

ASKESIS - SPIRITUAL TRAINING

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Athletes and sportspeople are admired and looked up to by virtually the entire human race. It was no different in the Graeco-Roman world, two thousand years ago. People trained and prepared to compete in athletic contests. The Olympic Games was the greatest of such festivals of athletic contest. There were also *regional* contests and *local* contests. If you were a young person wishing to compete, this meant that you did not have to wait four years for each Olympics. You could train every day, you could keep fit all the time, watch what you ate every day, made sure you slept properly every night. And this, in order to compete at one of many contests. No one trained in the ancient world without setting a goal. The ultimate goal was to win a prize, a simple wreath of olive branch or laurels of daphne... that would be placed on your head as a symbol of your achievement.

The New Testament also shows an admiration for athletes. Athletes are a prime example of achieving excellence, of setting goals and training oneself to achieve these goals. And this is projected onto the spiritual life, striving for excellence in the spiritual life. In the First Letter to the Corinthians we hear the following words:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a wreath that is perishable..., but we have an imperishable one. I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pummel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself would be disqualified.”

(1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

This brings us to the concept of *askesis* - training, exercise. But spiritual training, spiritual exercise. *Askesis*, or spiritual training is a common theme in the *Philokalia*. This idea of training oneself in order to withstand and endure future difficult circumstances is certainly present in the Bible. In the first letter to Timothy, we are encouraged to *train ourselves in godliness* (1 Tim. 4:7). And this because life *is* a contest. Not in the worldly way... who is more beautiful, who is smarter, who is more ‘successful’, who is faster, who is stronger. But life - is a contest - in that it is a struggle, it is a battle. In the letter to the Ephesians (6:11) we are encouraged to put on the *armour of God* and in the second letter to the Corinthians (6:4-10) we are instructed to take up the *weapons of righteousness*.

Which brings us to the image of a soldier. A soldier, much like an athlete, also needs to train, learn self-denial, learn to live off the land, become stronger, fitter, learn to endure

hardship, lack of food, lack of sleep, lack of comfort. Such training is necessary, to defend yourself and your family from any attack of the enemy. Likewise, because life is a spiritual battle, we too need to be trained for it. And there is a big difference between trying and training. “Oh, I tried to be a good parent”, “I tried to be a good husband or wife”, “I tried to make the relationship work”... Brothers and sisters, trying is not enough... we need to train. We need to develop character strengths, we need to learn principles, we need to be *ready* to be a spouse, a parent, a decent person in society, we need *formation*.

I might try very hard to win a marathon race, but if I have not trained, I will not even finish, let alone win. Without training, the resources simply are not in my muscles, they are not in the ingrained habit structures of my body. On the day of the race, no amount of trying will make up for the failure to train. It is the training that will enable me to participate effectively in the race. The same is true in the spiritual life. Training builds interior habits within us, ‘holy habits’.

(Richard J. Foster)

Askesis has to do with self-denial and self-control. It has a lot to do with saying ‘no’ to things we want. Saying ‘no’ to our excesses. Saying ‘no’ to the luxuries and the comforts and the pamperings. People go jogging to burn off their fat. But, how do we burn off the other type of fat? How do we burn off our bad habits, our addictions, our obsessions? The *Philokalia* trains us in such things as fasting, keeping vigil, prayer, charity, obedience. I will say no to meat and dairy for forty days before Easter not because “my religion says so”, but because I understand that that will teach me self-control on other things. I might normally pray for five minutes a day or when I need something from God... five seconds. But I will come to church during Sarakosti to practice praying for half an hour, one hour, three hours. My thoughts will be telling me “one hour of church... boring”... “let’s stay home and watch TV for five hours instead.” But no! I will challenge my self, push myself like an athlete to become stronger and more focused and more interested in improving myself.

No pain, no gain... says the old adage. St Gregory of Sinai is quoted in the *Philokalia* as saying that “No work, whether bodily or spiritual, which lacks pain or effort, ever produces fruit.” Which brings us to the three famous paradigms of the ‘no pain, no gain’ idea of askesis in our Tradition: the *vine*, the *gold* and the *bread*. Jesus speaks about pruning the vine. If you feel sorry for the plant and you don’t cut its branches, you are actually not doing it any good. Jesus Christ said: “My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch... that bears no fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” When digging for gold, how do miners separate the gold from the rock and the mud and the dirt? By burning everything in the furnace.

Nothing survives, except the gold. And so, an old proverb from the Bible tells us: “Gold is tested in the furnace and human character is tested in the furnace of humiliation.” And finally the bread paradigm. You don’t just throw wheat in the oven and expect a loaf of bread to appear. There is a long process. You need to separate the seeds from the chaff. Then you need to ground and crush and pummel and pulverise the seeds. They need to become fine flour. And then the flour is mixed with water and again pounded and pummelled and kneaded. And still it is not over, then comes the oven, the heat, the fire... and then finally the beautiful bread is baked and ready. St Ignatios of Antioch uses this imagery when he encourages Christians “to allow oneself to be ground between the grindstones of humility in order to become a sweet and delicious bread for the Lord.”

When all of us were baptized as babies, we were rubbed with olive oil. Ancient athletes used to rub oil into their muscles to warm up for their contest. In the battle between good and evil, we Christians, by virtue of our baptism joined the side of good. By virtue of our continued communion with Christ, we learn and train... to do battle against evil. Every time we decide to do good, the forces of the enemy declare war on us. And we - need - to be ready for them.

The forces of the enemy are known in the *Philokalia* as the passions (ta pathe - pathos) and that is what we shall talk about next Sunday in part seven of this series of sermons on the *Philokalia*. Those of you who have missed out on the previous instalments, can catch up by access the sermons on Twitter. Search #St George Church Rose Bay.