



Daniel Coriu

## The path from the natural to the spiritual *diakrisis* through *askesis* in the views of St. Apostle Paul and Elder Joseph the Hesychast

### Abstract

Elder Joseph the Hesychast (1897-1959) spiritual understanding resembles the Pauline one. Even though we recount only three passages wherein Saint Paul uses the exact word *diakrisis*, the meaning of the word is progressively detailed and enlarged throughout his epistles. Elder Joseph goes even further than Saint Paul concerning *diakrisis*, underling the major differences between natural and spiritual discernment.

Now, why did I choose to offer a com-



Rev. Daniel CORIU,  
Representative of the  
Romanian Patriarchate in  
Japan, PhD Student at the  
Faculty of Orthodox Theo-  
logy (Biblical Studies), of  
the Bucharest University,  
Romania

parative analysis of two perspectives that were written in considerably different periods? First of all, I would like to emphasize the continuous presence of *diakrisis* in the spiritual life of the Church, throughout the millenniums, from its first conception the Pauline epistles to its later developments in the writings of Elder Joseph the Hesychast. It is clear that Saint Joseph does not create something new. However, rather he follows the tradition of the Church and in certain aspects, strengthens and renews it. Moreover, the second reason for choosing those two representatives is the link between *askesis* and *diakrisis*. To both Saint Paul and Elder Joseph the Hesychast, *askesis* has a crucial role not only in reaching spiritual discernment but also in keeping it. Both *askesis* and *diakrisis* are not entirely the works of man, but also gifts of the Holy Spirit.

#### Keywords

right-distinction, ascetic, niptic writings, Saint Paul, Elder Joseph, orthodox hermeneutics

## 1 Introduction

Within modern theology, two main modalities of biblical understanding can be observed: first the historical-critical exegesis, which has its roots in the protestant environment from the Illuminist period and can be found in different academic researches; and second the patristic exegesis, which is more specific to the orthodox biblical studies.

These two directions belong to different areas and tend to act in an antagonist way- the usage of one implying the abandonment of the other. Even though great improvements have been made

in the last decades in order to connect these two exeges in a complementary approach, the major problem remains: the reading and understanding of the biblical text are confessional. The differences in reading the Scripture are based on the specificity of each hermeneutic which has its own methods according to the doctrinal background. Thus, we consider that the Orthodox Theology needs to rediscover its own exegetic and hermeneutic concept that reflects its dogmatic roots and the ecclesial heritage. The Church of Christ is the space of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. This is the reason why the Orthodox Church does not describe the word of the Holy Scripture to be merely a human word, but particular a word of God which needs special means in order to be read and understood. These means are the same means which Fathers of the Church have used in order to know God.

Our purpose in the present study is to emphasize the need for an *orthodox hermeneutic*, using as an example the texts of Saint Paul and Elder Joseph the Hesychast. Both of them express the unitary word of God, even though between them stands a long period. Also, we will like to underline that the contemporary orthodox theology needs to reconsider the hermeneutical sources, using along with the Father's works from the first centuries, and those of the more recent Fathers. The reason why it should do that stands in the continuous life of the Church enlightened by the same Holy Spirit.

## 2 Conceptual approaches

The word *διάκρισις* is made of the preposition *δια* which denotes a channel of an act and is translated by *through, after, by,*

from<sup>1</sup>; and κρήσις which suggests a *legal decision, a judgment, a right judgment* or even *punishment or condemnation*.<sup>2</sup>

In the majority of dictionaries, the term διάκρισις is seen mainly with the definition of distinction, which appears to be the oldest one. Separation, dissolution, dividing is also expressed by διάκρισις. Besides these, it can carry the meaning of diagnosis or interpretation of dreams.<sup>3</sup>

The exegetical dictionaries understand the term in its biblical context, which focuses on the distinguishing or decision, leading towards discerning. At the same time, it can express the ability to decide and to distinguish, but also dispute or argument according to Rom 14:1.<sup>4</sup>

Here, we need to underline an important aspect regarding the translation of the word διάκρισις in several languages. In English, the word is translated using a singular word, as discernment, decision, interpretation, or separation. French follows the same tendency using for διάκρισις words such as en séparant, séparatrice, dissolution, interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

A special case is the Romanian translation which, besides discernment, separation or distinction, mentions διάκρισις as *right-judgment, right-consideration* or more recently, *right-distinction*. These aspects are essential for the future analysis of

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, M. F. Unger, W. White Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, vol.2, (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1996), p. 119

<sup>3</sup> H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 399

<sup>4</sup> J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.), (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems Inc., 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Anatole Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, (Hachete, 1935), p. 475.

the term within the Father's writings. The majority of the contemporary translation of ascetic writings in Romanian employs compound words as cited for *διάκρισις*.

Even though the concept itself doesn't have a Christian origin (being found in Plato, Aristotle or Philo), the ecclesial community, as usual, has made this term to be used with Christian meaning, without losing its original depth, but only adapting it to the Christian purposes and usage.

In the patristic tradition of the Church we distinguish four significant meanings and contexts of the word *διάκρισις*:

- the power of distinction – such that of the consequences of an action (Heb. 5:14);
- the power of penetrating others' thoughts;
- the distinction of spirits (Luke 9:55; 1 Co 12:10), - which is by far the most used definition, and
- foresight.<sup>6</sup>

All these meanings can be found in both exegetical writings of the Church and especially in ascetical teachings of the Fathers. The concept of *διάκρισις* evolved and became complete in the sense that it now fully expresses the levels of Christian spiritual life.

However, its foundation lies in the New Testament, especially in the Saint Paul's epistles. There we find three passages where Saint Paul uses the word *διάκρισις*:

- μὴ εἰς διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν (Rom. 14:1);
- ἄλλω διακρίσεις πνευμάτων (1 Cor 12:10);
- πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ (Heb 5:14).

Beside the noun *διάκρισις*, Saint Paul places much emphasis on the verb *διακρίνω*. Even though we will not focus on the verb in

---

<sup>6</sup> John Chryssavgis, *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinai-te Mountain*, (Bucharest: Sophia Publishing, 2005), p. 305, (in Romanian).

our study, it is crucial to underline some main characteristics in order to better understand the structure of this concept.

In ancient Greek, the verb form of the word is more frequently used than its noun form. This is the reason why we can find it in Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Plutarch, and others. In their writings, the primary usage of the verb is to denote separation or partition or, as in latter works, decision.

In the New Testament *διακρίνω* is used 19 times (in Saint Paul's epistles is present in Rom. 4:20; 14:23; 1 Cor 4:7; 6:5; 11:29; 14:29). Same as the noun, the prefix *δια* strengthens the ideas of distinguishing, seeing and separating included in the root word *κρίνω*. Thus, *διακρίνω* extends the lexical content of *κρίνω* considerably in the meanings differentiate, decide, judge and dispute with one another, estimate, interpret, explain. *Διακρίνω* also appears with the broader meaning doubt.<sup>7</sup>

A general understanding which emerges from the usage of the verb *διακρίνω* in the Pauline text is the action of judgment, decision or disputation. In another instance (Rom. 14) the main verb *κρίνω* is used in connection with defamation or slander.

As shown in I Cor 6:6, the action *διακρίναι* is an action which only a *σοφός* (wise) can do it. Thus, the meaning of the verb is linked to *σοφός* in order to express its particularity. As we will notice in the writings of Fathers, the action of *διακρίνω* is not a common one, but requires particular features which are part of the area of *ἀσκήσις*.

In the context of I Cor 11:29-34, *διακρίνω* represents the foundation of the Christian attitude towards the Lord's Supper, which is the Holy Eucharist. The connection with the verb *δοκιμαζέτω* entitles the self-knowledge and covers the inner importance of *νοῦς* in ascetic practice.

---

<sup>7</sup> H. R. Balz, G. Schneider, *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 305-307.

Thus, the verb *διακρίνω* in the Pauline thinking embraces different meanings which have naturally been transferred to the noun *διάκρισις*. At the same time, it represents a deep base for what it will become the elaborate ascetic tradition of the Church.

The link between *ἀσκήσις* and *διάκρισις* is not terminological, but conceptual (or better, existential). This is the reason why we have subtly suggested earlier some simple directions regarding *ἀσκήσις* and *διάκρισις*. However, it is necessary at this point, for a better understanding, to underline some main characteristic of *ἀσκήσις*, as we did with *διάκρισις*.

From the beginning, we must stress that the term itself is not of Christian origin, neither is mentioned in more than one place in the New Testament- Acts 24:16: ἐν τούτῳ καὶ αὐτὸς ἀσκῶ ἀπρόσκοπον συνείδησιν ἔχειν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διὰ παντός.

In secular literature, the concept of *ἀσκήσις* has developed mainly through its verb *ἀσκέω*, from the initial meaning of working with raw materials (Homer, Hesiod), to a practice that becomes customary (Hippolytus, Sophocles) and reaching its stable meaning of exercise, experience, method in the later writings (Plato, Herodotus, Aristotle)<sup>8</sup>.

The difference between the philosophical meaning of *ἀσκήσις* and the significance that it gained in Christian teachings differ according to the intended purpose. If in Zenon's words the *ἀσκήσις* aims to achieve the sense of "virtue in perfection"<sup>9</sup>,

---

<sup>8</sup> Hermigild Dressler, *The Usage of Ἀσκησις and its Cognates in Greek Documents to 100 A.D.* (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1947), pp.10-45.

<sup>9</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6,71, vol.2, transl. by R.D. Hicks, vol.2, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: William Heinemann, Harvard University Press LTD, 1965), p. 118.

then in the Christian teachings, the same word becomes labor and determination toward Christian perfection.

Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov says that the achieving of such perfection cannot be completed by human efforts. Thus, Christian perfection “comes from God alone and is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 5:48). Henceforth, we understand that askesis as such, for Christians, can never be a goal or a purpose; it is only the means, the act of our liberty and our understanding on the path towards the acquisition of God’s gift. As an ascetic theory, our askesis becomes in its development, a science, an art, a culture. However, I say again, not matter how elevated a culture might be when it is regarded from its human aspect, it has only a relative value.”<sup>10</sup>

In this statement we can perceive the main difference between the Orthodox *ἀσκήσις* and the philosophic or academic one: the *ἀσκήσις* itself cannot succeed in anything without the involvement of the Holy Spirit. It is not an entirely human process and cannot be devoid of human effort. It is a synergy between God and human.

The academic field thus is not generally receptive of this perspective. For example, James Goehring states that “Jesus of the Gospels was not an ascetic”.<sup>11</sup> From the academic perspectives, only particular physical acts are recognized as ascetic or certain isolated groups, thus eliminating in a Nestorian way, the presence and the involvement of God (such an example is the categorization which Walter Kaelber undertakes in *The Encyclope-*

---

<sup>10</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *About the fundamentals of the orthodox ascetic*, transl. by Hieromonk Rafail (Noica), (Alba-Iulia: Reintregirea printing, 2017), p. 8 (in Romanian)

<sup>11</sup> James E. Goehring, *Ascetism*, in “Encyclopedia of Early Christianity”, Everett Ferguson(ed.), (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1990), p. 105.



*dia of Religion*<sup>12</sup>). Also, modern analysis emphasizes the negative aspects of *ἀσκέσις* in contrast to the real characteristics of the life of the Church. In general, for today people, *ἀσκέσις* signifies “not freedom but submission to irksome rules; not beauty but harsh rigor; not joy but gloomy austerity.”<sup>13</sup>

The main constituents of the *ἀσκέσις* concept are *ἐγκράτεια* (self-control), *εὐτέλεια* (frugality), *ἀναχώρησις* (isolation), *ἡσυχία* (silence, stillness). In the Christian life, they are seen in their biblical fundament (2 Pe 1:6; 1 Co 8:13; 2 Co 11:3) and cannot be regarded solely negatively. By delving into their deepest meaning, we discover their main purpose, which is the love for God (I Co 13).

Nevertheless, moderation is required in the practice of *ἀσκέσις*. This moderation is entailed by *διάκρισις* which distinguish true and natural *ἀσκέσις* from unnatural and demonic *ἀσκέσις*. *Διάκρισις* is specific to Christian ascetic life since the beginning, as a major characteristic which differs it from any other so-called “ascetic”. The attitude towards the body is the point where the natural *ἀσκέσις* separates from unnatural one. The latter, “evinces either explicitly or implicitly a distinct hatred for God’s creation, and particularly for the body; natural ascetism may do this, but on the whole, it does not. The official attitude of the Church, especially from the fourth century onwards, has been entirely clear. Voluntary abstinence for ascetic reasons is entirely legitimate, but to abstain out of a loathing for the material creation is heretical.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Walter O. Kaelber, *Ascetism*, in „*The Encyclopedia of Religion*”, vol.1, 2nd ed., Lindsay Jones (ed), (Washington: Thomson-Gale, 2005), p. 527.

<sup>13</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?* in “Ascetism” ed. by Vincent L. Wimbush, Richard Valantasis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

### 3 Διάκρισις and άσκέσις in the Patristic teaching

In the entire patristic literature of the Church (especially in *Philokalia* and in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*) the role of *διάκρισις* in the ascetic practice is very much emphasized.

Saint Anthony the Great is one of the famous spiritual fathers of the Church, whose name can be easily associated with *διάκρισις*, which permeates his sayings. One of the most evident is that from verse 8 of the *Paterikon* writing: “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God”<sup>15</sup> Another similar saying belongs to Abba Poemen: “Many of our Fathers have become very courageous in asceticism, but in fineness of perception there are very few”<sup>16</sup>. In the same nuance, Saint Cassian the Roman, says that “the receiving of food with measure and discernment, gives to the body the health and doesn’t take away its holiness.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the majority of the Fathers from ascetic writings, emphasize the role of *διάκρισις* in order to moderate *άσκέσις*, because, according to Saint John Damascene, “these which are done without discernment and purpose, not only they are useless, but they are not good, and they damage.”<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, we can find in the same writings, another nuance which in reverse, stress the importance of *άσκέσις* in order to achieve *right-judgment* or *right-distinction* (*διάκρισις*).

---

<sup>15</sup> \*\*\**The sayings of the Desert Fathers – the alphabetical collection*, transl. by Benedicta Ward, revised edition, (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

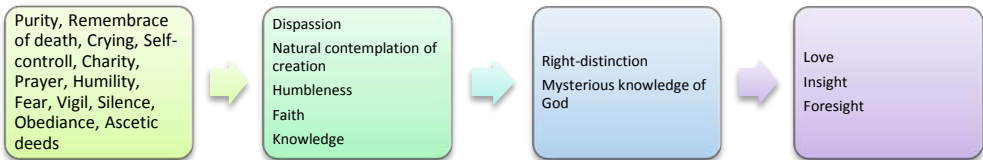
<sup>17</sup> Saint Cassian the Roman, *To Castor the Bishop, About the eight thoughts of evilness*, in “*Filokalia*”, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, vol. 1, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Buharest: Humanitas, 2009), p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> St John of Damaskos, *On the Virtues and the Vices*, in “*Philokalia*” vol.4, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), p.174. (in Romanian)

More important, in Fathers' sayings, we encounter a separate dimension within the concept of *διάκρισις*: one is called *natural*, and the other is named *real (spiritual) distinction*. The first one is often linked with the virtuous acts or living, and the second one is only a result of interference of Holy Grace. The virtuous living compresses different aspects of *ἀσκήσις* and has the role of leading towards the latter aspect, strengthening its presence. From the Philokalia of the Niptic Fathers we were able to extract different categories of the relation between *ἀσκήσις* and *διάκρισις*. We will resume the texts by making a short schema in order to understand better the importance of this group for the spiritual life.

*ἀσκήσις*

*διάκρισις*



Within the first category, we find some main characteristics of *ἀσκήσις*, such as *ἐγκράτεια* (self-control) or *ἡσυχία* (silence, stillness). Besides these, all the others are considered to be ascetic deeds, which have an essential place in the spiritual life of the Fathers. In their perspectives, virtues can only be reached by “the care for deeds”<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, in this care, they define three types of deeds: the bodily deed, the hands’ deed, and the soul’s deed.<sup>20</sup> The meaning of practical and ascetical effort is to raise the soul to the next level of spiritual life, without stagnation, but “advancing towards God and never static in our aspira-

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Ilias the Presbyter, *Moral Heads*, in “Philokalia” vol.4, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publisher, 2008), p.254 (in Romanian).

tion towards supernal beauty”<sup>21</sup>. “The fire of God”<sup>22</sup> leads the soul into the mysterious knowledge of Him, leaving behind the practical deeds and living only in a contemplative way. This level is the level of the real distinction, “real discernment and discernment itself.”<sup>23</sup> Saint John, the Climacus, assigns it to those who are ahead in the spiritual life.<sup>24</sup> Its characteristics are the luminous grace of Spirit<sup>25</sup>, wisdom<sup>26</sup>, insight, foresight<sup>27</sup>. According to the same Saint, all the following gifts from this advanced level are based on obedience, from which humility is revealed. The obedience, because it always leads the soul towards question and unwillingness, learns the natural discernment. Moreover, the humility, by giving faith and dispassion, brings forth the right-distinction and spiritual discernment. Comparing to the above statements, the natural discernment is considered to be the knowledge of things and the distinction which the soul does between evil and good. Abba Dorotheus compares the natural discernment with some “ties which strengthens the house, and gathers stone with stone, and keeps

---

<sup>21</sup> Nikitas Stithatos, *The 300 Heads about purification, nature and knowledge*, in “Philokalia” vol. 6, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publisher, 2009), p. 256. (in Romanian); the English text: *On the Inner Nature of Things and on the Purification of the Intellect: One Hundred Texts*, in *Philokalia*, vol.4, transl. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, Faber&Faber, 1995, pp. 131-132, (Kindle book).

<sup>22</sup> Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent*, ed. by Ioan-Cristinel Tesu, (Neamt: Sihastria Monastery, 2015), p. 246, (in Romanian).

<sup>23</sup> Nikitas Stithatos, *The 300 Heads about purification*, p. 256.

<sup>24</sup> Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder*, p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Gnostic Heads, (or Theological)*, in “Philokalia” vol. 2, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publisher, 2009), pp. 163-164, (in Romanian).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder*, p. 90.

the building together, and gives it a beautiful appearance.”<sup>28</sup> Saint Maximos the Confessor shows that “the natural power of distinction leads the soul towards virtue by deeds”, whereas “the luminous grace of Spirit enlightens the mind to choose above all the companionship of wisdom.”<sup>29</sup> The knowledge of the self and the distinction of evil and good are part of natural discernment for beginners and to those on the middle level, according to Saint John the Climacus.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, we understand that in the patristic conception, the natural *διάκρισις* has a balancing role in the practice of *ἀσκήσις*, moderating the way and the intensity of ascetic deeds. On the other hand, without *ἀσκήσις* no one can reach neither natural *διάκρισις* nor real distinction.

Elder Joseph the Hesychast, a more recent father (+1959), demonstrates that the patristic insights regarding the link between *ἀσκήσις* and *διάκρισις*, have the same source – the Divine Grace.

Forwards, we will analyze the spiritual words of Elder Joseph regarding *διάκρισις*, comparing them with the niptic writings and with the Saint Apostle Paul’s perspective. The purpose is to emphasize that the outpouring of grace and wisdom is the same in the Church, from its beginning until contemporary time.

---

<sup>28</sup> Abba Dorotheos, *Divers teachings for spiritual use*, in “Philokalia”, vol. IX, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: The Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 1980), p. 620, (in Romanian).

<sup>29</sup> Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Gnostic Heads*, p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder*, p. 244.

#### **4 Pauline inheritance and niptic similarities in Elder Joseph's teaching**

From Elder Joseph, there remain not many writings, besides some letters and two biographical writings of his disciples. His life and his spiritual path were not focused on leaving material resources for posterity, but more on a spiritual method of knowing God and uniting with Him. He was a perfect ascetic. From the references of Elder Ephraim, we become aware of his severe *ἀσκήσις* in all contexts of life. Fasting, vigil, prayer, crying, self-control, and silence were fulfilled perfectly, without compromise and self-reliance. „Every day he ate only 75 grams of crumbled bread after the 9 hours, meaning 3 PM. Only Saturday and Sunday they ate little food with oil.”<sup>31</sup>

However, he had *διάκρισις* as a measure in all ascetic deeds. Both his disciples (Elders Ephraim and Joseph) recount that how great was his ascetic practice, so was his spiritual discernment. In every written document regarding his life, is included a particular chapter about discernment. Besides that, every ascetic deed is described with another one, measured differently, according to contexts and persons.

In his book about his spiritual Father, Elder Joseph from Vatopedi has a chapter titled *About discernment and foresight*.<sup>32</sup> Also, Elder Ephraim evokes different aspects of the natural discernment of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, revealed in the ascetic life of their monastic community<sup>33</sup>. An extraordinary approach

---

<sup>31</sup> Archim. Ephraim, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, transl. by Stefan Nutescu, (Bucharest: Evanghelismos Printing, 2010), p. 111, (in Romanian).

<sup>32</sup> Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Elder Joseph the Hesychast. Struggles-Experiences-Teachings*, transl. by Stefan Nutescu, (Bucharest: Evanghelismos Printing, 2009), p. 210, (in Romanian).

<sup>33</sup> Archim. Ephraim, *My Elder Joseph*, pp. 249-257, (in Romanian).

regarding *διάκρισις* can be found in the letters of Saint Joseph. There, every virtue and ascetic labor is seen as worthless without the grace of God.

The climbing from the natural to spiritual discernment is described mainly in the memories of father Joseph from Vatopedi. A crucial fact is that the sayings of Elder Joseph have the same meanings and nuances as the Pauline views and the niptic expressions. In his teaching, the natural distinction is presented as a result of the ascetic practice and comes before the level of real (spiritual) distinction (discernment).

The Saint Paul's *διάκρισις* from Heb. 5,14 describes the level of the natural distinction between evil and good, which is specific to those from the middle level according to Saint John the Climacus. However, this level of discernment is the achievement of the ascetic deeds and is recalled by Elder Joseph as "a special experience gained in long ascetic practice against passions and demons."<sup>34</sup> The knowledge of the High Priesthood of Christ requires a high level of perfection and is specific to those who have reached maturity and perfection. The Pauline discourse from 5:11 to 6:2 corresponds to the patristic insight between ascetic deeds and the power of distinction. The learnings which Saint Paul reminds here can be compared to the practical deeds from the niptic writings and also, from the life of Elder Joseph. The practical deeds are important too, but they can be left behind when the soul reaches the mysterious knowledge of God. Even though Saint Paul recognizes *διάκρισις* as characteristic to those who have reached maturity and perfection, it is not in contradiction with the niptic teachings. Thus, the Father's sayings about the level of distinction (natural discernment) being not of perfection, but the middle level, are biblically founded. In

---

<sup>34</sup> Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, p. 210, (in Romanian).

one paragraph, Saint Nikitas Stithates casts away any doubt: "While we are infants in need of milk (cf. Heb. 5:12) we are suckled on the milk of the introductory virtues acquired through bodily discipline; yet this is of but limited profit (cf. 1 Tim. 4:8) to us once we begin to grow in virtue and gradually leave our infancy behind. When we attain adolescence and are nourished by the solid food of the contemplation of the spiritual essences of things - for our soul's organs of perception are now well attuned (cf. Heb. 5:14) - it may be said that we increase in stature and grace (cf. Luke 2:52), and sit among the elders (cf. Luke 2:46), disclosing to them things hidden in the depths of darkness (cf. Job 12:22). When we have reached 'mature manhood, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13), we proclaim to all the meaning of repentance, teach others about the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 4:17) and press on towards the Passion (cf. Luke 12:50). For this is the ultimate goal of everyone who has reached perfection in the practice of the virtues: after passing through all the different ages of Christ, he finally undergoes the trials that Christ suffered on the cross."<sup>35</sup>

Useful for our study is the mention of Saint Paul's regarding the *practice* by which an immature person needs, to reach his perfection. The noun *ἐξίτη* is in close relation with the verb *ἐξασκέω* which can mean a rough training or practice. Subtly, we notice in the Pauline passage from the Epistle to Hebrew, a connection between the concept of *ἀσκέσις* and the goal of *διάκρισις*. In the

---

<sup>35</sup> Nikitas Stithatos, *The 300 Heads about purification*, p. 286 (in Romanian); Nikitas Stithatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge, Love and the Perfection of Living: One Hundred Texts*, in *Philokalia*, vol.4, transl. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, Faber&Faber, 1995, p. 152, (Kindle book).



present context, *ἀσκέσις* is required for reaching the natural discernment, which can easily lead to spiritual discernment.

In Elder Joseph's teaching, one can assign natural distinction to both the level of practical life and knowing the difference between good and evil. At this level, one can experience an inner knowledge of other people spiritual states or perspectives, according to his own background. This is called "natural foresight" and is compared to intuitive knowledge which exists between some blood relatives or very close persons. The process itself is called by Saint John Climacus as *νοερά ἄισθησις* when he speaks about different levels of right-distinction.

As Elder Ephraim from Arizona narrates, Elder Joseph the Hesychast had also *διάκρισις* in the ascetic labors of his monastic community. According to the niptic writings, the discernment in practical life is a basis on which every growth takes place. "Therefore, without right-distinction, nothing good can be done, even if for the unlearned seems to be good, either is done at a wrong time and without need, either doesn't accounts the things 'measure or the strength of the person, or knowledge and many others. Moreover, the one who has the gift of distinction, he has received it by humility. Moreover, he knows everything."<sup>36</sup> A person who has the power of distinction is severe with himself and indulgent with the others. Elder Joseph the Hesychast was such a person: "In general, in his ascetic life, he was very harsh and relentless. He loved with all his heart "the fasting, the vigil, the prayer". The bread and the food were always measured. He never eats fresh food if he knows that remains were left from the other days. However, regarding food, he was more indulgent with us, young people. He knew that the

---

<sup>36</sup> Peter of Damask, *Spiritual Teachings*, (in "Philokalia" vol. 6, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest:Humanitas Publisher, 2009), p. 194, ( in Romanian).

fasting is not a purpose, but a means and a helper in the ascetic labors."<sup>37</sup>

Beside the natural discernment (distinction) which combines both the ascetic practice and natural foresight, Elder Joseph the Hesychast has appreciated the most, the spiritual discernment or the spiritual power of distinction.

The patristic texts recognize the Pauline expression of spiritual gifts from I Corinthians 12 as a biblical argument for the gift of spiritual distinction.

Saint John Cassian from Rome describes the gift of right-distinction (or discrimination as in the English translation) to be "no small virtue, but one of the most important gifts of the Holy Spirit. Concerning these gifts, the Apostle says: "To one is given by the Spirit the principle of wisdom; to another the principle of spiritual knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing... to another discrimination of spirits' (1Cor. 12:8-10). Then, having completed his catalog of spiritual gifts, he adds: "But all these are energized by the one and self-same Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:11). You can see, therefore, that the gift of discrimination is nothing worldly or insignificant. It is the greatest gift of God's grace."<sup>38</sup>

For Saint John Chrysostom, the distinction of spirits from 1 Corinthians 12:10 is knowledge of one "who is real spiritual and who is not, who is a real prophet and who is a deceiver."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Archim. Ephraim, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, p. 250, (in Romanian).

<sup>38</sup> St John Cassian, *On the Holy Fathers of Sketis And on Discrimination, Written for Abba Leontios*, in "Philokalia" vol. 6, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest:Humanitas Publisher, 2008), pp. 126-127, (in Romanian).

<sup>39</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Constantin Fagetean (ed.), (Bucharest: Sophia Printing, 2005), p. 306, (in Romanian).

As for Elder Joseph the Hesychast, the gift of right-distinction between spirits was a necessity for every ascetic person. He defines it as “the exact knowledge of spiritual charismata: when it works; which kind of charisma forms it and which applies it, when it shows and what human need to do; when it withdraws and how human need to pay attention and to work.”<sup>40</sup> In his concept, the distinction of spirits is more useful for the Church than prophecy or foresight. Even though it can spring forth both prophecy and foresight, the right-distinction in the spiritual fight reveals the paths of the enemy and helps the ascetic person to avoid any deceit: “Foresight and prophecy partially help and build the Church. Right-distinction (διάκρισις) however, build and fulfill the one who has this charisma and then builds and the others, because it knows the places and the enemies and the type of war. Paul was referring to this when he said: “we are not ignorant of his schemes.” (2 Cor. 2:11)”<sup>41</sup>

A crucial aspect of the right-distinction gift is that it does not only stem from human struggle but more so from the mercy of God.

Nevertheless, the *ἀσκέσις* concept offers the tools in order to conform the soul for the receiving of the Holy Grace. However, also, it has a significant role in re-gaining the lost grace when it withdraws because of the weakness of mankind. Elder Joseph considers that the gift of right-distinction is a gift of Grace. When the Grace withdraws, it takes away together with the gift. Therefore, “very hard and harsh asceticism is required to regain the gift of right-distinction, when it withdraws for reasons

---

<sup>40</sup> Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, p. 214, (in Romanian).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

which, unfortunately, happen inevitably because of the human weakness.”<sup>42</sup>

In a letter addressed to a spiritual son, Elder Joseph expresses the importance of the Divine Grace in every ascetic deed of a human. When he speaks about fasting, prayer, silence, vigil, and crying, he shows that man needs to struggle to accomplish not only one of them but all, in order to avoid sinning. He compares the ascetic labor with the farmer’s work: “he tilled the soil, he cleans it, seeds it and then waits for the mercy of God. Moreover, if God does not send rain in the rightful time and good winds, the farmer will lose his labor”.<sup>43</sup> This process is comparable with the ascetic practice which, without the divine grace, doesn’t bring forth any fruit and the deeds become “food for demons because the deeds are stew by our passions and we are not able to reap anything.” Elder Joseph concludes that “beside all, we need the spiritual discernment, and the right-distinction of spirits, which by much zeal we need to ask from God.”<sup>44</sup>

The Elder Joseph’s perspective is consistent with the Pauline and the niptic insights. Saint Paul also conclude in the same manner as Elder Joseph, pointing out that all the virtues are originated and also “energized by the one and self-same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:11). Thus, the Holy Spirit not only initiates the ascetic labor but also sustains it. In Pauline thoughts, all the human spiritual activity and service have their fulfillment in God’s work. In 1 Corinthians 3,7, Saint Paul uses farming language with the purpose of decreasing the importance of his rhetoric and to stress on God’s involvement. This is a sign of humility

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Elder Joseph, *Monastic life*, transl. by Constantin Coman, (Bucharest: Bizantine Publishing House, 2003), pp. 369-370.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

and also of right-distinction between self-appreciation and God's support.

The same imagery of farming in Saint Nilos's *Ascetic Discourse* is also used to emphasize the role of the Divine Grace for fulfilling all the human labors: "What can be better than to entrust our anxieties to God, so that He may help us with the farming? The soil is tilled, and the seeds are sown by human effort; then God sends the rain, watering the seeds in the soft womb of the earth and enabling them to develop roots. What then, is the use of relying on our efforts since God controls the helm and directs all things as He wills?"<sup>45</sup>

The spiritual gifts follow all the ascetic labors. One who suffers such passion will receive from God "by communion the grace of dispassion as a crowning for virtues."<sup>46</sup> In the niptic perspective, right-discernment comes along with the dispassion. The same synergy between human resources and the Holy Spirit's work is revealed by Saint Maximos the Confessor. His sayings correspond to the words of Saint Paul from 1 Corinthians 12:10-11: "It is not allowed to say that only the Grace by himself work in Saints the knowledge of mysteries, without the powers which receive by nature that knowledge (...). Therefore, the grace of the Holy Spirit doesn't work wisdom in Saints without the mind to receive it; neither knowledge without capable reason for it nor the faith, without the convincing of mind and of reason about the future; neither the healing gifts, without natural love for human; nor any from the others gifts, without the skill and the capable power of each. However, again,

---

<sup>45</sup> St Nilos The Ascetic, *Ascetic Discours*, in "Philokalia" vol. 1, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest:Humanitas Publisher, 2008), pp. 165-166, (in Romanian).

<sup>46</sup> Saint Maximos the Confessor, *Gnostic Heads*, p. 176.

human will not reach these mentioned, without the power of God that gives them.”<sup>47</sup>

A very original aspect which we encounter in Elder Joseph the Hesychast’s teaching is the link between natural and spiritual discernment, but also between natural and spiritual foresight. The spiritual discernment is an exclusive gift of God, not of nature. Its presence requires total obedience and purity in Christ. “It starts from intuition and climbs gradually until foresight, insight, and prophecy, being the fruit of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Also, the real discernment will provide both natural and spiritual foresight. Comparing to natural foresight, spiritual foresight has love as its power. Thus, in the vision of Saint Joseph, natural discernment and foresight are not abandoned but included in the entire concept of *διάκρισις*.

Noticeably is not ultimately the connection which the Elder Joseph draws between the spiritual discernment and prophecy. It is related with the Pauline enumeration where the distinction of spirits plays an essential role in distinguishing the real prophecy against false prophecy. Same here, Elder Joseph reminds that even the devil has his foresight which is in opposition both to natural and spiritual foresight. By real-distinction, one can disseminate the spirits in order to prevent any deceit.

## 6 Conclusions

Our study’s purpose is to express inclusively, the uninterrupted connection between the Pauline insights regarding *διάκρισις*,

---

<sup>47</sup> *Idem, Answers to Thalasio*, in “*Philokalia*” vol. 1, transl. by Dumitru Staniloae, (Bucharest: Humanitas Publisher, 2009), pp. 274-275, (in Romanian).

<sup>48</sup> Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, p. 211, (in Romanian).

through the niptic development until its usage in Elder Joseph the Hesychast' teachings. The Pauline presence in the philocaly text is beyond some simple quotes, like a thread which follows the majority of Father's expressions. Same happens with Elder Joseph's narrations: he doesn't quote in every circumstance from Pauline epistles, but he feels the Pauline Spirit and knows that "this is what Saint Paul meant".

The niptic and ascetic exegesis is one of the most neglected exegeses of the modern theology. It is so because it is not directly concerned about the biblical text itself, but instead on the event or experience described by the text. As we observed, the perception of the Pauline realities is shown in both the niptic and Saint Joseph's writings. It is reflected by a sense of inwardness and the same, profound understanding identical to that of Saint Paul's.

Both the niptic Fathers and Elder Joseph are concerned not about the philosophical idea of *διάκρισις*, but how the concept itself can become part of their spiritual growth. This is the part where *ἀσκήσις* is very much implied. By *ἀσκήσις*, the concept of *διάκρισις* not only becomes part of spiritual life but enlarges its dimensions towards the communion with God in love. These aspects represent realities for the Saints. They are not abstract concepts based on presupposition, but rather experience shaped in human words.

The patristic exegesis represents nowadays the vertebral column of the Scripture's understanding in the orthodox ecclesiastical space. Its specificity is the actualization. It means spiritual reliving, access to the described reality from the text and by that, transposition into one's own life. In order to accomplish that, every biblical scholar must become ascetic. The understanding of the Scripture and Fathers' sayings is not a purely intellectual exercise, but, as Elder Joseph testifies, is a gift of right-distinction. By it, every person will be able to internalize

the words and to prove by experience, their validity in the spiritual life.

In our time, when so many conceptual offers are invasive, we need to have the gift of right-distinction to protect us from misunderstandings and wrong beliefs. However, we cannot have this gift if we do not follow the path which was briefly described above. We cannot jump steps in order to achieve higher performances. Even self-knowledge as evidence of humility cannot be veridic without the gift of right-distinction. Thus, the Holy Spirit can bring us faster to this understanding if we obey by faith and allow them to be formed by His Grace. He is, after all, One Who does everything according to His wish (1 Cor. 12:11).