



What the Church Fathers say about:

Knowing Yourself!



Translated by:
Angela Georgy
Christeen Azmy

Edited by:
Magdi Fares Malek

Prepared by:
Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

What the Church Fathers say about:

Knowing Yourself!



Prepared by:
Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

Translated by:
Angela Georgy
Christeen Azmy

Edited by:
Magdi Fares Malek



My heart yearns for people of all walks of life – people of different nationalities, cultures, ages, gender, and capabilities – that each of us would know the truth about ourselves, and the capabilities each of us possess. I wonder if they would question themselves about their life and who they are. Do they ever stop and ask:

1. Shouldn't I spend some time with myself everyday in order to know more about myself, even if only for minutes daily for a few days? I should think about: who I am? Why God created me? What are His plans for my life? What mission has He given me? And how can I accomplish it?
2. Shouldn't I get to know my life's journey, i.e., where did I come from and where am I going?
3. Do I need to open my eyes to see who my companions are, be it the visible or invisible [heavenly] creatures?
4. Do I make use of the unique capabilities God has given specifically to me?
5. How do I view my spirit, mind, heart, body, emotions, and senses?
6. What is my concept of the world that God created for me to live in?
7. Do I aspire to know my beloved God Who opens His divine bosom for me to live by Him and with Him for ever?
8. Are my thoughts preoccupied with the heavenly, and how they are yearning for me and long to welcome me?

St. Clement of Alexandria's heart and mind were occupied with the issue of how a person could know him/herself. He said, “**Know yourself, then you will know the Son of God. Know the Son of God, then you will become like Him.**”

❖ Contemplate yourself until you see God.

St. Basil the Great

My dear reader, you may live for tens of thousands of days, so it would be prudent for you to dedicate a few minutes everyday asking God to shed His light on you. Through this you would come to know the truth about yourself. This truth is that God occupies Himself with you as if there were no other creature in all of creation to concern Himself with beside you.

KNOW YOURSELF

When the son who spent all of his money came back to himself (Luke 15:17), his father's great love was very clear to him as he immediately ran towards him, fell on his neck, and kissed him. The son could not fathom his father's favorable reaction before he decided to return. He hadn't even considered his welcoming embrace a possibility.

❖ The man who is worthy to envision himself is greater than that who thinks that he is worthy to see the angels... And he who is considered

Prepared by: **Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty**

Translated by: **Angela Georgy**
Christeen Azmy

Edited by: **Magdi Fares Malek**

Queen Mary & Prince Tadros
Coptic Orthodox Church
Pope Shenouda III Center
283 DAVIDSONS MILL ROAD
SOUTH BRUNSWICK, NJ 08831

Printed by: American Pack
Cairo - Egypt +202 22801119
US Branch +1 973 323 2666



worthy to see his sins, is greater than that who raises the dead with his prayers¹.

St. Isaac the Syrian

- ❖ The mind that ~~is~~ never neglects examining himself and quest for the Lord avails to gain possession of his own soul – the soul that was in the perdition of the passions – by always offering himself **as a captive to the Lord's love**, with absolute zeal and strength, and by clinging to Him only².

St. Macarius the Great

- ❖ Let your first priority be: not to deceive yourself.

St. Melito, Bishop of Sardis

- ❖ Do you want to know God? First, learn to know yourself!
- ❖ If you want to know the truth about yourself, do not look at what you are now, but rather as you were originally created to be.

St. Evagrius Ponticus

- ❖ When he went back (the son who squandered all his money) to himself, it was because he already departed from himself, thus he dropped himself down, separated from it and left it there. So, he had to return back to himself first, in order to regain his original status that he fell from.
- ❖ When he separated from himself, then he separated from his father too. When he separated from himself, then he was occupied with foreign matters.
- ❖ Now he comes back to himself, to his father, where his self will be in a complete safety³.

St. Augustine

- ❖ He came back to himself after he departed from himself. For coming back to God is coming to one's self, because whoever ~~is~~ gets away from Christ is fighting himself⁴.

St. Ambrose

THE NECESSITY OF DIVINE ENLIGHTENMENTS FOR KNOWING ONE'S SELF

The Psalmist says: "For You will light my lamp; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness" (Ps 18:28). It is hard for a person to know the depth of their soul on their own. If one tries, he will fall in one of two dangers: he will either consider himself righteous and idolize himself with pride; or suffer destructive depression upon discovering his weaknesses, sins and inability to change him. The light of God gives us amazing hope, and opens the doors of



His heavens before us; those heavens being the home of our Father Who awaits our coming and welcomes us as though we are in our own home.

- ❖ The most difficult thing for a human being is to get to understand himself. **St. John Chrysostom**

- ❖ I do not succeed in understanding all what I am about.
- ❖ My God, who am I? What is my nature? This life is a vast maze, merciless, inconsistent and multi-faceted.
- ❖ I am anxious to know God and my soul.
- ❖ Are you anxious for anything else? No, I tell myself. Only You God, Who can judge me. "For what man knows the things of a man except the man's spirit within him?" (1 Cor 2:11). There are certain matters in the human being that the human's spirit knows nothing about. But You God, our Creator know us well.

Although I feel worthless in Your eyes, and consider myself dust and ashes, I can not deny that I do know about You what I do not know about myself.

Sure, we now look into a dark mirror, and not face to face. As long as I am far from You, my God, I am at home in my body, and foreign to You (2 Cor 5:6).

I know my God that You are not harsh, yet **I do not know which temptations I can overcome, and which of them I can't. But I have hope because You are honest.** You will not allow that I am tempted beyond what I am able to bear (1 Cor 10: 13).

Therefore, I confess for what I do not know about myself, and whatever I understand is only through the illumination that you give me.

But, what I do not know yet, I will never know until the time comes, O my God, when I see "my darkness ~~is~~ like daylight in Your eyes⁵."

St. Augustine

YOU ARE MORE PRECIOUS THAN THE WHOLE WORLD!

The Lord Jesus Christ assures us of His appreciation of the human being when He says: "For what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36) He wants us to care for ourselves and not for our belongings. This is what **St. Basil the Great** and other Fathers teach us based upon the experiences they lived through.

- ❖ The Holy Scriptures caution you about the importance of caring for your soul; not about the body or the matters related to the body, such as health, beauty, lusts, and the long life. Likewise, you should not give much



importance to wealth, glory, or power or such matters related to the earthly life. Rather you should care about your soul above everything else, for she is your most valuable treasure. Decorate her with virtues, purify her from sin, and adorn her with the beauty of moral excellence which is more magnificent than all other ornaments. Meditate deeply on this thought: because the body will decompose, but the soul is eternal⁶.

- ❖ "Look at yourself" (cf. Deut 15:9)¹. I mean look *only* at yourself and not at what is in your hands or around you, because what we are is one thing, and what we own or what's around us is something else. For, we are on the image of our Creator; we have a soul and spirit. What we possess are the body and its senses. Things such as money, work, and the rest of life's necessities are items that merely surround us. What does this verse mean then? It means that you are not to care about the body, nor make an effort in seeking its good, whether it is health, beauty, or a long life. Do not give a place for lusts, do not be tempted by beauty, glory, power, and authority; and do not heed much about matters that were made for serving a life that is passing away, so that you don't magnify its importance. Do not neglect to focus on yourself as your only concern. Yet "observe yourself" and nothing else. Decorate your soul and nurture her, and with your perseverance, wipe away every stain that sullied her with sin, and every disgrace defiled her with transgression. But, try to decorate her that she would shine with splendor, and become enlightened with the light of righteousness and its excellence.

Examine yourself, find out who are you? I wonder! And know what your essence is?

Your body is finite, but your soul is immortal. Understand that you have two lives: a physical life that is soon to end, and another spiritual life that is endless and eternal⁷.

- ❖ "*Know yourself*" so that you can assess the condition of your soul (healthy or sick) because many of those who are sick are unaware of their condition due to their ignorance and lack of interest in knowing themselves.

This advice is of great benefit for all those who have healthy bodies. For whatever condition they are in, it will cure the sick and maintain the healthy.

Are you **traveling** before the one who says, "Keep my ways"? Control yourself so that you do not divert from the gravity of the path, or go right or left. Rather walk on the royal path.

Oh you **engineer**, lay the foundation of faith that is Jesus Christ, assuring it is solid.

¹ "Beware lest there be a hidden thought in your heart." (cf. Deut 15:9 LXX)

Oh you **builder**, pay attention to what you are building so that it is not merely wood, hay or straw, but "gold, silver or precious stones" (1 Cor 3:13).

Oh you **shepherd**, be alert so that you do not ignore any of your pastoral responsibilities. And what are these responsibilities? They are guiding the lost, bandaging the injured and curing the sick.

Oh you **farmer**, fertilize around the barren fig tree, and give it all it needs to produce fruit.

Oh you **soldier**, "Participate in the toils of the Bible," and struggle against the evil spirits and physical lusts, taking up the complete armor of God. Do not be troubled by life's worries, but aim to satisfy the One Who made you a soldier.

Oh you **wrestler**, be careful not to violate the laws of this sport. No one will receive the heavenly crown without lawfully struggling. Be like St. Paul the Apostle who traveled to many countries, struggled and fought. Be vigilant like the good fighters and do not avoid knowing yourself. Protect with your own hands, the vital organs of your body that the enemy is mainly targeting. Don't be distracted, but always keep your eyes on the enemy, looking ahead gazing at your opponent. Continue this way until you win, struggling in the war against the unseen enemies. The sole purpose of this advice is to prevent you from finding yourself asleep in life or in a deep pit, but rather to stand grounded firmly in alertness, committed and focused on constant self examination through wisdom and vigilance.⁸

- ❖ First you are a human being. You alone among the animals are created in God's image. Isn't this enough for you? Consider that; you were fortunate to be made by the hands of God Who created all these magnificent creatures.

Secondly, since you are made on the image of God Who created you, aren't you capable of matching the angels' glory by having a righteous and orthodox conduct?

God gave you a rational soul, through which you should understand Him, and your thoughts may search about the nature of the other creatures, and gain the sweetest fruits of wisdom. All the earthly animals, tame or wild, and all that live in the waters, and fly in the air are enslaved to you, and you are their master.

Didn't you discover the arts, and lay the foundations of cities?

Didn't you reach all that is necessary? No, but you even went beyond that, with excess spending and lavish living.

Didn't you chart courses in the waters by your intellect and understanding?



Didn't the sea and land give you what you need for your life?
Isn't it for you that the sky, air, and planets in the high are so organized and beautiful?

Why then is your soul broken down by sadness? Is it because you don't own a horse that has a silver strap?!

Isn't the sun that sends you its light during the day enough? Or are you saddened because you do not have gold pots or silver lamps? Isn't this full moon that lightens you with the heavenly lights enough? Or is it because you do not ride the gold plated vehicles? You have two feet, they are your accompanying vehicle... Why then do you envy those who have full pockets and at the same time need others people's feet to get them from one place to another?

Or are you saddened because you do not sleep on an ivory bed? This earth is more valuable than ivory and embraces you with a sweet rest and soft light sleep that is undisturbed by worries or sadness.

Or is it because you do not sleep under a golden plated umbrella? You have the lightened skies with its shining planets.

This is the way of human thinking. But what is vastly greater is God's coming among men for your sake and distributing the Holy Spirit, and exterminating death until it faded away. He is the Hope for the Resurrection... and gives divine commandments that guide you to the perfection. You have the way that leads you to God through the commandments, and the heavenly kingdom which is prepared for you, with the crowns of righteousness, that are prepared for those who do not escape from virtues, despite the difficulties and troubles they had to endure⁹.

- ❖ Pay attention to your souls, and not to what you have or what surrounds you, only to your souls in particular, because there is a big difference between these two items. The soul is our essence, and it is God's image within us. But what we have is our body and our senses which are attached to our souls. And, what surround us are the riches and the various fancy things in life¹⁰.
- ❖ Attend to yourself, that is, your soul, for she is worthy of honor. Do your best to keep her away from the fingerprints of evil. Do not forget that you have a dual nature: **a dying nature of the body and an immortal nature of the soul**. Therefore, your life is double edged: that is, a life related to the dying body that passes quickly, and a life that has to do with the eternal soul. Be careful then, and do not stop at those vanishing worldly goods as if they were eternal, and do not despise the eternal righteousness as if it was temporary¹¹.

St. Basil the Great



- ❖ It is befitting for every human to know himself as he is; and to distinguish himself from whatever he has, so that he would not unwittingly hold on to that which is foreign to himself. This problem happens to those who are negligent, and do not care about themselves (their inner man). Rather they care for strength, beauty, prominence, political power, abundant wealth, pomp, self-importance, bodily stature, grace of form or the like. Such persons make very poor guardians of themselves: because of their absorption in (the false images), they overlook what is their (true self) and leave it unguarded.

How can anybody take care of something he/she does not know? **The best means to preserve the good we have is to know ourselves. Each person has to know who he/she is, and precisely estimates his/her capabilities, and differentiate between what is fake and what is real, in order not to run after misconceptions.**

Now anyone who has any regard for the life of this world or thinks that worldly honor is worth protecting, does not know how to distinguish himself from what he is not. Nothing temporary is ours. For how can we have dominion over that which is passing and transitory? There is only One Entity in this world Who does not have a materialistic nature; that is the Eternal God. The entire materialistic world is disintegrating by rapid and consecutive changes. Hence, it must follow that he, who separates himself from the Eternal God, will be lost far away in the abyss. He who separates himself from God, will be carried away to follow Satan. And, that who owns and care for the temporary matters and at the same time searches for God, will end up with a big disappointment, and will alienate himself from God, and would not be able to achieve any goal

- ❖ The friends of the Bridegroom offer this counsel: **"If you do not know (yourself), O fairest among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the Shepherd's tents."** (Song 1:8) And what does this mean? An ignorant person does not know his own worth.¹²
- ❖ God imprinted on your nature the resemblance of His glorious nature, as one imprints an image on wax.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

- ❖ Move inside yourself, and you will see what is outside. Get out what is inside, so that the sons of the house, who were thrown out, will enter and rest inside, and then the Builder will be happy to reoccupy His house¹³.
- St. John Saba**
- ❖ Understand you beautiful soul that you are the image of God. Understand, oh soul, that you are the glory of God. Therefore you should know your own glory, and be vigilant!

St. Ambrose



- ❖ If we know the majesty that we share in, and how we are bits of Heaven, then, let us not do anything to put our nature to shame.

Nemesius of Emesa

YOU ARE THE DEAR BELOVED CREATURE OF GOD

St. Clement of Alexandria states that the human being is the greatest of creatures¹⁴, and most precious to Him. Man was in His thought before the creation. With His infinite love, God made the world for the human being, and then created him on His image and likeness so that man could taste the partnership with Him.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, Origen's student, states that man is the most beloved creature to God. He did not create him through necessity, but through His great love.

- ❖ Truly man is valuable in God's eyes because he is His handiwork. When God made everything, He did so, saying "Let there be" (He just ordered and so it was), but when it came to human beings, He created Him by Himself, with His hands, and He breathed into Him. What God shaped was according to His image. Yet He created man Himself out of His yearning within Himself, unlike the rest of the creatures¹⁵.

St. Clement of Alexandria

- ❖ God did not create man just to be a creature, as He did with the rest of the irrational earthly creatures, but He created him on His image, and gave him a share of the strength of His Word, so that he carries some of the Word's reflection on him, and because he is a rational creature, capable of staying forever in a state of holiness, in a hidden life, that is the life of the saints in paradise. But because God knew beforehand, how far the human beings' will could deviate; therefore He secured the grace that was given to him with the Law and the location that He put him in. So, He got him to His paradise and gave him a Law, in order to keep the grace and stay righteous, practicing the life of paradise without sadness, pain or anxiety, enjoying the promise that there will be no corruption in the heavens¹⁶.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic

GOD WANTS OUR SALVATION AND ETERNAL GLORY

The apostle Paul gives us the following advice: "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged," (1 Cor 11:31). Our serious self-examination and our grievances against ourselves before God bring us before the Cross and open the gates of hope in front of us, exempting us from judgment in the Great Day of the Lord. Our Christ elevates us to the throne of His grace and instead of being concerned with our sins; our energy will be consumed in His great love.



- ❖ He did not say: "If we have punished ourselves," or "If we have took retribution from our souls", but rather He said, "If only we would desire to realize our rebellion, and judge ourselves in truth, and condemn those things we did on the sinful way, we could have gotten rid of the punishment in this world and the next." Whoever condemns himself gains God. He benefits in two ways: firstly he acknowledges his present sins, and secondly he will be cautious in the future¹⁷.

- ❖ Instead of slackening in what we call "simple sins," **we have to give an account of ourselves** on all our words and looks, and judge ourselves now so we can be freed from the punishment to come. This is why St. Paul said: If we judge ourselves everyday here for our sins, for sure this will take away the severity of the judgment in *that place*.

- ❖ If we are negligent, we will be judged and God will discipline us. This is why **we have to take the initiative by judging ourselves** in good faith, holding the trial that our conscience secretly raises against us. Let's examine our thoughts and design a rule fit for our souls, so that through the fear of the coming punishment our mind would be withdrawn, and gain control of its motives and guard the eyes without slumber to protect ourselves against the continuous works of the devil¹⁸.

St. John Chrysostom

- ❖ I will judge myself, so that the Judge of the living and the dead will not judge me (2 Maccabees 7:18-19)¹⁹.

- ❖ How miserable am I?

My God... when will this corrupt nature leave me and when will Your full strength work within me?...

I come back and what do I say? You are the True Goodness, Merciful, Holy, Just... but I am evil, selfish, a sinner, and unjust!...

You are the Light, but I am darkness, you are the Life, but I am death!...

You are the Doctor, I am the sick one; You are the Joy, I am sorrow!...

You are the Honest Truth, but I am a true lie, like any human being on earth...

Oh! I look at Your deep wounds, but you have my name inscribed on Your hands. Read my name and redeem me!

My spirit that cries before You is Your handiwork. Create in me a new creation. This is Your work, this is why my spirit does not stop crying to You saying: "You, Oh Life, revive me anew!"



She is Your hand-made creation, pursuing You, and pleading for You
to restore her initial beauty.”

St. Augustine



¹ *Ascetical Homilies, 64.*

² *Sermon 9:11.*

³ *Ser on N. T. 46 : 2.*

⁴ *In Luc 15: 11- 32.*

⁵ *Confessions 10:7.*

^٦ راجع الأب الياس كويتز المخلصي: القديس باسيليوس الكبير، منشورات المكتبة البولسية، بيروت، ١٩٨٩، ص ٣١٥. عظة ٣: ٣.

^٧ راجع الأب الياس كويتز المخلصي: القديس باسيليوس الكبير، ص ٢٤٨-٢٤٩. تعريف الدكتور نجيب حجار.

^٨ راجع الأب الياس كويتز المخلصي: القديس باسيليوس الكبير، ص ٢٥٠-٢٥١. تعريف الدكتور نجيب حجار.

^٩ راجع الأب الياس كويتز المخلصي: القديس باسيليوس الكبير، ص ٢٥٣-٢٥٤. تعريف الدكتور نجيب حجار.

¹⁰ *Hom. 3, in illud, PG 31:203 a*

¹¹ *Hom. 3, in illud, PG 31:202 b.*

^{١٢} نشيد الأناشيد للقديس غريغوريوس النيسي، تعريف الدكتور جورج نزار، عظة ٢.

^{١٣} رسالة ٣٩: ٥.

¹⁴ *Paidagogos 1:3; 1:8:63.*

¹⁵ *Paidagogos 1:3; 1:8:63.*

¹⁶ *De Incarnation Verbi Dei 3:3,4.*

¹⁷ *In 1 Cor., hom., 28:2.*

¹⁸ *Genesis, hom 60:16.*

¹⁹ *Ep. 209:10.*