

Encyclical on the Feast Day of the Three Hierarchs*

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Archbishop of America

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“You have a job to do, soul, and
a great one: examine yourself.”

St. Gregory the Theologian,
Poem 2.1.78 “To His Own Soul”.

To the Most Reverend Hierarchs, the Reverend Priests and Deacons, the Monks and Nuns, the Presidents and Members of the Parish Councils of the Greek Orthodox Communities, the Day and Afternoon Schools, the Philoptochos Sisterhoods, the Youth, the Hellenic Organizations, and the entire Greek Orthodox Family in America.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is said of the ancient philosopher Thales of Miletus that an inquirer once asked him, “What in life is difficult? Thales responded immediately: “To know oneself.” (From Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*). This dictum, *Gnothi Seauton*, ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ “Know thyself” was so common in Greek philosophy that the ancients themselves were in disagreement as to who had first spoken it. This saying is surely best known, however, as the inscription over the portal of the temple of Delphi, admonishing those who sought the oracle’s gift that the most useful knowledge was not of the future, but of oneself. For according to the Hellenic understanding, within the bounds of the self could be found insight into all things: the world around us, natures visible and invisible, and even truths divine.

Perhaps no other element of the Hellenic philosophical legacy was more readily accepted by the Fathers of the Church than the rule, “Know thyself.” The Three Hierarchs whom we celebrate this day—Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint John Chrysostom—all practiced and preached self-knowledge as an essential aspect of true spirituality: the beginning of sanctification and the basis for heartfelt doxology to God.

*With thanks to the [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America](#).



Skeleton with scythe reclining on the Greek inscription GNOTHI SAUTON.
Roman mosaic, circa 1st century (Museo Nazionale Romano).

Saint Gregory the Theologian, for example, enjoins self-knowledge as the key which opens the gates of repentance: “You have a job to do, soul, and a great one, if you like: examine yourself, what it is you are and how you act, where you come from, and where you are going to end, and whether to live is this very life you are living, or something else besides. You have a job to do, soul: by these things cleanse yourself.” (Poem 2.1.78 “To His Own Soul”).

Saint John Chrysostom, moreover, extols self-knowledge as the pathway to humility and all other virtues beside: “He that is fond of outward glory and highly esteems the things present... is not permitted to understand himself; so he that overlooks these things will easily know himself; and having come to the knowledge of himself, he will proceed in order to all the other parts of virtue.” (Homily 25 on the Gospel of Matthew)

Saint Basil, expounding at length on the advantages of self-knowledge, says “Scrupulous attention to yourself will be of itself sufficient to guide you to the knowledge of God. If you give heed to yourself, you will not need to look for signs of the Creator in the structure of the universe; but in yourself, as in a miniature replica of cosmic order, you will contemplate the great wisdom of the Creator.” (Homily on the words, ‘Give Heed to Thyself’) In other words, man is a microcosm, declaring the glory of the Creator to one who looks inward as clearly as the heavens above show to one who looks upward.

Saint Basil continues, “When you have gone over all these points with suitable reflections upon each... you will be able to say with the prophet: ‘Thy knowledge is become wonderful’ [Psalm 138:6] from the study of myself. Give heed, therefore, to thyself, that you may give heed to God, to whom be glory and power forever. Amen.” True knowledge of self, therefore, leads ultimately to doxology, and never to doubt or despair.

Ours is a time in which, too often, information is confused with knowledge, and technology is taken for wisdom. The so-called “Information Superhighway,” along with the other electronic media, brings floods of facts and ideas into our lives. How easily, though, is the quiet work of self-knowledge drowned out by the informational deluge of this age. Retreat, solitude, contemplation, and the practice of stillness—these provide the context in which a person may drink deeply from the pool of self-knowledge, leading to repentance, virtue, and worship. As Orthodox Christians

who value our Hellenic heritage, we must go against the currents of our day and follow the Fathers in cultivating a continual observance of the ancient rule, “Know thyself.”

Throughout all our parishes and Archdiocesan institutions, may the students, the teachers, and the supporters of Greek Letters be blessed through their studies unto the true knowledge of self that leads to salvation, through the intercessions of these Three Holy Hierarchs and Ecumenical Teachers of the Church of Christ.

With paternal love in Christ,
Demetrios



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