



Passionately Drunk



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The Philokalia, that wonderful collection of writings by the fathers on prayer of the heart, has as its full title, *The Philokalia of the Neptic Saints gathered from our Holy Theophoric Fathers, through which, by means of the philosophy of ascetic practice and contemplation, the intellect is purified, illumined, and made perfect.* Little wonder it is known popularly as the *Philokalia*. That word, *Philokalia*, means “the love of beautiful things.” It is not a reference to expensive, decorative items, but to the things which are made beautiful by their union with God. All things are beautiful inasmuch as they are united to God, Who is Beauty itself. Another important word in the title is the adjective, “Neptic” (νηπτικός). It has a variety of translations: sober, watchful, vigilant. It refers to those who, having their earthly senses purified, have become truly aware of God and dwell in Him. This title is especially used to describe the fathers of the *Hesychast* tradition in Orthodoxy, the tradition of ceaseless prayer and inner stillness associated with the monastic life.

To describe these fathers as “sober,” is very insightful. For our experience with the passions, the disordered desires of our body and soul, is often an experience of drunkenness.

For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him (1 Thess. 5:7-10).

The man who is drunk is famously unaware of his surroundings. He stumbles physically, mentally and spiritually, barely aware of his own imbalance. The passions have the same ability to blind us. In anger we are aware primarily of our own anger. What we see, we see through the haze of the energy that pulses through our mind and body.



All of the passions have this property. They consume us and become the primary lens through which we see the world and with which we react. Thus we are described as in “delusion.” Those who see the world through their passions do not see the truth of things. They see their own passions.

There is a social aspect to the passions – they are not restricted to an individual’s experience. Whole societies, or significant segments within it, can be drunk with the same passions. Thus a whole society can be drunk with the passion of racism (a mixture of ignorance, superstition, fear, anger, etc.). Such a passion is reinforced by being repeatedly affirmed by those around us. Many aspects of culture are simply a communion of the passions.

We live in an age where the passions are carefully studied and used as the objects of marketing. Those things that are sold to us (even those that supposedly appeal to our intellect) are marketed to our passions. Apple computer famously researches the “feel” of its packaging, presenting a sensual experience that is associated with quality, precision and value. It is a successful strategy across the whole of our culture.

However, those who are “drunk” with the passions also yield themselves as victims to their intoxication. Political parties pour massive amounts of money into their campaigns simply to create and nurture the passions by which people vote. We are not governed by reason or informed decisions. Most of what you or I think about political subjects is a description of the passions to which we are enslaved. The political cynicism of many is, to a degree, a recognition of our disgust with the politics of passion.

By the same token, most of the opinions we nurture are equally the product of our passions. We think, we believe, we decide, we act largely in accord with the passions to which we are enthralled. Theological debates are generally arguments between one person’s passions and another’s. It is a conversation between drunks.

And so the Church values the holy, *sober* fathers. These are the men and women who have walked the narrow way of salvation, “putting to death the deeds of the body.” Inner stillness is the state of freedom from disordered passions. The neptic fathers do not cease to desire (they are not Buddhists). But their desires have been purified and healed – restored to proper order. Sobriety means desiring the right thing in the right way at the right time. Traditionally, this purification and healing come as a result of a life of repentance, fasting and prayer. It slays demons and heals the wounds of the soul. All things are brought into obedience to Christ.

It is the life that Scripture enjoins:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world (1 Peter 5:8-9).

There is a story in the desert fathers that illustrates such vigilance. A community of monks once heard a rumor that one of their number was harboring a woman in his cell. They went to the elder and complained. While they became yet more agitated, the elder slipped away to the cell of the erring monk. Finding the woman there, he hid her in a large earthen vessel. He placed the lid on the vessel and sat on it. Soon the angry monks arrived at the cell and began to search for the woman. Out of respect for the elder they overlooked the vessel on which he was sitting. Finding nothing, they apologized to the erring monk and



left. The elder, rose from his seat and said to the monk, “Pay attention to yourself.”

It is a call to sobriety. The angry monks were drunk with their own self-righteousness. Their sin was at least as great as the erring monk. The elder alone was sober. His sobriety hid the sin of a man from those who would have harmed him, and revealed the sin to the one who needed to be healed. The word of healing was kind and without judgment. “Pay attention to yourself.” It is the simple word of St. Peter, “Be sober.”

For all of us, in every moment of the day with regard to all things and all people, it is good to pay proper attention to ourselves.

This prayer of St. Isaac of Syria, great among the neptic fathers, is one of my favorites:

I knock at the door of Thy compassion, Lord: send aid to my scattered impulses which are drunk with the multitude of the passions and the power of darkness.

Thou canst see my sores hidden within me: stir up contrition – though not corresponding to the weight of my sins, for if I receive full awareness of the extent of my sins, Lord, my soul would be consumed by the bitter pain from them.

Assist my feeble stirrings on the path to true repentance, and may I find relief from the vehemence of sins through the contrition that comes of Thy gift, for without the power of Thy grace I am quite unable to enter within myself, become aware of my stains, and so, at the sight of them, be able to be still from great distraction.

Source: [Glory to God for all Things](#)