

HESYCHAST PRAYER AND ASCETIC VIRTUE IN THEOLEPTOS OF PHILADELPHIA AND GREGORY PALAMAS: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION

Alessia Brombin

Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University,
E-mail: brombin.alessia@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7823-4443>

In 1946, Jean Guillard editing the entry on Theoleptos of Philadelphia for the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* asserted the impossibility of making an objective judgment on his thought, and pointed out that he had not distinguished himself from his contemporaries by originality.¹ But some sides remained rather obscure. The scholar noted in Theoleptos the recurrence of certain ascetic propensities that were the basis of ancient Hesychasm, such as: “νήψις”, “προσοχή” e “προσευχή”.

To date, there has been no proper study of the originality of his doctrines, but eminent scholars, such as Angela C. Hero² and Robert Sinkewicz,³ have edited the critical editions of his works, which facilitates a recognition of the characteristics of his theology. It will therefore not be the task to address the complexity of the authors compared, but rather to attempt to investigate a specific aspect of the practice of spiritual direction in the late Byzantine era linked to the exercise of certain virtues in particular, of which “πένθος” (penthos) stands out.⁴ The proposed analysis follows the recent interest in fe-

¹ Guillard J., Théolepte, in: *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, Paris, 1946, 339-341.

² See Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994; Hero A.C., *The Unpublished Letters of Theoleptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia (1283-1322)*, *Journal of Modern Hellenism*, Vol.3, 1986, 1-31; Vol.4, 1987, 1-17.

³ Sinkewicz R.E., *Theoleptos of Philadelphia: The Monastic Discourses*, Toronto, 1992.

⁴ In general, attention was no longer directed [after the studies from the 1930s-

male monasticism⁵. Taking into account the ecclesiological and political context, there will be a brief commentary on a careful selection of the most significant passages from the five letters that Theoleptos sent to the nun Irene-Eulogia, as well as the one letter that Gregory Palamas addressed to the abbess Xenia.

Spiritual fatherhood in Theoleptos of Philadelphia

Theoleptos of Philadelphia was born in Nicaea in Bithynia⁶ in 1250 (51 ca.),⁷ where as a married man he served his diocese as a deacon. He stayed on Mount Athos, sharing the monastic experience with Athanasius, the future Patriarch of Constantinople.⁸ He was famous for his religious zeal, strict asceticism and defence of dogma. In 1283 he was elevated Metropolitan of Philadelphia. His spiritual children can be considered Matthew of Ephesus⁹ and the

1950s] specifically to his ascetic-spiritual teaching (Rigo A., *Nota sulla dottrina ascetica di Teolepto di Filadelfia (1250-1322)*, *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neellenici*, Vol. 24, 1987, 166).

⁵ See Rigo A., *La direction spirituelle des moniales à Byzance (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, in: *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Edited by E. Kountoura Galaki and E. Mitsiou, Athens, 2019, 283-300; Nicol D.M., *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits, 1250-1500*, Cambridge, 1994; Talbot A-M., *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium*, Aldershot, 2001; Talbot A-M., *Varieties of Monastic Experience in Byzantium, 800-1453*, Notre Dame, 2019.

⁶ See Χούμνου Ν., *Επιτάφιος εις τον μακάριον και αγιώτατον μητροπολίτην Φιλαδελφείας Θεολήπτον*, in: *Anecdota Graeca*, éd. da J.F. Boissonade, Vol. V, 1833, 200; Congourdeau M-H., *Théolepte de Philadelphie*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité XV-XVI*, Paris, 1990-1991, 446-459.

⁷ Laurent V., *La direction spirituelle à Byzance. La correspondance d'Irène-Eulogie Choumnaina avec son second directeur*, *Revue des études byzantines*, Vol.14, 1956, 75.

⁸ See Γρηγορόπουλος Ι.Ι., *Θεολήπτου Φιλαδελφείας του Ομολογητού (1250-1322)*, *Βίος και έργα*, Α', Τέρπος, Κατερίνη, 1996, 42; Rigo A., *Note sulla dottrina ascetica di Teolepto di Filadelfia (1250-1322)*, *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici*, Vol.24, 1987, 173.

⁹ See Previale L., *Due monodie inedite di Matteo di Efeso*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, Vol.2, 1941, 9-15.

Kommenos.¹⁰ His ascendancy over Irene Komnene Palaiologina was decisive for her,¹¹ as he spent himself in realizing her monastic vocation. During the rebuilding of the monastery of Philanthropos Soter by Irene, he took on the role of spiritual director of both monks and nuns.¹²

In November 1322, the Metropolitan was in Philadelphia where, following a rapid illness, he died. In this last phase of his existence he was adept at weaving epistolary relations with the abbess. His five letters, and the majority of the twenty-three speeches that we have available, were written, spoken and directed to the monastic community of Philanthropos Soter. The letters open up interpretative spiritual horizons about the daily difficulties of life in the monastery. Although belonging to the literary epistolary genre, the framework of spiritual direction allowed Theoleptos to raise the tone, and to place himself beyond the measure of *praxis* by establishing a higher correspondence between the interlocutors. Upon his death, the letters and catechesis were collected and collated by Irene herself.¹³ At the age of twelve, Irene-Eulogia had married the son of Andronicus II, John, but the marriage was dissolved after only four years due to his sudden death (1307).¹⁴ At the age of sixteen, Irene's life was already

¹⁰ See Guillard J., Théolepte, in: Dictionnaire de théologie catholique, Paris, 1946, 340.

¹¹ See Talbot A-M., Choumnaina, Irene, in: Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, Vol. I, Oxford, 1991, 432-433.

¹² See Laurent V., Une princesse byzantine au cloître. Irène-Eulogie Choumnos Paléologine, fondatrice du couvent de femmes του Φιλανθρώπου Σωτήρος, Échos d'Orient, Vol.29, 1930, 47.

¹³ The list of all collected writings and the evidence of their possession by Irene-Eulogia can be found in Moschonas T., Κατάλογοι τῆς Πατριαρχικῆς Βιβλιοθήκης, Τόμος Α', Alexandria, 1945, 85-93. The description of the manuscript and some assumptions about the copier can be found in Pérez Martín I., Irene Cumno y el 'taller de la Paleologuina, S&C, Vol.19, 1995, 223-234.

¹⁴ See Nicephori Gregoræ, Byzantina Historia 7, 5, Vol. 1, Bonn, 1829-1855, 241.11.9-13.

marked by deep sorrow,¹⁵ and it is not excluded that she embraced the monastic life, taking the name Irene-Eulogia for this reason.¹⁶ Father Laurent considered the vocation to be an exception for her time, but Talbot argues that for married (and widowed) women to leave the world was not at all uncommon, moreover, in this particular case the princess would have been prompted by the example of her sister.¹⁷

Spiritual direction is present in most of his writings, regardless of their nature and content. The direction given to Irene-Eulogia in the Letters is evidently personal. In the Italian edition of his writings, a subdivision according to literary genres is presented, the letters were numbered in chronological order, the first dating back to late spring-summer 1307, the next three between December 1321 and spring 1322, the last was written on his deathbed towards the end of 1322. The writings are of unequal length, opening with a brief prologue that introduces the subject, the style is very often rich in repetition and redundant also due to the marked recourse to analogy, we agree that it lacks the usual rhetoric one would expect from a pastor of souls.¹⁸

The first letter bears witness to the onset of Irene-Eulogia's spiritual crisis and the need for a safe guide to accompany her

¹⁵ His story has melancholic overtones (Laurent V., *Une princesse byzantine au cloître. Irène-Eulogie Choumnos Paléologine, fondatrice du couvent de femmes του Φιλανθρώπου Σωτήρος, Échos d'Orient*, Vol.29, 1930, 36).

¹⁶ For a biographical profile, see Nicol D.M., *Eirene-Eulogia Choumnaina Palaiologina, Princess and Abbess, Died c. 1355*, in: *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits, 1250-1500*, Cambridge, 1994, 59-70; Stolfi A., *La biografia di Irene-Eulogia Cumnena Paleologhina (1291-1355): un riesame*, *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, Vol.20, 1999, 1-40; Hero A.C., *Irene-Eulogia Choumnaina Palaiologina: Abbess of the Convent of Philanthropos Soter in Constantinople*, *Byzantinische Forschungen*, Vol.9, 1985, 119-147.

¹⁷ See Talbot A-M., *Late Byzantine Nuns: By Choice or Necessity?*, in: *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium*, Aldershot, 2001, 107-114.

¹⁸ See Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 11.

emerges.¹⁹ Theoleptos introduces the first concept on which much of monastic asceticism already rested, the “πένθος”, the compunction of the heart or mourning for the divine love from which one has departed. Irene was committed to severing family ties, declined invitations to salons, began to shun the ease of her social status, and rejected the vanities that came with it. She was driven by Theoleptos to aspire, with zeal and diligence, to spousal union with Christ. The spousal theme is the thread that runs throughout the letter.

The text focuses on recalling five spiritual counsels useful to all novices. The first binds the body and the second the mind, “the body lingers over the cell” and “the mind remains in the heart”.²⁰ To “linger” (χροννίζω) means to remain physically and for a protracted time in solitude, only then will the mind be able to “remain” (παρραμένω) for a long time in the heart. In the heart one must supplicate Christ with continuous invocation, Theoleptos reminds her that she will still be alone, and in order to face the plots of the Evil One she must unceasingly remember the name of God (μνήμη τοῦ θεοῦ), conform her body and senses to the divine commandments, sing hymns and pray frequently. The fourth council aims at defeating the lusts of the flesh, since the oppression of the body represents a victory for the soul, and this is realized in doing violence to oneself (βιάζω), imposing constraints and harassment (θλίψις). The harassment of, and on, the body leads to the joy of the spirit, the primary effect of πένθος. Therefore, to obtain the joy of the fulfilled heart one must go through an initiatory mourning.²¹

Between this letter and the following ones, there will be a very large time lapse from 1307 to 1321/22. In these letters, the narrative

¹⁹ See Salaville S., *Une lettre et un discours inédits de Théolepte de Philadelphie*, *Revue des études byzantines*, Vol.5, 1947, 103.

²⁰ Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 34, lines 26-27.

²¹ Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 35, line 50.

tension will be polarized around certain concepts such as forbearance (ὑπομονή) and continence (ἐγκράτεια), as opposed to pride (φρόνημα) and vainglory (κενοδοξία). The third Epistle can be dated between the late winter and early spring of 1322.²² The text focuses on temptation. The short prologue introduces this spiritual illness, in which two explanatory similes (of the seasons and of work) are inserted, followed by two series of actions performed by Irene-Eulogia, and concludes with useful references to living according to the Spirit. The Metropolitan notes that the nun had to take further steps to advance on the path to perfection. The progressive stages of the spiritual life pass through the winter of temptations (Ὁ χειμῶν τῶν πειρασμῶν),²³ but Irene still found herself living in the spring of pleasure (ἔαρ τῆς εὐπαθείας),²⁴ immersed in the consolations offered by visits from family and friends, indulging in compliments, which weakened her and hardened her heart. The labours are distributed in every kind of practical activity in which the nun engaged, these were to temper the soul as if by fire, to make it all light (ὅλη φῶς γίνεται). Among the voluntary afflictions enclosed by Theoleptos were: forbearance (ὑπομονή), meekness (πραότης) and docility (ἡμερότης). Voluntary efforts are the shield against the pleasures of the body. Any stalemate due to external temptations was to be fought with endurance, acceptance, and imitating Christ. In the background is the asceticism of world renunciation and self-denial,²⁵ in line with the asceticism advocated by Hesy-

²² Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 103. According to Rigo, «the letter is slightly later than the second one and dates from the winter of 1322 (March-April)» (see Teolepto di Filadelfia, *Lettere e Discorsi*, Magnano, 2007, 291). The letter is addressed to «τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὴν αὐτὴν ἐπιστολὴ γ'» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 70-87).

²³ Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 70.

²⁴ Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 70.

²⁵ Reminding Irene of her monastic vows, she states «you have explored the world to come and loved its bliss, crucified yourself to the earthly world with the monastic

chasm. Theoleptos concludes his missive by illustrating eight spiritual remedies by contrasting them with their respective illness.²⁶ Love is opposed to earthly pleasures, joy is opposed to irrational pains, anger is opposed to inner peace, goodness heals from rancor, longsuffering is opposed to pusillanimity, gentleness is opposed to pride, while faith in divine blessings combats the pleasure of gratifications.²⁷

The penultimate letter follows shortly after the previous one, the text is very concise, and the argument revolves around the snares stretched by the Evil One.²⁸ Written in April 1322, it was drafted before the illness that struck him down. He immediately enters into *medias res* illustrating the tactics of the Evil One who insinuates himself through evil thoughts. The Devil «openly submits to malice»²⁹ and «conspires in secret and offers the glory of men (John 12:43-44).»³⁰ He rails against vainglory (κενοδοξία) and pride (ὕπερηφάνεια) by giving examples from Matthew's Gospel (5:28-29; 5:22). The last letter³¹ was written on his deathbed between November and Decem-

life and vowed to live only with the hope of the future» (see Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 63).

²⁶ He does so precisely by introducing them with the expression *διὰ* (with, by means of) in an instrumental sense.

²⁷ «διὰ γὰρ τῆς θείας Ἀγάπης τὴν πρὸς τὰ ἐπίγεια τερπνὰ ἐπιθυμίαν Ἀπελαύνεις, διὰ τῆς χαρᾶς τὰς ἐκ τῶν ἔξωθεν ἐπερχομένας Ἀλόγους λύπας καταθραύεις, διὰ τῆς εἰρήνης τὴν ὀργὴν ἐξορίζεις, διὰ τῆς χρηστότητος τὴν μνησικακίαν ἐκδιώκεις, διὰ τῆς μακροθυμίας τὴν μικροψυχίαν καταστέλλεις, διὰ τῆς ἐπιεικίας τὴν ἔπαρσιν καταβάλλεις, διὰ τῆς βεβαιοπιστίας τῶν μελλόντων τὴν ἐκ τῆς τῶν παρόντων ἡδυπαθείας Ἀπιστίαν Ἀποσκορακίζεις καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐγκρατείας τὴν Ἀκόλαστον ἡδονὴν κολάζουσα καταργεῖς» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 213-223).

²⁸ Τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὴν αὐτὴν ἐπιστολὴ δ' (see Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 88-91).

²⁹ «προφανῶς ὑποβάλλουσα τὰ κακά» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 88).

³⁰ «Ἀφανῶς ἐπιβουλεύουσα προτείνει τὴν τῶν Ἀνθρώπων δόξαν» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 88).

³¹ «Τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὴν αὐτὴν ἐπιστολὴ ε'» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 92-94).

ber 1322.³² It is a farewell note, in which he broadens his view of the virtues by setting them in an ascetic-mystical framework with an eschatological flavor, contrasting the pursuit of pleasure with the acquisition of the virtues. In imagining one's own passing, the tone is heartfelt, but consolation soon takes hold, where the senses, seemingly gratified by the pleasures of this world, are silenced, and a clear awareness emerges that «virtues, because they carry off the soul to the world to come, comfort [us] after the end.»³³ The quintessence of the teaching of Theoleptos of Philadelphia is represented by the last command he prescribes to Irene-Eulogia «Choose unwelcome sufferings and you attain virtue,»³⁴ to which he adds «Do not reject unwelcome afflictions and you gain endurance and through endurance the Lord gains you.»³⁵

Spiritual direction in Gregory Palamas

In the theology of Gregory Palamas we find hints of spiritual direction placed in the Hesychast framework. In his letter *To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia*, he states that he was writing only at her urging, and also notes that she had no need to receive spiritual counsels, since she was pure and already able to discern for herself, as he states:

For by the grace of Christ you have gained, together with old age, a venerable understanding, and for many years you have studied and applied the ordinances of the divine com-

³² See Κουρούσης Σ.Ι., Μανουήλ Γαβαλάς, ἔγγραφα Ματθαίου μητροπολίτης Ἐφέσου (1271/2-1355/60), Ἀθήναι, 1972, 339.

³³ «αἱ Ἀρεταὶ δὲ ὡς πρὸς τὰ μέλλοντα τὴν ψυχὴν Ἀρπάζουσαι παρακαλοῦσι μετὰ τὸ τέλος» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 92).

³⁴ «αἶρου τὰς Ἀκουσίους θλίψεις καὶ κατορθοὺς Ἀρετῆν» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 94).

³⁵ «μὴ παραιτοῦ τὰς Ἀκουσίους ἐπιφορὰς καὶ ὑπομονὴν προσλαμβάνεις καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπομονῆς προσλαμβάνεται σε Ὁ Κύριος» (Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 94).

mandments, dividing your life in due measure between obedience and stillness. In this way you have wiped clean the tablet of your soul, so that it is capable of receiving and preserving whatever God writes on it.³⁶

The passage emphasizes that the purification achieved by obedience, and with the help of the ἡσυχία, makes all spiritual guidance superfluous; indeed, nuns and monks who had experienced a profound experience of God could themselves become mystagogue.

The letter was written between 1346 and early 1347,³⁷ it can be likened to a true spiritual treatise written at the height of the hesychast theological controversy (see 5-6). A conviction for heresy also weighed heavily on Palamas (1342), but the elderly nun called him back from forced exile and asked for spiritual instruction.³⁸ She was an elderly and virtuous Byzantine abbess, so Palamas readily sang her praises, and appealed to her as a 'virgin bride of Christ'.³⁹ The bishop of Thessalonica sent her a single letter that was presumably used for the edification of the young nuns under her care.⁴⁰ The struc-

³⁶ Palamas G., To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, in: *Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth*, Vol. IV, Translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, New York, 1999, 295.

³⁷ A very large group of authoritative scholars have dated the writing before 1345/46 (see Rigo A., *La direction spirituelle des moniales à Byzance (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, in: *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Edited by E. Kountoura Galaki and E. Mitsiou, Athens, 2019, 290). For dating, see also Meyendorff J., *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, «*Patristica Sorbonensia*,» 3, Paris, 1959. Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1959, 385-386; Sinkewicz R.E., *Gregory Palamas*, in: *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, Vol.II, Turnhout, 152; *PLP*, 21546; Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη*, 1992, 137-138.

³⁸ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην*, in: *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη*, 1992, 195.

³⁹ «παρθένε νύμφη χριστοῦ» (Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην*, in: *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη*, 1992, 205).

⁴⁰ See Rigo A., *La direction spirituelle des moniales à Byzance (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*,

ture of the writing can be divided into three sections (prologue, middle section and epilogue)⁴¹, which contain seventy-one paragraphs of uneven length.⁴² The exhortatory style denotes the uniqueness of the Palamite theology, which tends towards mysticism, as the writing represents ‘the most complete synthesis of his spiritual teaching’⁴³ as Ιωάννης Σπιτέρης states. The first section is preparatory to the discussion of ascetical themes that we will find in the central part. The author notes that human nature is subject to two types of death, one concerning the body and the other the soul. Although the soul is immortal, it can die under the weight of carnal desires (see 1 Peter 2:11). Palamas considered this to be the worst of deaths, since once the soul had died, the body continued to live until its physical death (10). He goes on to describe the causes and effects of this type of death, describing it as an “eternal punishment” (11),⁴⁴ illustrating that the death of the body occurs in the present time, while that of the soul is “without end” (12).⁴⁵

There is a kind of mutual influence between the soul and the body, from which it can be deduced that the return to God, through obedience, also makes the body participate in the union, thus opening the door to the resurrection of the whole man unified in God (14). The penitential background emerges forcefully when Palamas

in: *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Edited by E. Kountoura Galaki and E. Mitsiou, Athens, 2019, 291.

⁴¹ For further subdivisions see Rigo A., *La direction spirituelle des moniales à Byzance (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, in: *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Edited by E. Kountoura Galaki and E. Mitsiou, Athens, 2019, 291, footnote 48.

⁴² For the subdivision into paragraphs, reference will be made to that proposed by Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην*, in: *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε΄ τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 193-230.*

⁴³ Σπιτέρης Ι., *Palamas: la grazia e l'esperienza*, Roma, 1996, 175.

⁴⁴ Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην*, in: *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε΄ τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 198.*

⁴⁵ Χρήστου Π.Κ., *Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην*, in: *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε΄ τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 198, footnote 15.*

considers the present time to be the propitious time for conversion (μετάνοια), thus stating: «the time of this life is time for repentance (καιρὸς μετάνοία), the very fact that a sinner still lives is a pledge that God will accept whoever desires to return (Ἐπιστρέφειν) to Him.» (17)⁴⁶ The argument gets to the heart of the matter, opening the discourse with a meditation on the virginal state as the fast track to deification (21).⁴⁷ Palamas sets himself the goal of realizing a life freedom from care (Ἀμεριμνία), in the total absence of upheavals (22). On the one hand, he considered the nun Xenia to be a new bride, a young girl for a husband, which is why it was suggested to her to avoid the seduction of worldly glory, riches and fame, as Theoleptos had done with Irene-Eulogia. Further on, he rails against the passion of concupiscence. The principle of all evil comes from this, since the effects are concatenated and felt on a large scale⁴⁸. The disease of concupiscence: it shows itself in covetousness (φιλοκτημοσύνη, 30-34), the love of fame (φιλοδοξία, 35-38) and the excesses of gluttony (γαστριμαργία, 41-47). The passion for property originates in the human will, which in turn fuels those evils identified by Paul in his letter to the Colossians (3:5), and this is accompanied by the love of money/avarice (φιλαργυρία),⁴⁹ and in general of material goods

⁴⁶ Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 201; Palamas G., To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, in: Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth, Vol. IV, Translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, New York, 1999, 299.

⁴⁷ The renunciation of earthly ties, such as marriage, is aimed at preventing the Evil One from infiltrating into men and women from a young age, even though in principle, it is not impossible for married individuals to achieve the same results, albeit with greater difficulty (20). Palamas advocates for a chaste life because he deems it more effective and less arduous compared to other forms (23).

⁴⁸ In paragraphs 30-47, Palamas will review the by-products of concupiscence and also illustrate their remedy at the end of each section.

⁴⁹ See Larchet J.C., *The Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses: An Introduction to the Ascetic Tradition of the Orthodox Church*, 2014, 171-184.

(φιλοῦλιας),⁵⁰ on which unbelief in Providence depends.⁵¹ The remedy for this malady is voluntary poverty (ἐθελοῦσιος Ἀκτημοσύνη), which for Palamas corresponds to poverty in spirit (33). To the love of fame (φιλοδοξία) is attributable the pursuit of the adornment of the body (καλλωπισμός σωμάτων) and the luxury of clothes (πολυτέλεια ἔνδυμάτων), which correspond to worldly vainglory (κοσμικός κενοδοξία).⁵² On vainglory depend presumption (οἷσις) and hypocrisy (ὑπόκρισις)⁵³. The context gives us the opportunity to infer that spiritual wealth was contrasted with wealth of substances, and wealth. Vainglory is typical of childlike feeling related to spiritual immaturity.⁵⁴

The third spiritual illness, caused by concupiscence, is gluttony or voracity (γαστριμαργία),⁵⁵ but generally speaking it consists in making bad use of pleasure. It is a degeneration of a good quality present in human nature, touching the noetic, imaginative and sensitive spheres. It begins with the fondness for pleasure (φιληδονία), whence sensible impressions make their way into man, generating

⁵⁰ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 208.

⁵¹ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 208. The foolishness spoken of by Jesus Christ in Lk 12:18 is generated and nurtured by the love of indiscriminate accumulation as an end in itself.

⁵² Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 211. Note the parallels with Letter 4 of Theoleptos of Philadelphia.

⁵³ Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 211.

⁵⁴ See Palamas G., To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, in: Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth, Vol. IV, Translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, New York, 1999, 308-309.

⁵⁵ Γαστριμαργία can be defined as the pursuit of pleasure of eating, in other words the desire to eat with a view to pleasure, or again, negatively in relation to the virtue of which it constitutes the negation, the intemperance of the mouth and belly (Larchet J.C., The Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses: An Introduction to the Ascetic Tradition of the Orthodox Church, 2014, 151).

the propensity to lasciviousness of the stomach (41). Among the remedies to contain such passions, Palamas selects four: prayer, humility, fasting (νηστεία) and mortification (κακοπάθεια),⁵⁶ while the place of combat is identified in the monastic cell (43). The author felt the need to summarize the qualities of the perfect nun in humbling herself in spirit, mortifying her flesh and being deprived of all material possessions. To better illustrate the requirements, he made use of an analogy that Theoleptos used, that of the passing of the seasons.⁵⁷ For Palamas, the entire spiritual life is conceived as a transition from season to season towards maturity,⁵⁸ and in this process, the first arrival is purification.

It affects the soul that is subjected to voluntary punishments (46), hence the affliction, which is followed by the comfort of the joy of forgetting, and the granting of forgiveness (συγχώρησις); hence conversion (μετάνοια) is its primeval daughter. Mystical intuition suggested he assert that the sum of virtuous practices is the circumcision of the spirit (πνευματικῆς περιτομῆς),⁵⁹ which leads us to believe that ascetic practices were preparatory to conversion, and that they had their own baptismal resonance as an analogy to the ancient Jewish circumcision.⁶⁰ In paragraphs 51 to 53 he focuses his attention on the poverty of the soul. The first tool at the ascetic's disposal is self-bias (αυτομεμψία, or also called self-prosperity or self-accusation).⁶¹ Pala-

⁵⁶ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 215.

⁵⁷ I refer to the evocative image of the 'winter of temptation' and the 'spring of comfort' (see Hero A.C., *The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia*, Brookline, 1994, 70).

⁵⁸ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 217.

⁵⁹ Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 218.

⁶⁰ See Brombin A., *La circoncisione nello spirito (Rm 2, 28-9): rimedio alla durezza del cuore*, *Bibbia e Oriente*, Vol.61, 279-280/2019, 19-36.

⁶¹ See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου

mas combines it with the benefits of humility of the soul, and sets man before divine punishment in the beyond. The superior knowledge of sin moves to affliction, and thence to consolation, by virtue of a real and authentic recognition of sin and weaknesses, which could only come from God (52).

Paragraphs 54 to 67 represent the culmination of the spiritual path. In the final stage of asceticism, one attains perfection, experiencing Ἀταραξία – a state of inner tranquility – and embodying perfect humility (54). The man who possesses poverty generates further virtues such as: the absence of freedom from care (Ἀμεριμνία), attention (προσοχή), prayer (προσευχή), affliction (πένθος) and tears (δάκρυον).⁶² In the exultation of the heart, which is prevented in this spiritual stage, hope opens up confidently to the work of God (56), because the mind, having returned to itself, is reunited with all the powers of the soul, since «When every shameful indwelling passion has been expelled and the intellect, as already indicated, has returned wholly to itself, converting at the same time the other powers of the soul – and when through cultivating the virtues it sets the soul in good order,»⁶³ and thus enlightens man and thus illuminates man with divine light (58). The effects of the perfect exercise of the virtues in the soul are summed up in «When it has transcended intelligible realities and the concepts, not unmixed with images, that pertain to them, and in a godly and devout manner has rejected all things.»⁶⁴

τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 220.

⁶² See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 222.

⁶³ «αὐτός τε πρὸς ἑαυτὸν καὶ τὰς ἄλλας τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεις ἐπιστρέψας Ὀλοκλήπως, τῇ γεωπγία τῶν Ἀρετῶν φιλοκαλήσῃ τὴν ψυχὴν» (Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 223). Note how the soul becomes a lover of the beautiful (φιλόκαλος), understood as one who urges (or is attracted by) the Beautiful/God to put all possible care into cultivating one's virtues, or alternatively it may mean that the love of beauty is realized in the exercise of all virtues (58).

⁶⁴ Palamas G., To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, in: Philokalia: The Complete Text

Divine grace has reached man in his innermost being, and for this reason he is illuminated by an ineffable light (ἄρρητον φῶς),⁶⁵ an irrefutable sign of the divine presence and communion (59).⁶⁶ He bids farewell to Xenia with a summation of the characteristics and fruits of affliction (68-70). At its beginning, πένθος represents the pain caused by the fear of God, which leads to the love of God and the gift of His consolations (68). The principle of affliction is, moreover, for this bride of Christ: the desire of the spouse. This metaphor sums up its purpose:

In addition, the initial stage of grief resembles something that appears to be almost unattainable – a kind of petition for betrothal to God. Thus those who grieve in their longing for the Bridegroom to whom they are not yet united utter as it were certain words of courtship, smiting themselves and calling upon Him with tears as though He were not present and perhaps might never be present. But the consummation of grief is pure bridal union with the Bridegroom. For this reason St Paul, after describing a married couple's union in one flesh as 'a great mys-

Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth, Vol. IV, Translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, New York, 1999, 316.

⁶⁵ In paragraphs 60-61, Palamas went on to describe the 'enlightening' condition, quoting Evagrius Ponticus (Skemmata, 4 and 2), Diadochus of Photice (Chapters, 89) and Isaac the Syrian (Discourse, 32) (See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 225-226, note 4-5;1; also read the reflections in Rigo A., De l'apologie à l'évocation de l'expérience mystique. Évagre le Pontique, Isaac le Syrien et Diadoque de Photice dans les œuvres de Grégoire Palamas (et dans la controverse palamite), in: Knotenpunkt Byzanz: Wissensformen und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen, Edited by Andreas Speer and Philipp Steinkrüger, Berlin, Boston, 2012, 91.

⁶⁶ The paragraph is largely taken from the Life of Peter the Athonite (See Χρήστου Π.Κ., Πρὸς τὴν σεμνοτάτην ἐν μοναζούσαις Ξένην, in: Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράματα, Ε' τόμος, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, 171-172).

tery’, added, ‘but I say this with respect to Christ and the Church’ (Eph. 5:32).⁶⁷

To achieve peace and divinization, men are called to become one in Christ, which is why they are already united to Him through the ecclesial body where the spousal union is fully celebrated.

Conclusions

Looking at the writings of these two authoritative spiritual directors, we can agree that the contents are similar, and that the “recommendations [are] similar to other works sent to the sisters by spiritual fathers”, as Rigo states,⁶⁸ and this only confirms their belonging to the reference Tradition, as the first factor of authority for any πατήρ πνευματικός.⁶⁹

The two directors possess characteristics that every spiritual father should possess; Father Kallistos Ware emphasized that they were adept at discerning spirits, feeling love for the nuns they directed, as well as compassionate in their con-suffering with them,⁷⁰ to these we can add a fine psychological sensitivity, which led Theolepto «to direct by letters a princess who had become a nun and abbess:

⁶⁷ Palamas G., To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia, in: *Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth, Vol. IV, Translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, New York, 1999, 321.*

⁶⁸ Rigo A., *La direction spirituelle des moniales à Byzance (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, in: *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Edited by E. Kountoura Galaki and E. Mitsiou, Athens, 2019, 292. They are along the lines inaugurated in ancient monasticism and in more refined ways by Theodore Studita and Euphrosyne.

⁶⁹ See Scrima A., *La tradition du père spirituel dans l’Église d’Orient*, in: *Le Maître Spirituel selon les grandes traditions et d’après des témoignages contemporains*, Paris, 1983, 173-189.

⁷⁰ See Ware K., *The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity*, in: *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, NY, 2001, 135-140.

it seems that this great lady demanded obedience rather harshly, as she was accustomed to from her previous life; it took a lot of instruction for her to become fully aware of her duty to be ‘mother’ to her nuns’»⁷¹ as Špidlík stated.

Theoleptos and Gregory Palamas prove to be adherents of the inheritance transmitted by the ascetic tradition of exile, and agree with Scrima we can find the existence in them of:

A tradition, taken in the sense of living teaching, centered on the immediate transmission, from the spiritual father to the disciple, of the science and practice of mental prayer; it is that which forms the substance, the marrow of the exilic life. In the Orthodox conception, however, prayer is not limited and is not reserved exclusively to monks: their specific role is to be the guardians of its authentic transmission. The monks are [...] real signs, visible traces of the inheritance [...] because they welcome the gift of “the blessing bearer of grace of the Inheritance”: as science and as practice.⁷²

⁷¹ Špidlík T., *La direzione spirituale nell'Oriente Cristiano, Vita Consacrata*, Vol.16, 1980, 526.

⁷² Scrima A., *L'accompagnamento spirituale: Il movimento del Roveto ardente e la rinascita esicasta in Romania*, Magnano, 2018, 64.

HESYCHAST PRAYER AND ASCETIC VIRTUE IN THEOLEPTOS OF PHILADELPHIA AND GREGORY PALAMAS: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION

Alessia Brombin

Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University,
E-mail: brombin.alessia@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7823-4443>

This study presents a refined comparative analysis of the spiritual fatherhood and ascetic teachings of Theoleptos of Philadelphia and Gregory Palamas, two eminent figures in late Byzantine spirituality. Their epistolary guidance to monastic disciples, particularly the nuns Irene-Eulogia and Xenia, reveals crucial aspects of their theological and ascetic instruction.

Theoleptos' letters emphasize the cultivation of virtues such as penance (*penthos*), spiritual vigilance, and unceasing prayer. His teachings advocate for the renunciation of worldly pleasures and underscore the significance of solitude and ascetic discipline as pathways to union with Christ. Theoleptos guides his disciples toward a spousal union with the Divine, urging them to transcend human desires and embrace a state of mourning for lost divine love. His epistles offer a nuanced account of monastic spiritual direction during a period when ascetic practices were fundamental to Byzantine religious life.

This comparative examination reveals a shared emphasis on ascetic virtue while highlighting the nuanced differences in their theological frameworks. Theoleptos and Palamas offer complementary perspectives on the ascetic journey, enriching our understanding of Byzantine monastic spirituality and its diverse expressions in the late medieval period.

Keywords: Hesychast Prayer, Ascetic Virtue, Theoleptos of Philadelphia, Gregory Palamas.