who have united with Christ. The righteous not only will not go through "customs-houses", but they will also not be in fear of that. We shall see all this better when we compare the teaching of the Fathers. The characterisation of the soul's passage through the demons as customs is taken from the tax collectors of that time. We may look briefly at this subject in order to understand why the Fathers characterise the soul's passage through the demons as customs.

In ancient times the name of tax gatherer was given to those who purchased the public taxes from the State and then collected them from the people" [48]. The tax gatherers were divided into two classes. The first class comprised the so-called "publicans ('confiscators') or tithe collectors", who were the wealthiest class and the force of authority, and the second comprised the "tax collectors". The publicans were the general public collectors, who had bought the taxes from the State, while the tax collectors were their salaried servants, who collected the taxes from the people and gave them to the publicans.

The tax collectors were unjust because they collected larger taxes than had to be paid to their masters. That is why they had a very bad reputation in ancient communities. Plato said that the tax collectors were oppressive, not so much when they collected duties from the visible imports, "but when in looking for what was hidden they meddled in other people's equipment and freight". Therefore when Theocritus was asked what were the fiercest beasts, he answered: "in the mountains, bears and lions, and in the cities, tax collectors and sycophants".



The tax collectors, in their effort to collect as many taxes as they could—and especially in order not to let some people escape who could not accept the very heavy and unjust tax—contrived various means: they would lie in wait in narrow roads and seize passers-by, forcing them to give what they owed. It was very unpleasant and odious to the people of that time.

It is just this familiar and odious image which the Fathers used in order to give the people of that time an understanding of the terrible mystery of death and of the terrible things that unfold when the soul is being prepared for departure, especially when it is leaving the body. St. Macarius of Egypt would say expressively: "Like the tax collectors who sit in the narrow roads and seize the passers-by and the oppressed, so also the demons watch carefully and grab hold of souls. And when they pass out of the body, if they are not completely purified, they are not permitted to go up into the mansions of Heaven there to meet their Master. For they are driven down by the demons of the air" [49].









The image of the tax collectors certainly belongs to the reality of that time. But the teaching that the demons try to seize a man's soul at its departure is mentioned in many texts of Holy Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church. We have already seen that after death the souls of the righteous are received by the angels and the souls of sinners and the unrepentant are received by the demons. With the malice which all the demons have against men, they

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would like to dominate everyone and have them in their power for ever. But they cannot have authority over the righteous.

A basic passage which the Fathers of the Church interpret as referring to the customs demons is what Christ said shortly before His Passion: "for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in me" (John 14, 30). The ruler of this world is the devil. He is called the ruler of the world not because he is really the ruler and final authority in the whole world, but because he dominates the world of the unjust. Christ declares that the devil has no authority over Him. He is surely referring here to the devil and death.

St. Paul, referring to the spiritually dead who were deprived of the grace of God, writes: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the ways of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2, 1-2). This passage indicates that men are deadened by sins and the work of the devil.

Likewise the devil is characterised as the prince of the power of the air because he is in the atmosphere and is constantly waging war on men. It is precisely this image which the Fathers have in view, saying that when the soul leaves the body and passes through the air towards heaven, it meets the ruler of the air. The passage also mentions that this ruler is working now too in the sons of disobedience.

There are many passages in the Old Testament which the Fathers use to indicate what is called the souls' payment of customs duties. I should like to mention two of them. One comes from a psalm of David in which the Prophet King speaks to God and says: "O Lord my God, in you I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me, lest they tear me like a lion and rip me to pieces, with no one to rescue me" (Psalm 7, 1-2). The other passage is in the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, where it says: "there seemed to be a fire burning in my bones; I was wearied and could not endure, for I heard many mocking me on every side" (Jer. 20, 9-10).

Now that we have quoted the most basic passages interpreted by the Fathers, we shall go on to their teaching about the "taxing" of souls. We should say that we will first compare their teaching about the taxing and then speak of the mystical interpretation of this condition. As will be seen more clearly in what follows, the souls of the righteous are not in fear, since they have the grace of God, and the demons have no power over them. The souls of the unrepentant are in anguish, being subject to the influence of the demons and to the action of the passions as well. There are demons, but the customs payment also means the action of the passions. We should never forget this point, because to be unaware of it creates false conceptions. The reader of this chapter must be particularly careful in studying the patristic teaching.

St. Basil the Great, interpreting the passage from the Psalms: "save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me, lest they tear my soul like a lion" (Psalm 7, 2-3), says that the brave men who have struggled throughout their lives against the invisible enemy, towards the end of their lives "will be searched by the ruler of the age" in order to hold them captive if they are found to have wounds or stigmata or imprints of sins. But if they are found uninjured and unstained, then "as they are invincible and free, Christ will give them rest". Therefore he who is under the power of death, since he knows that "One is He who saves, One is He who redeems", cries out to Christ the Saviour: "deliver me in that time of searching, lest they tear my soul like a lion". And Christ, since he was free of sin, said: "now the ruler of this world is coming and he will have nothing in me"; for man, however, it is enough to say that the ruler of the world is coming and he will have "few and small things" in me" [50].

The hour of death is terrible because then the person recalls his sins, but also because he sees frightening things. St. John Chrysostom bears witness that there are many men who recount terrible visions, which the departing one cannot repel. They are so terrible that "his very bed shakes violently, and he gazes in fear at the bystanders".

That is to say, his very body is shaken by his soul's fear, and he makes many disturbed movements. St. John Chrysostom adds that if we are frightened by the sight of terrible men, how much more frightened we will be when at the departure of our soul from the body we see "angels threatening us and stern powers". The soul which is parted from the body wails uselessly, in vain [51].

St. Symeon the New Theologian speaks about this, emphasising especially that he who has God's Light conquers the demons that come near him, for the demons are burnt by the divine Light. This is the case even now, as far as the person is in the vision of God and is clothed in God's Light. It will be much more the case when a person's soul is leaving his body. St. Symeon says that the Christian has no benefit from the spiritual struggle which he is going through if the devil is not set ablaze by the Light of God. And this means that the essence and aim of the spiritual life is to be united with the Light. St. Symeon writes:

"If the prince of darkness, when he comes, does not see Thy glory accompanying me and is not utterly confounded—he, the darkness, consumed by Thy inaccessible Light—and if all the hostile powers with him do not

flee on seeing the mark of Thy seal, while I pass through, trusting in Thy grace perfectly intrepid, and approach Thee and bow down what is the use of that which is going on in me now?" [52].

The demons that want to seize a person's soul even at the last moment are characterised by St. Diadochos of Photike as tartar rulers, that is to say, rulers of hades. A person who loves God will not be in fear, for love casts out fear, and he will freely outdistance "the tartar rulers". The soul of a man who rejoices in the love of God, at the hour of death, "is lifted with the angels of peace above all the hosts of darkness" [53].

Thus the holy Fathers are not satisfied just to emphasise the existence of the demons and their aggressive rage against men, but they also emphasise the way in which we can escape their threats. By confessing his sins completely a person is released from cowardice and fear, is filled with the love of Christ, and so he is freed from the evils of the demons. The devil has no power over him.

Abba Isaiah calls the demons which approach the soul when it is leaving the body "rulers of darkness" and "rulers of evil". He teaches that when a man's soul leaves his body, the angels travel with it. But then the powers of darkness also go out to meet it and to dominate it. At that moment the angels do not fight with the demons but wall the person round with the good deeds that he has done. When the person has conquered the demons because of the good deeds which he has done in his life, then "the Angels will rejoice with him when they see him, freed from the powers of darkness". That is why Abba Isaiah exhorts us to love peace, to have love towards men, to think of God and His righteousness, to ignore need for the world and its honour, and so forth [54].

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers contain the teaching of Theophilus the Archbishop on the subject we are dealing with. He says that at the time of departure a court case takes place between the angels and the demons. The demons present "all the sins committed either deliberately or through ignorance from birth to this last hour", and they make accusation against the person. Likewise the angels bring up the good deeds which the soul of the particular person has done. Then the soul under judgement is in great fear. If the demons win, it hears the words: "Take away the ungodly soul, that it may not see the glory of God". But if it comes out the victor and is given freedom, the demons are put to shame and the angels receive the soul and guide it "into that unspeakable joy and glory" [55].

We find these views in many patristic texts. Hesychios the Priest prays that when the ruler of darkness comes, he may find our misdeeds few and petty [56]. He teaches that when the soul has Christ with it, "He will speedily avenge it" [57].

Likewise St. Theognostos says that the righteous soul rises to heaven, going in peace "to meet the radiant and joyful angel that comes down for it and travelling with him unimpeded through the air, totally unharmed by the evil spirits" [58].

The holy Fathers teach all these things not from their imagination, but from enlightening experiences. Sometimes other holy men have revealed these things to them, and at other times they themselves, illumined by God, have had such frightening experiences.

Antony the Great once reached the point of personally seeing such dreadful things. In his cell he went into rapture and then saw himself go out of his body and walk in the air, obviously led by angels. Some bitter and terrible demons prevented them from ascending to heaven and sought a reason for several deeds. Then those leading Antony the Great fought with the terrible demons, saying that God had forgiven him all his deeds from his birth and that they should accuse him only of what he had done from the moment when he became a monk. "Then when they had accused him and not proven him wrong, his way became free and unhindered" [59].

In a dreadful story of Antony the Great the following is told: During the night a voice wakened him and urged him to go out of his cell and look. Then in fact he saw someone "tall, without bodily form and dreadful", who was the devil, standing straight with his hands raised, preventing some from ascending by keeping hold of them, and gnashing his teeth at others because they had escaped and were ascending to heaven. It was revealed to Antony the Great that this dreadful spectacle was "the passage of souls" [60].

St. John of the Ladder describes a terrible spectacle seen by the hermit Stephen, who was an ascetic on Mt. Sinai, near the cave of the Prophet Elijah. On the day before his death, while his eyes were open, he went into ecstasy and began to look to the right and left of his bed. Those present heard him answering as if he were being interrogated. Sometimes he said: "Of course it is true. That was why I fasted for so many years". Or again: "Yes, that is correct, but I wept and served my brothers". Or again: "No. You are accusing me falsely." Or sometimes: "Quite right. No, I have no excuse. But God is merciful". And St. John of the Ladder adds that "this unseen and relentless interrogation was a truly awful and frightening spectacle". Worst of all was the fact that they accused him of things which he had not done" [61].

From what we have cited it seems that the whole tradition of the Church speaks of the existence of the customs

demons, the spirits in the air, which fight a man with hatred and evils not only throughout his life, but especially before and after his soul's departure from the body.

In the tradition of the Church, however, it is seen clearly, that the demons have no mastery over the men of God, because those who have put on God do not go through such a martyrdom. If the ruler of the world has no power over Christ, this is also true of those men who are united with Him. This is why the Fathers advise us to live within the Church, with repentance, confession and spiritual works, that we live and die in the Church with the orthodox faith and the prayers of our Fathers, so that the ruler of darkness and the spirits of evil may not have power over us.

In any case it is a fact that during the soul's departure from the body a great battle goes on, chiefly in people who have insufficient purification. The terrible thing is that many people in our time die without being aware of the shocking hour of death. That is to say, the illnesses of our time, as well as the powerful pharmaceutical culture, distort man's psychosomatic constitution and make it difficult for him to go through these crucial hours with fitting attention, fear of God and prayer. Of course medicines do help us not to feel the pain of our illnesses, but they also alter our whole psychosomatic constitution; they do not allow us to realise what is going on and to seek God's mercy.

These hours are very crucial. This is why all who fear God and have spiritual knowledge of the crucial moments pray to be made aware of the events of that time. It is a real opportunity for the person to repent of all that he has committed, to seek God's mercy. To be watchful at this frightful hour is the most important work. That is why the Church prays for God to deliver us from "sudden death".

But we must look at the existence of the customs houses from two sides. One side is the demons' malice and the other is the existence of passions. In the patristic teaching we find that there is also another interpretation of the customs houses. Without, of course, overlooking the teaching about the existence of the rulers of darkness and the spirits of evil, I would also like us at this point to turn our attention to the mystical teaching of the Fathers of the Church about the customs-houses.

We also said before that when a person's soul is about to leave the body, the memory of the sins which he has committed in his life comes back to him. It is a truly intolerable state. St. John Chrysostom speaks of it. He says that on the last day of a person's biological life "sins contort his soul", they stir up his soul. This refers to passions which "move up from below the heart" [62]. The passions seek satisfaction, but the person cannot respond. It is a terrible state.

This insatiable desire of the soul is intensified even further when the soul is separated from the body. St. Gregory of Nyssa attributes this kind of interpretation to his sister Macrina. He says that as it happens with people who have remained in filthy places for a long period of time, that they are not released from the odiousness of the dirt even if they live in clean air afterwards, the same happens to the soul when it parts from the body. Lovers of the flesh, even if they have turned to the incorporeal and refined life, are unable to free themselves from the carnal odour. Precisely then the soul becomes more materialised and in that way "they are in great distress". St. Gregory adds that if what some people say is true, that the shadowy shapes of the departed are seen in the vicinity of the graves, this is an indication that the soul does not want to be parted from the life of the flesh even after it has left the body. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in which the Rich Man, finding himself in Hades, seems to be thinking about his relatives, indicates that the souls of lovers of the flesh really cannot part from the passions which constitute the carnal life [63].

We know from the Orthodox Tradition that there are passions of the body and passions of the soul. Since there is unity between soul and body, there is also a relationship between the passions of soul and body. The passions of the soul work through the bodily senses. When the soul is released from the body, it cannot satisfy its passions. Ungratified passions produce intolerable pain and a suffocating condition. They stifle the soul. This is the real hell and a frightful affliction. For this reason the holy Fathers advise us to cleanse our souls from the passions while we are in the present life, so that the soul may be released and freed after its departure. It should be satisfied and attracted to God Himself.

There is also another problem for the soul after its departure from the body. St. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that all nature is attracted to what is like it, to its relatives. So too the soul is drawn towards the divine and is related to it, since man is related to God and contains within himself copies of the archetype. After leaving the body, the soul is light, without any bodily pain, and therefore it is easy and pleasant to proceed towards what attracts it, towards God. But if the soul is held down by material habits and by the nails of the passions, then it undergoes suffering in the way in which the body suffers during earthquakes, when it is not only crushed by the weight of the earth but can also be pierced by various pointed objects which are in the earth [64].

It is just this which constitutes the torment of the soul. It experiences a dreadful bifurcation, we could say. On the

one hand, it wants to ascend towards God and unite with Him, since it is His image. On the other hand it is impeded by the passions which riddle, press and torment it. And this view is one part of the interpretation of the holy Fathers concerning the customs houses.

The torment of a soul which is parted from the body is described in a wonderful and realistic way by Abba Dorotheos. He says that during this life the soul is comforted through being distracted by the passions. It can feel great sorrow and dreadful pain, but by means of the body and the passions it can take comfort and ease its pain. In such a melancholic and frightful state the person "is fed, drinks, sleeps, meets and associates with friends", that is to say he is entertained by persons dear to him. Thus he is comforted in part and can more easily forget the deepest problem which worries him. But when the soul leaves the body, "it is alone with its own passions and, in short, is always tormented by them". At this time the soul is burning with the annoyance of the passions, it is distracted by them and cannot be mindful of God. This is a real tragedy, for at this time, because there is no body either, it cannot feel even the slightest comfort.

In what follows Abba Dorotheos takes an astonishing example. Suppose someone was shut up in a dark cell with no food or drink for three days without sleeping or meeting anyone, or psalmodising, or praying, or thinking of God at all. Then he would know "what the passions do to him". Actually in such a situation the soul and the whole man is infuriated. We are assured of this by various people who experience the agony of places of torture and frightful imprisonment. If this is the case even while the soul is linked with the body, how much more so when it has left the body and is isolated with its passions.

Abba Dorotheos also makes use of the image of the sick person with a burning fever. This of course creates many other problems as well, especially if the person has a melancholic and ill-tempered body. The same thing happens with the impassioned soul. "The conflict arising from its own bad habits punishes it all the time, the memory being always embittered, the mutterings of its passions constantly emerging, always burning it and enraging it". If one adds to this torment and suffering of the soul the terrible places of Hell and the demons and the fire and the darkness, and so forth, then one can understand the suffering and torment of the soul after its departure and its sojourn in Hades and Hell".

The things that we have said so far show just what those customs houses are that are spoken of in the patristic texts. On the one hand, they are the passions of the soul which, because of the non-existence of the body, cannot be satisfied, and therefore stifle the soul. On the other hand, they are the evil demons which have gained mastery over passionate people, and it is natural that after the soul's departure they have greater mastery over them. The righteous people, who during their lives have purified their souls and bodies from passions of the soul and body and have been clothed in the pledge of the Spirit and united with God, escape the power of the customs houses, since the demons have no power over them. The souls of the righteous are led, free and undistracted, towards God, with whom they are united.

So the whole problem is not to be afraid of the customs demons, but as long as we live, to cure our soul and our whole being of passions, to partake of the uncreated grace of God, so that the departure of our soul from our body may be a matter of joy and delight.

Of course there are some who maintain that such notions as customs houses and aerial spirits have come into Christianity from Gnostic theories and pagan myths which prevailed during that period.

There is no doubt that such views can be found in many Gnostic texts, in pagan ideas which are found in Egyptian and Chaldaean myths. However it must be emphasised that many Fathers adopted the teaching about customs houses, but they cleared it of idolatrous and Gnostic frames of reference and placed it in the ecclesiastical atmosphere. The holy Fathers were not afraid to do such creative work.

It is a fact that the Fathers were working creatively and productively when they took many views and theories from the pagan world, but gave them an ecclesiastical content. It is well known that the Fathers took the teaching about the immortality of the soul, about the ecstasy of man and the dispassion of the soul and body, the teaching about the tripartite soul and many other things from the ancient philosophies, as well as from ancient traditions, but clearly they gave them another content and a different perspective. We cannot discard the teaching about the immortality of the soul just because the ancient philosophers spoke of it. We must look at the content which the holy Fathers gave to it.

Therefore what happened to other topics happened also to the subject of the customs houses. It is true that ancient traditions and heretical views spoke of "rulers of the astral sphere", about "gates of an astral journey", about "aerial spirits", and so forth. We find several of these phrases in the Bible and in patristic texts. As we have mentioned in this chapter, many Fathers of the Church speak of customs houses and aerial spirits, but they have given them different content and different meanings. The patristic teaching about customs houses must be interpreted within

the following four points.

First. The symbolic language of the Bible requires the necessary interpretation. Anyone who only keeps to the images used distorts the Gospel message. For instance, we must say that words in the Bible can be misinterpreted if we only look at their theological meaning. The same thing is true in the case of the customs houses. We should not be thinking only of today's customs houses, through which everyone has to pass at the national borders. The symbolic image is intended to present something, but it must be interpreted in an orthodox way.

Second. There are demons, which are dark angels. They are persons and therefore have freedom, and with God's permission, but also through the wrong use of freedom by man, they have been able to dominate him. That is to say, after the soul's departure from the body, the demons demand to possess a soul which they have mastered because of its unrepentance. In Christ's well-known parable about the foolish rich man there is the sentence: "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?". According to the patristic interpretation it is the demons who demand possession of the soul of the foolish rich man after its departure from the body.

Third. The demons have no authority over the men of God. All who are united with God and have within their soul and heart the uncreated energy of God are outside the control of the demons. So the deified will not go through the so-called customs houses.

Fourth. According to the teaching of the Fathers, as we have seen before, the demons, which are real spirits, act by means of the passions. The fact that the passions cannot be gratified after the soul's departure from the body is a suffocation of the soul.

When we examine the customs houses in these theological frames, the use of this teaching is not inappropriate. But if we have other conceptions, we are on the wrong path.

#### *Endnotes*

48. See extended analysis in G. Konstantinou: Dictionary of holy Scriptures, ed. Grigori, op. 966 (Gk).

49. Macarius of Egypt: Homily 43, 9, CWS p. 222.

50. Basil the Great: Homily on Psalm 7, 2. PG 29, 232B, D.

51. John Chrysostom: Homily 44 on Matthew, EPE 11, p. 170 (Gk).

52. SC 174, p. 310.

53. Diadochus of Photiki: On spiritual knowledge, 100, Philokalia 1, p. 295.

54. Evergetinos, op. cit. p. 101f.55. Ibid. p. 102f.

56. Hesychios: On watchfulness and holiness 161, Philok. 1, p. 190.

57. Ibid 149, p. 188.

58. Theognostos: On the practice of the virtues 61, Philok. 2, p.

59. Evergetinos, op.,cit. p. 99.

60. Ibid. p. 100.

61. John of the Ladder: Step 7, CWS p. 142.

62. John Chrysostom: Homily 44 on Matthew, EPE 11, p. 168 (Gk).

63. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Soul and the Resurrection, Ch. 6, SVS p. 76.

64. Ibid. p. 83.

65. Dorotheos: Discourse 12, Fear of punishment, CS 33, p. 183f.

From *Life After Death*, by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, trans. Esther Williams (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1995), pp. 62-80.

#### **Webmaster Note**

The charge of "Gnosticism" is exactly what is leveled against those Orthodox writers today who faithfully uphold the tradition of the aerial toll-houses. It would be one thing for a Protestant critic to level such an accusation; but for Orthodox to make the same claims is truly sorrowful. What follows is an extended quote from *The Hellenic-Christian Philosophical Tradition*, by Dr. Constantine Cavarnos (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1989), pp. 17-21. The quote within this passage is from St. Basil's *To Young Men, on How They Might Profit from Greek Literature*, sect. IV and V; cf. 1 Thess. 5:21. I have included this here to demonstrate, in relation to another theological topic, the spurious nature of these accusations. For further insight into this see "[Answer to a](#)

Critic," by Fr. Seraphim of Platina.

The presence of Platonic notions and terms is so noticeable in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, a brother of St. Basil, that he has been called by some a "Christian Platonist." Two later Church Fathers—John Damascene, who flourished during the first half of the eighth century, and Photios the Great, who lived in the next century—have been characterized by some as "Christian Aristotelians." This has been occasioned by the fact that both wrote substantial chapters on the Categories and the Predicables of Aristotle. But a careful reading of the whole body of their works shows that they made much greater use of *Plato's* writings than of Aristotle's, particularly in their discussions of God and the human soul. With regard to Photios, it is very significant that in his Lexicon of ancient Greek words, entitled *Lexicon Synagoge*, there are far more references to Plato than to Aristotle. In listing words used by Plato, Photios often names the Platonic works in which they appear. He mentions altogether fifteen dialogues.

Moreover, in one place he speaks of Plato as "great" (*ho megas Platon*), but he nowhere uses this highly honorific word for Aristotle. On the basis of such internal evidence, there would seem to be a justification for calling Damascene and Photios "Platonists," rather than "Aristotelians." Actually, the use of either of these terms for them is inappropriate, a serious error, as it is when applied to Justin Martyr, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, or any other of the Greek Church Fathers. For the foundation of their thought is neither Platonism nor Aristotelianism, nor some other secular system of thought, but is Christian revelation. This very important fact is noted frequently by the Greek Fathers from the earliest to the latest. Thus the fourteenth century Father Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, says: "Whence did we learn about God, whence about the universe, whence about ourselves something certain and free of error? Is it not from the teaching of the Spirit?"

The adoption of certain notions and terms from Plato, Aristotle, and other pagan writers does not make the Greek Church Fathers adherents of such writers. They would have had no objection to being called simply "philosophers." For they call Christianity "philosophy," "the divine philosophy," and characterize serious reflection on some problem or topic, such as those they engaged in, "philosophizing." But none of them called himself or any other of their learned Christian predecessors a "Platonist," an "Aristotelian," a "Christian Platonist," or a "Christian Aristotelian." Such characterizations were for them unthinkable. They were unthinkable because they would have been untrue, for the foundation of their thought was, as we have noted, neither Platonic nor Aristotelian, but Christian. Although they did use many elements from Plato and Aristotle, they chose those elements that did not contradict revealed teaching, but were in harmony with it and helped express or illustrate its content. In other words, their use of pagan philosophy was not a wholesale, slavish one. It was a very selective or "eclectic" use, which left them quite free to criticize the errors of secular philosophy. Material for this eclecticism was provided for them not only by the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but also by those of the Stoics and other Greek philosophers and, further, by ancient Greek poets, historians, and orators. The following remark by St. Basil is very illuminating in this connection: "Since it is through virtue that we must enter upon this life of ours, and since much has been uttered in praise of virtue by poets, much by historians, and much more still by philosophers, we ought especially to apply ourselves to such literature."

The guiding principle for this eclecticism was put forth by Basil and used by the other Christian philosopher-theologians or Church Fathers of the East. Basil advised: Take from heathen books whatever befits the Christian and is allied to the truth, and pass over the rest. The model to be used is the bee. "Altogether after the manner bees," says Basil, "must we use these writings, for the bees do not visit all the flowers without discrimination nor indeed do they carry away entire those upon which they light, but rather, having taken so much as is adapted to their needs, they let the rest go." . . .

One reason why the Greek Fathers selected and adapted such elements was because they found them very helpful for formulating in clear and precise form the content of the Christian faith. Another reason was the fact that the use of philosophical terms and concepts would attract to the faith the more educated among the pagans—those who had received instruction in philosophy. For these reasons, too, they chose as their language not the common Greek, the koine, but Attic Greek, using as their models particularly such great masters of Attic prose as Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Thucydides. From Plato, they took many philosophical elements, modified them to a greater or lesser extent, and assimilated them organically in the Christian teaching.