

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

*By John Keats*

*O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the Lake  
And no birds sing;*

*O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,  
So haggard, and so woe begone?  
The Squirrel's granary is full  
And the harvest's done;*

*I see a lily on thy brow  
With anguish moist and fever dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose,  
Fast withereth too;*

*I met a Lady in the Meads,  
Full beautiful, a fairy's child  
Her hair was long, her foot was light  
And her eyes were wild;*

*I made a Garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant Zone  
She look'd at me as she did love  
And made sweet moan;*

*I set her on my pacing steed  
And nothing else saw all day long  
For sidelong would she bend and sing  
A faery's song;*

*She found me roots of relish sweet  
And honey wild and manna dew  
And sure in language strange she said  
I love thee true;*

*She took me to her elfin grot  
And there she wept and sigh'd full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four;*

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

*And there she lulled me asleep  
And there I dream'd, Ah Woe betide!  
The latest dream I ever dreamt  
On the cold hillside;*

*I saw pale kings, and princess too  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried, La Belle Dame sans Merci  
Thee hath in thrall;*

*I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill's side;*

*And this is why I sojourn here  
Alone and palely loitering;  
Though the sedge is withered from the Lake  
And no birds sing.*

## **Article by Nun Macaria**

The knight in John Keats' poem, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, with his fatally naive fascination for the supernatural, has much in common with today's spiritual seeker. The knight is described as being "at-arms," that is, prepared for battle or for some high adventure. Had he been specifically intent on romance he might have been dressed differently. He was not prepared for the kind of adventure he encountered: he did not recognize the enemy. He had a supernatural vision which was beautiful and enticing but it did not occur to him that such a vision could be harmful. When the true nature of the vision was revealed, it was too late for him. The poet implies that the youth has received a fatal, invisible wound. This fascination with the supernatural and with fair-seeming, hostile spirits was a favorite theme for the Romantic poets, as it is in our time. In both cases there has been a rejection of materialism in favor of the supernatural but without any leavening of discernment. In fact, the contemporary world has no standard or guideline for discernment; it represents a plurality of world views in which the only common understanding is that there is no truth. Even modern Christianity is ill-equipped for this task, cut off as it is from the grace and wisdom of holy Tradition. If we wish to find practical, experiential knowledge of the spiritual world, and in particular about the discernment of spirits, we need to turn to the writings of the Holy Fathers and the Saints of the Orthodox Church. We will find a harmony and consistency in these many voices of experience, from the earliest days of the Church until our own.

### Seeing Angels

First, the Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church warn us that because of our sinful state, we have much more affinity with the world of fallen spirits than with the angels. Until the heart is purified one cannot assume that one is worthy to see heavenly visions. Holy Scripture warns us that Satan is able to disguise himself as "an angel of light." (II Cor. 11:14) After all, this is the

## The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

original nature of all the fallen spirits. The spiritual nature of demons is underscored in a story about a conversation that once took place between a demon and Elder Sophrony of Niamts, who was the famous successor of St. Paisius Velichkovsky. The demon is reported as arguing, "...I too am a spirit, am I not? And I too inspire men to write books."<sup>1</sup> This demon was at particular pains to prevent St. Sophrony's monks from troubling themselves with what he called "filthy rags." These rags were the spiritual books and manuscripts of the Holy Fathers that teach about the spiritual life and warfare with demons. The demons felt threatened by the very existence of these books, lest some young hothead of a monk should take it into his head to read them, for then there would be no peace between the demons and men. Let us look at some of the stories and guidelines for spiritual discernment that are given us by tradition as a corrective to the spirit of this age.

Let us start with a story from our own century about a monk who saw "an angel of light": "My Father," said the monk to Father Sabbas one day, very sorrowfully, "I beg you, do not forget to commemorate my mother during Liturgy tomorrow. She died three days ago."

To Father Sabbas' mind these words seemed to indicate a victory of the devil. The discerning elder was troubled. Here, he thought, the enemy is doing something ugly. The cunning one! He stops at nothing to deceive and darken God's creation.

Without showing his concern, he tried to probe into the matter a bit further.

"Tell me all about this, my child. Tomorrow is the third day after your mother's repose; that means she died the day before yesterday. She died in Romania. How could you learn about her death in two days?"

There was a little silence.

"How? How did I learn?" The deacon began timidly. "Well, he told me."

"Who told you?"

"My guardian angel told me."

"Your guardian angel? You saw your angel?"

"I have been granted to see him, not just one or two times. It has been for two years now. He appears to me and joins me in prayer. We sing the Akathist together and make prostrations, and we have spiritual conversations...."

This "two years" grieved Ft. Sabbas very much. Two years of demonic deception are no light matter. To allow the enemy to work undisturbed for your destruction for two years is indeed grievous.

"And why, my child, did you not tell me anything all this time?"

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

## An Epiphany Journal Reprint

“The angel told me it was not necessary.”<sup>2</sup>

The above story is from the life of Elder Sabbas of Mount Athos (+ 1908).

How did the Elder know so quickly and surely that his disciple was deluded? One indicator was that something had been concealed from him. The monk had an elder and was expected to confess his thoughts and any events in his spiritual life to this elder on a regular basis. When the “angel” told the monk that it was not necessary to reveal his thoughts, it was an indication that something was very wrong. When the monk trusted in himself instead of consulting his elder, he accepted the idea that it was all right to conceal something from his elder. The evil spirits need concealment. Pride is also implicated in this concealment. The monk was tempted to accept the idea that he knew better than his spiritual father. Because Lucifer fell through pride; this is the vice which gives him the easiest access to us. This monk was very fortunate to have a guide to help him out of the trouble he’d fallen into. It is also quite common for one who has no spiritual guide to fall into spiritual delusions, or as the Russians call it, prelest.<sup>3</sup>

### The Proud Monk

Here is another story in which pride led to a serious trouble. This event also took place on Mt. Athos, at the Monastery of Katounakia in 1914 where the monks were adding a second story to one of the cells. The elder had told the monks to be patient and carry the boards of wood up to the top one by one. However, the youngest monk in the community, Fr. Hilarion, was not so patient. He started to carry three boards at a time, and when other monks tried to correct him, he took offense. According to monastic tradition, harsh scourges await a disciple who angers his elder. The proud monk climbed up to the roof of the kalyve with the three boards on his back. As soon as he laid them down he received the blow; he was delivered to the power of Satan and possessed by a demon. And what a dreadful terrifying demon! His fury agitated the whole region.<sup>4</sup>

While the exorcism was being conducted, one of the monks guarding the demoniac, who was strapped to a board, began to question him:

“Evil demon, why did you enter Hilarion?”

“Come! You are going above yourself,” answered the demon. “Do you think that I would tell you?”

“I command you in the Name of the Holy Trinity to tell me the reason.”

“Ha! How dare you put me on oath! Who are you? You’re not even a priest! I entered into him because, because he was proud.”

“Again I command you in the name of the Holy Trinity; tell me what is a proud man?”

Pressured by the command, against his will the demon made a remarkable confession “This is what: one who in the twenty-four hours of the day never even once sets in his mind that he is a sinner, he is p-r-o-u-d.” (The last words he shrieked in a high voice.)<sup>5</sup>

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

Pride, however, is not always immediately apparent. Outward humility can often be a cover for inward pride. So there are other indicators mentioned in the Orthodox tradition. One of them has to do with the particular kind of clairvoyance or “prophecy” that demons are capable of, opposed to the kind of intuition that may be a natural gift or the kind of clairvoyance that is a divine gift. The demons do not know the future, though they may guess at future events, and they cannot know the thoughts of the heart, though they are able to plant thoughts in one’s mind. A particular way of using Scripture may also be connected to this. It is useful to take heed to St. John Climacus’s warning in his Ladder of Divine Ascent:

A demon is often a prophet to those who believe in him; but he is always a liar to those who despise him. Being a spirit he sees what is happening in this lower air; and noticing that someone is dying, he foretells it through dreams to the more superficial sort. The demons know nothing about the future from foreknowledge. Demons often transform themselves into angels of light and take the form of martyrs and make it appear to us during sleep that we are in communication with them. Then when we wake up, they plunge us into unholy joy and conceit. But this is a sign of diabolic delusion. Angels reveal torments, judgments and separations; and when we wake up we find we are trembling and sad. (Step 3:27-29)

## Clairvoyance and False Prophets

The life of St. Nikita of Petchersk provides a good illustration of a demonic type of clairvoyance and use of Scriptures. St. Nikita entered the life of reclusion contrary to the orders of his abbot, who told him he was not mature enough for this labor. After some time in reclusion, he began to hear another voice praying with him and to smell a pleasant fragrance. He reasoned with himself that if this were not an angel, he would not be praying with him. He begged the angel to reveal himself. A voice replied that he could not appear lest Nikita fall into delusion. But Nikita, already a captive, replied that he would never be deluded because his abbot had warned him about delusions. The voice answered that it would send an angel to be with him. When the “angel” appeared Nikita fell down and worshipped him. The angel told him to stop praying and to read books instead and the angel would pray unceasingly for him. Soon, Nikita began to prophesy and talk about the Holy Scripture to all who came to him and he became quite famous. Actually, his “prophecies” were never about future events but about where stolen goods could be found, or about events happening far off. His knowledge of the Scriptures was entirely limited to the Old Testament which he knew by heart. He could not bear the New Testament and would not allow anyone to mention anything from it in his presence. These peculiar symptoms indicated to his brethren in the Petchersk Lavra that he had fallen into prelest. There were many holy monks with spiritual gifts in the monastery at the time and they drove the demon from Nikita by their prayers. After this was done, they questioned him and found that he no longer knew anything at all about the Old Testament, and in fact had forgotten how to read. He only learned to read again through great effort and eventually attained great sanctity through a humble life among the brethren.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes prelest is revealed to the eye of the experienced elder by the way that the one who is deceived receives his “revelations.” There is an example of this in the life of Elder Leonid. The elder had heard about a certain monk, Hiero-schemamonk Theodosius of the Sophroniev Hermitage, who had supposedly attained clairvoyance. He suspected trouble and inquired of the

## The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

monk how he received his revelations. The monk told him that the “Holy Spirit” appeared before him in the form of a dove and spoke to him. When Elder Leonid warned the man that this was not the way God sends revelations, the monk became belligerent: “I thought that you, like the others, wanted to derive profit from me, but you came to teach me!”<sup>7</sup> Elder Leonid warned the abbot of this monk to watch out for his “holy man” lest something should happen to him. The monk committed suicide very soon afterward. St. Ignatius Brianchaninov has the explanation for this one: “The Lord reveals Himself to the doer of the commandments spiritually, and he is seen with the spiritual eye, with the mind. The person sees the Lord in himself, in his thoughts and feelings transfigured by the Holy Spirit. On no account must the Lord be expected to appear to the eyes of the sense.”<sup>8</sup> As our Lord has said, “The kingdom of heaven is within.” (Lk. 17:21)

There is another, perhaps subtler example from early in this century about a monk named Fr. Callistratus on Mount Athos who had lived for 40 years in asceticism and was actually fairly well experienced in the spiritual life. Yet, the higher one rises, the greater the dangers become. Fr. Callistratus began to experience a kind of disturbance in his being at the time of prayer so that he would start to tremble and shake. He fell into delusions when he accepted this demonic activity as coming from God. He was even prepared to defend it scripturally with “Jesus...groaned in the spirit and was troubled.” (Jn. 11:33) This monk was finally delivered from his troubles through the help of the famous Elder Daniel of Katounakia who was able to show him that strange and unreasonable movements are never of a divine origin. Rather, “...by the action of grace a man becomes sober, peaceful, undisturbed in soul and body, reverent. Often the body will be completely motionless while the mind is caught away in divine ascents and contemplation. Another attribute of Divine grace is that it does not usually act when one is among others but in solitude of the cell or desert.”<sup>9</sup> Afterwards, Father Callistratus was able to acknowledge that such a delusion had come upon him because he had no guide.

### The Fruits of the Spirit

Elder Daniel’s instruction to Fr. Callistratus point to an important aspect of discernment. The same guidelines that warn about spiritual delusion can be turned around to point to someone’s sanctity and the validity of his spiritual experience. The following story provides a good example:

An Athonite monk, who knew St. Silouan personally, told the story of how he did not recognize Elder Silouan’s sanctity until the latter’s death. The Saint would sometimes speak about prayer and God with such boldness that the other monk would beg him to stop because he was afraid that St. Silouan had lost his fear of God. The saint’s biographer questioned this monk:

“And when you halted him, what did he say?”

“He was always even-tempered. I stopped him and he would be silent.”

“And did he get angry when you stopped him?”

“Oh, no! He was a gentle person and I never remember him getting angry.”

## The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

“Father Trophim, you know that those who are spiritually beguiled are always rebellious and vexed if they are criticized?”

“No, you see God hid that from me...He was really a very simple man. It is only now that I understand the mistake I made.”<sup>10</sup>

St. Silouan’s meekness in the face of doubt and criticism was a clear indicator of his spiritual state to those who had “eyes to see.” His biographer, Elder Sophrony, describes what St. Silouan’s reaction would have been if he had indeed been deluded. He would have been disturbed by the other monk’s criticism. He would have been “vexed and rebellious.” Both the “proud monk” Hilarion as well as the monk questioned by Elder Leonid, above showed exactly this kind of inability to accept criticism. This example from St. Silouan’s life is a classic example of how humility is used as a measure of either sanctity or pretest.

In the life of St. Symeon the Stylite, the desert fathers were concerned about whether his ascetic labor of living on a tall pillar was pleasing to God or whether it came from pride. They sent a messenger to test him. The messenger commanded the Saint to come down from his pillar in the name of the desert fathers. Tithe Saint refused, this would show that his labors were based on pride and delusion. However, when St. Symeon was commanded, he started to come down. Then the messenger told him to return to his post because now the fathers would know for sure that his labor was God-pleasing.

The fruits of the Spirit, are described very well in the Epistle reading assigned for days when a monastic saint is celebrated: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23) As St. Seraphim says, “When a man receives something divine in his heart he rejoices, but when he receives something diabolic he is disturbed...though the devil might transform himself even into an angel of light, (II Cor. 11:14) or might produce thoughts seemingly good: still the heart would feel a certain obscureness and agitation in its thoughts.”<sup>11</sup> However, this would be an extremely dangerous approach for a beginner, it is quite likely that a beginner will feel quite calm in the presence of a demon. Distrust is the safer path. As Father Seraphim Rose has expressed it,

The Church Fathers give basic words of advice. For example, they say that, if someone appears to you as an angel of light, distrust it. God will not condemn you if He actually wants to appear to you and you reject Him, because if he really wants to get a message across He’ll come again and find a way of getting through to you. In fact He praises you for being distrustful because you don’t want to fall into deception.<sup>12</sup>

### “Filthy Rags”

We have given some classic examples above of individuals who have fallen into pretest and of cases where it was possible to determine that an individual was not in a state of pretest but was proved to be righteous, based on traditional stories and guidelines. Rather than trying to cover the whole topic of pretest in the many different ways it manifests itself, we have merely tried to indicate that there are grave spiritual dangers involved in seeking after spiritual experiences. We have by no means exhausted the subject. All the accounts above are about monks who were

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

An Epiphany Journal Reprint

seriously and soberly pursuing the spiritual life, who had left everything that is of this world for God and His kingdom. Yet they fell into traps. By contrast, one could find countless examples of pretest among the various spiritual “products” available in today’s spiritual supermarket, where one might encounter any kind of spirit in a far more frivolous atmosphere. Like the knight in John Keats’ poem, one can be seeking merely out of desire for an adventure or out of boredom. Such an approach to spiritual life is already a kind of delusion.

How does one avoid spiritual delusion? It is necessary to begin to study the classics of spiritual life as written by the Holy Fathers of Orthodoxy and it is necessary, if at all possible, to have an experienced guide or spiritual father or mother. In order to benefit from these writings, one must truly share the same faith as these Holy Fathers. One cannot possibly benefit from picking and choosing what seems useful. This approach is based on pride and self-trust which, as we have already mentioned, leads souls into prelest.

The first rule of unseen warfare is “distrust of self to one’s dying day.” What can be more bewildering to the beginner than this distrust of self? It is anathema to all modern psychology and spirituality. The beginner tends to wonder which foot he should put forward first if he is not to rely on his own judgment. It takes at least a little self-knowledge and experience to begin to understand the usefulness of this rule, to understand how many ways we have of fooling ourselves, how easily we become intoxicated and misled by our own thoughts and passions. Also, one must admit, the first rule is impossible without the second: have an all daring trust in God. One who begins to trust in God will trust in His providence in all the circumstances of his life and that brings humility and allows Divine mercy room to work in one’s life. These are big topics though. It would be best to refer the reader to some of those “filthy rags” referred to by the demon in the vision of Elder Sophrony of Niamts. Here is a beginner’s list:

1. Discourses and Sayings by Abba Dorotheos, currently available through Cistercian Press, though the St. Herman Alaska Press is planning to publish a new translation by Fr. Seraphim Rose.
2. Unseen Warfare by Lorenzo Scupoli, re-written by St. Nicodemos of the Holy
3. Mountain and St. Theophan the Recluse, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press; Crestwood, New York.
4. The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism by St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, Holy Trinity Monastery; Jordanville, New York.
5. What is Spiritual Life by St. Theophan the Recluse, St. Herman of Alaska Press; Platina, California.
6. Spiritual Counsels of Saints Barsanuphius and John, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, California.
7. The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit by I.M. Kontzevitch, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, California.

# The Angel of Light and Spiritual Discernment in the Orthodox Tradition

## An Epiphany Journal Reprint

### Footnotes:

1. "The Vision of Elder Sophronius": Orthodox Word #83, p. 275.
2. From "Elder Sabbas the Father Confessor" in Contemporary Ascetics of Mount Athos, Vol. II, (St. Herman of Alaska Press, 1992, Platina, Ca) pp. 437-8.
3. "Contemporary Ascetics of Mount Athos Vol.2, op. Cit., p. 502.
4. Ibid pg 514
5. Ibid pg. 515
6. The Arena: an Offering to Contemporary Monasticism by St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, tr. by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore (Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY 1982) pp. 31-33.
7. Elder Leonid of Optina by Fr. Clement Sederhoim (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA 1990) p. 84.
- 8 The Arena, Op. Cit. p. 3.
- 9 Archimandrite Cherubim, Op. Cit. Vol. 1, pp. 268-9.
10. St. Silouan by Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, tr. by Rosemary Edmonds (Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex 1991) pp. 250-251.
- 11 Little Russian Philokalia, Volume 1: St. Seraphim of Sarov (St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA, 1991) Pp. 49-50.
12. God's Revelation to the Human Heart by Father Seraphim Rose (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1987) pp. 38-9.