

Homily 52, by St. Isaac the Syrian

Knowledge vs. Faith

The soul that journeys by the pathways of discipline upon the road of faith, and has often made great progress therein, if she returns once more to the ways and means of knowledge, will straightway be crippled in her faith, and will be deprived of the noetic power of faith, which with diverse forms of (divine) assistance manifests itself in a pure soul that unquestionably has recourse to it with simplicity in all her concerns. For the soul that once and for all has surrendered herself to God in faith, and has received through much experience the taste of His help, will not take thought for herself again, but rather, she is stilled in awestruck wonder and silence, and has no power to return to the ways and means of her own knowledge and to be engaged in them. And this is so lest, on the contrary, she should be deprived of God's providence, which secretly shelters her unceasingly, cares for her, and everywhere cleaves to her incessantly. For the soul would be foolish to suppose herself sufficient to provide for herself on the strength of her own knowledge. Those upon whom the light of faith has dawned are no longer so audacious as to pray for themselves; nor do they entreat God, saying, 'Give this to us,' or 'Take that from us.'; nor do they in any wise care for themselves. For every moment, with the noetic eyes of faith, they see the

fatherly providence which comes from the true Father to shelter them:
He

Who in His great and immeasurable love surpasses all in paternal affection and Who, more than all, has the power and might to help us exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask, or think, or conceive. For knowledge is opposed to faith; and faith, in all that pertains to it, is the breaking of the laws of knowledge (we do not, however, speak here of spiritual knowledge). For such is the 'definition' of knowledge—that without investigation and examination it has no authority to do anything, but it must investigate whether that which it considers and desires as possible. But as to faith, what shall we say? If yes and no approach it at the same time, it will not be persuaded to remain in such a position.

It is well known that knowledge cannot exist without investigation and the employment of its means of operations; and this is a sign of hesitation regarding truth. But faith requires a way of thinking that is single, limpidly pure and simple, far removed from any deviousness or invention of methods. See how faith and knowledge are opposed to one another! The home of faith is a childlike thought and a simple heart. 'In the simplicity of their hearts,' it says, 'They glorified God.' And, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' But knowledge conspires against and opposes both these qualities.

Knowledge keeps within the boundaries of nature in all its paths; but faith makes its journey above nature. Knowledge does not allow itself to

experience anything that is ruinous to nature, and it keeps far away from it; but faith readily submits itself to this and says, 'Upon the asp and the basilisk shalt thou tread, and thou shalt trample upon the lion and the dragon.' Fear accompanies knowledge; but confidence accompanies faith.

The more a man journeys in the pathways of knowledge, the more he is shackled by fear and cannot be found worthy of freedom from it; but he who follows faith straightway becomes a free man and a ruler of himself, and as a son of God he freely wields all things with authority. The man who has found the keys of faith wields all the natures of creation even as God; for by faith comes the authority, after the likeness of God, to create a new creation. 'Thou didst so will,' it says, 'and all things were present before Thee.' And oftentimes, out of things that are not, faith can do all things.

But knowledge can do nothing without matter. Knowledge is not so bold as to attempt anything that has not been given to nature. How so? The liquid nature of water cannot support upon its back the footsteps of a body; the man who comes too close to fire burns himself; and whosoever should rashly oppose nature in this fashion brings himself into peril. Knowledge watchfully guards itself from such things and will in no wise be persuaded to overstep their boundaries. But faith transgresses them

with authority, saying: 'If thou go through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, and the rivers shall not overflow thee.' Faith has many times worked such things before the eyes of all creation. If knowledge were given the opportunity to attempt such things, it would in no wise be persuaded. For it is by faith that men have entered into the flames and bridle the burning power of the fire, walking unharmed as in the midst thereof, and they have trodden upon the back of the sea as on dry land.

All these are above nature and opposed to the ways and means of knowledge.

Do you see how faith has shaken the foundations of knowledge and proven it futile in all its ways and laws? Do you see how knowledge keeps within the limits of nature? Do you see how faith passes above nature in traveling on the pathway of its journey? The ways and means of knowledge governed the world for a little more or less than 5000 years, and man was in no wise able to raise his head from the earth and perceive the power of his Creator. For this was not until our faith shone forth and freed us from the gloom of earthly labors and futile slavery that seeks fruitless distraction. And now we have reached the unfathomable sea and the unfailing treasure, we desire once again to turn aside to miserable little brooks. There is no knowledge that is not needy, however rich it might be; but heaven and earth cannot contain the treasures of faith. The man whose heart is upheld by the confidence of faith will never be in want; and when he has nothing, by faith he possesses all, as it is written: 'All things whatever you shall ask in prayer, ye shall receive'; and

again,
'The Lord is at hand, have care for nothing.'

Knowledge always seeks means to safeguard those who have acquired it.

But what says faith? 'Except the Lord build the house and guard the city, in vain does he labor that buildeth it and watch that guardeth her.'

The man who takes refuge in faith never employs or is engaged in ways and means. For knowledge everywhere sings the praises of fear, as the man said, 'He that feareth in his heart is blessed.' But what says faith? 'He was afraid and began to sink'; and again, 'For ye have not received the spirit of bondage unto fear, but you have received the Spirit of Sonship unto the freedom of faith and trust in God; and again, 'Fear then not, nor flee from before their face.

Fear is always followed by doubt; doubt, by investigation; investigation, by ways and means; and ways and means, by knowledge. And in examination and investigation, fear and doubt are always made known—for knowledge does not always succeed everywhere, as we showed in the beginning. Often calamities, grievous adversities, and many occurrences filled with peril befall the soul, wherein knowledge and the devices of wisdom are utterly unable to provide help against these difficulties that defy the whole power and limit of human knowledge. But faith is never

vanquished by anything. For what help can human knowledge offer in open conflicts or in war against invisible beings, against incorporeal powers, and many other things of this kind?

Do you see the feebleness of the power of knowledge and the strength of

the power of faith? Knowledge prevents its disciples from approaching anything alien to nature. But see here the power of faith and what it commands its pupils: 'In My Name,' it says, 'ye shall cast out demons, take up serpents, and if ye drink poison, it shall not hurt you.'

Knowledge enjoins all who journey in its path to investigate according to

its laws, the end of anything before making a beginning, and thus to commence; lest the end of the thing proves unachievable by the limit of

human ability, and labor be spent in vain, and lest the thing proved difficult and impossible to realize. But what says faith? 'All things are possible to him that believeth,' for to God nothing is impossible. O unspeakable wealth, O ocean rich in its billows and its marvelous treasures and mighty floods of power of faith! How filled with boldness,

how replete with sweetness and hope is the journey accompanied by faith! How light are faith's burdens, how sweet its labors!

Question: Whom does he resemble that has been deemed worthy to taste the sweetness of faith but afterwards turns again to unspiritual knowledge?

Answer: He resembles the man who has found a pearl of great price and exchanges it for a copper obol, who has abandoned self-sufficient freedom and turned to the ways of destitution, filled with fear and slavery.

It is not that knowledge is blameworthy, but that faith is higher; and if we find fault, it is not knowledge that we blame. Far be it! Rather it is to

distinguish the erring modes by which it goes against nature, and how it becomes kindred to the orders of the demons—which distinctions we shall clearly make hereafter; and how many steps there are in which knowledge journeys; what is the difference in each of them; by what conceptions it is awakened in each mode when it abides therein; in which of these modes (when it walks therein) it opposes faith and goes forth outside of nature; what are the distinctions in knowledge; in which degree (when knowledge returns to its primary aim) it comes into its nature and by its good discipline becomes a stepping–stone for faith; and how far the distinctions of its degree reaches; how it passes from these modes to higher ones; which are the modes of that other degree that is first in honor; when it is that knowledge unites with faith and becomes one with it and from it receives the vesture of fiery intellections; when it is inflamed by the Spirit, acquiring the wings of dispassion; and when it is exalted above servitude to things earthly into the realm of its Creator, with the aid of other modes. But for the moment it is suitable that we should know only that faith and its working is higher than knowledge.

Knowledge is perfected by faith and acquires the power to ascend on high, to perceive that which is higher than every perception, and to see the radiance of Him that is incomprehensible to the mind and to the knowledge of created things. Knowledge is a step whereby a man can climb up to the lofty heights of faith; and when a man has reached faith,

he no longer has need of knowledge. 'Now,' it is said, 'we know in part and we noetically perceive in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.' Faith, therefore, now shows us, as it were before our eyes, the reality of that future perfection. It is by our faith that we learn those things that cannot be comprehended, not by the investigation and power of knowledge.

These are the works of righteousness; fasting, alms, vigil, holiness, and the rest of such works performed by the body. Love for one's neighbor, humility of heart, forgiving those who have sinned, recollection of good things, investigation of the mysteries concealed in the Holy Scriptures, the mind's occupation with good works, the bridling of the soul's passions, and the rest of such virtues, are performed in the soul—all these require knowledge, for knowledge guards and teaches their order. All these are known as virtues, but they are still only steps by which the soul ascends to the more lofty height of faith.

The way of life proper to faith is more exalted than the working of virtue, and it is not labor, but perfect rest, consolation, words in the heart, and it is accomplished by the intellections of the soul. All these wondrous modes of spiritual discipline—the practice of which in the spiritual life is awareness, delight, fruition of the soul, burning love, joy in God, and the rest—and whatsoever things in this discipline are bestowed upon the soul accounted worthy of the grace of that yonder blessedness, and whatsoever

things are subtly indicated in the Divine Scriptures, all these things are accomplished through faith by God, Who, is boundless in His gifts.

A difficulty: But if any says, if all these good things, and the aforementioned works of virtue, the abstention from evils, the discernment of those subtle thoughts that sprout up in the soul, the battle with thoughts, the struggle with the inciting passions, and the rest of such things which even faith itself cannot manifest its power in the soul's actions—if it is knowledge that accomplishes all these good things, then how can knowledge be considered to be opposed to faith?

Solution: We say that there are also three intelligible degrees in which knowledge ascends and descends, and according to the variation of the modes wherein it walks, it submits to change and becomes the cause of either harm or help. There are three degrees: body, soul, and spirit. And although knowledge is single in its nature, yet it becomes more gross, and more subtle, and changes its provisions and the activities of its conceptions in relation to the noetic and sensible realms. So, hearken and learn the order of its activity and causes whereby it harms or helps. Knowledge is a gift bestowed by God on the nature of rational beings in their very creation. It is naturally simple and undivided, even as the light of the sun: but according to its activity, knowledge undergoes changes and additions.

On the first degree of knowledge:

When knowledge cleaves to the love of the body, it gathers up the following provisions: wealth; vainglory; honor; adornment; rest of the body; special means to guard the body's nature from adversities; assiduity in rational wisdom, such as is suitable for the governance of the world and which gushes forth the novelties of inventions, the arts, sciences, doctrines; and all other things which crowned the body in this visible world. Among the properties of this knowledge belong those that are opposed to faith, which we have stated as enumerated above. This is called common knowledge, for it is naked of all concerns for God. And because it is dominated by the body, it introduces into the mind an irrational importance, and its concern is totally for this world.

This measure of knowledge does not reckon that there is any noetic power and hidden steersman over a man whatsoever, nor any divine care that shelters and takes concern for him. It takes no account of God's providential governance; but on the contrary, it attributes to a man's diligence and his methods every good thing in him, his rescue from what harms him, his natural ability to avert the plights and many adversities that secretly and manifestly accompany our nature.

This degree of knowledge presumes that all things are by its own providence, like those men who assert that there is no divine governance of visible things. Nevertheless, it cannot be without continual cares and

fear for the body. Therefore, it is appraised to faintheartedness, sorrow, despair, fear of the demons, trepidation before men, the rumor of thieves and the report of murders, anxiety over diseases, concern over want and lack of necessities, fear of death, fear of sufferings, of wild beasts, and of other similar things that make this knowledge like a sea more turbulent by great waves at every hour of the night and day. For knowledge does not know how to cast its care upon God through the confident trust of faith in Him; wherefore in all things that concern it, it is constantly engaged in devising devices and clever contrivances. But when in some instance the modes of its contrivances prove fruitless, it strives with men as though they hindered and opposed it, since it does not see in this the mystical hand of providence.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree that uproots love, is planted in this very knowledge. It investigates the minute faults of other men and the causes thereof, and their wickedness; and it arms a man for stubbornly upholding his opinion, for disputation, and aids him in cunningly employing devices and crafty machinations and other means, which dishonor a man. In this knowledge are produced and are found presumption and pride, for it attributes every good thing to itself, and does not refer to God.

Faith, however, attributes its works to grace. For this reason, it cannot be lifted up with pride, as it is written: 'Not I, but the grace of God which was with me'; and also, 'Knowledge puffeth up,' which the blessed Apostle said of this same knowledge, since it is not mingled with faith and hope in God, but he said it concerning true knowledge, far be it! By humility, true knowledge makes perfect the soul of those who have acquired it, like Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and the rest of the saints who have been accounted worthy of this perfect knowledge to the degree possible for human nature. And by diverse theories and divine revelations, by the lofty vision of spiritual things and by ineffable mysteries and the like, their knowledge is swallowed up at times, and in their own eyes they reckon their souls to be dust and ashes.

But that other knowledge is puffed up, even as it meet, since it walks in darkness and values that which belongs to it by comparison with things of earth, and it knows not that there is something better than itself. And so all (who claim to such knowledge) are seized by the uplifting of pride, because they measure their discipline according to the standard of the earth in the flesh, they rely upon their works, and their minds do not enter into incomprehensible matters.

But as many as reflect upon the waves of the glorious splendor of the Godhead, and whose labor is on high, their minds do not turn aside with interventions and vain thoughts. For those who walk in the light cannot go astray, and for this reason all those who have strayed from the

light of
the knowledge of the Son of God, have turned away from the truth,
journey on these pathways just mentioned.

This is the first degree of knowledge; in it a man follows the desire of
the
flesh. We find this knowledge blameworthy and declare it to be
opposed
not only to faith, but to every working of virtue.

On the second degree of knowledge:

But when knowledge renounces the first degree and turns toward
deep
reflections on the love of the soul, then it practices the aforementioned
good deeds with the help of the soul's understanding, in co-operation
with the senses of the body, in the light of the soul's nature. These
deeds
are: fasting, prayer, mercy, reading of the divine Scripture, the modes
of
virtue, battle with the passions, and the rest. For all these good things,
all
the various excellences seen in the soul and the wondrous means that
are
employed for serving in Christ's court in the second degree of
knowledge,
are made perfect by the Holy Spirit through the action of its power.
This
knowledge makes straight the pathways in the heart which lead to
faith,
wherewith we gather supplies for our journey to the true age.

But even so, this knowledge is still corporeal and composite; and although it is the road that leads us and speeds us on our way toward faith, yet there remains a degree of knowledge still higher than it. If it goes forward, it will find itself raised up by faith with the help of Christ, that is, when it has laid the foundation of its action on seclusion from men, reading of the Scriptures, prayer, and other good works by which the second degree of knowledge is made perfect. It is by this knowledge that all that is excellent is performed; indeed, it is called the knowledge of actions, because by concrete actions, through the senses of the body, it accomplishes its work on the external level.

On the third degree of knowledge, which is the degree of perfection:

Hear now how knowledge becomes more refined, acquires that which is of the Spirit, then comes to resemble the life of the unseen hosts which perform their liturgy not by the palpable activity of works, but through the activity accomplished in the meditation of the understanding. When knowledge is raised above the earthly things and the cares of earthly activities, and its thoughts begin to gain experience in inward matters which are hidden from the eyes; and when in part it scorns the recollections of things (whence the perverseness of the passions arises), and when it stretches itself upward and follows faith in its solicitude for the future age, in its desire for what has been promised us, and in

searching deeply into hidden mysteries: then faith itself swallows up knowledge, converts it, and begets it anew, so that it becomes wholly and completely spirit.

Then it can soar on wings in the regions of the bodiless and touch the depths of the unfathomable sea, musing upon the wonders and divine workings of God's governance of noetic and corporeal creatures. It searches our spiritual mysteries that are perceived by this simple and subtle understanding. Then the inner senses are awakened for spiritual doing, according to the order that will be in the immortal and incorporeal life. For even from now it has received, as it were in a mystery, the noetic resurrection as a true witness of the universal renewal of all things. These are the three degrees of knowledge wherein is brought together a man's whole course in the body, in the soul, and in the spirit. From the time when man begins to distinguish between good and evil until he takes leave of this world, his soul's knowledge journeys in these stages. The fullness of all wrong and impiety, and the fullness of righteousness, and the probing of the depths of all the mysteries of the spirit are wrought by one knowledge in the aforementioned three stages; and in it is contained the mind's every movement, whether the mind ascends or descends in good or in evil, or in things midway between the two. The Fathers call these stages natural, supranatural, and contranatural. These are three directions in which the memory of a rational soul travels up or down, as has been said: when the soul works righteousness in (the

confines of) nature, or when through her recollection she is caught away to a higher state than nature in the divine vision of God, or when she goes out of her nature to herd swine, as did that young man who squandered the wealth of his discretion and laborers for a troop of demons.

A recapitulation of the three degrees of knowledge:

The first degree of knowledge renders the soul cold to works that go in pursuit of God. The second makes her fervent in the swift course on the level of faith. But the third is rest from labor, which is the type of the age to come, for the soul takes delight solely in the mind's meditation upon the mysteries of the good things to come. But since a man's nature is not yet completely elevated above the state of morality and the heaviness of the flesh, and is not yet perfected in the spiritual state that transcends this other state that is liable to aberration, it is unable to attain to the perfection that knows no cessation in its liturgy; and while a man is in this world of deadness, he cannot entirely take leave of the flesh's nature.

So long as a man still abides in the nature of the flesh, he is in continual transition from one (state) to another. At one time, as a poor man and a pauper, his soul performs her service in the second, middle degree, working virtue that is inherent in her nature by means natural to the body. At another time, like those who have received the Spirit of adoption

in the mystery of freedom, the soul employs the gift of the Spirit, given that according to the beneficence of its Bestower; but afterward she again

returns to the loneliness of her works, that is, those wrought by the body.

The soul keeps watch over the body, lest the crafty one takes her captive

through the enticements found in this age, and by troubled and erring thoughts. So long as the soul is closed behind the veil of the door of the

flesh, she has no confidence, for there is no perfect freedom in this imperfect age.

Every working of knowledge is for the sake of activity and training; the working of faith, however, is not performed in deeds, but is accomplished

by spiritual insights to the naked activity of the soul, and it transcends the senses. For faith is more subtle than knowledge, just as, knowledge is

more subtle than palpable deeds. All the saints who have been found worthy to attain to this spiritual discipline (which is awestruck wonder at God) pass their lives by the power of faith in the delight of that discipline which is above nature.

By faith we mean not that wherewith a man believes in the distinctions of

the Divine and worshipful Hypostases, in the singular and unique nature of the very Godhead, and the wondrous dispensation to mankind

to the assumption of our nature, although this faith is also very lofty.

But

we call faith that light which dawns in the soul by grace, and by which the testimony of the mind establishes the heart in freedom from doubt through the full assurance of hope that is remote from all conceit. This

faith manifests itself not by the tradition of the hearing of the ear, but with spiritual eyes it beholds the mysteries concealed in the soul, and the secret and divine riches that are hidden away from the eyes of the sons of the flesh, but are unveiled by the Spirit to those who are brought up at Christ's table in the study of His laws. Then He said, 'If ye keep My Commandments, I will send you the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive, and He shall teach you all truth.'

The Comforter shows a man the holy power that dwells within him at every moment, and the protection, of the noetic force that shelters him always and drives away from him all harm, that it should not touch his soul or his body. The luminous and noetic mind visibly perceives this (holy power) with the eyes of faith, and the saints gain greater knowledge of it through experience. This power is the Comforter Himself Who, in the strength of faith, consumes the parts of the soul as with fire. The soul then rushes forward, despising every danger because of her trust in God, and on the wings of faith she soars aloft, taking leave of visible creation, and as though drunken, she is ever found in the awestruck wonder of solicitude for God; and with simple, uncompounded vision, and with invisible perception of the Divine nature, the understanding becomes accustomed to attending to reflection upon that nature's hiddenness. For until the coming of that which is the perfection of the mysteries, and until we be found worthy of their manifest revelation, faith administers unspeakable mysteries between God and the saints. Of these may we be deemed worthy of the grace of Christ, here as in earnest, but there in the

substance of truth in the kingdom of the Heavens together with those who love Him. Amen.