

Basil of Caesarea on Christian Discernment

in the Light of Eric Voegelin's Principles

Copyright 2009 Anne Gordon Keidel

The purpose of this talk is to show how Eric Voegelin's principles help organize and unify the teachings of Basil of Caesarea as they pertain to discernment. Basil expressed his ideas of discernment in a wide variety of writings and genres. There were his ascetical writings, his dogmatic treatises, his exegetical homilies, his instructions to young people, and his many letters. Voegelin's thought is particularly appropriate for providing an order to the thought of Basil, because both were informed by the writings of Plato and the thought of the ancient Greeks. His principles help identify a connecting thread through all Basil's different writings, and thus provide a certain structure to Basil's teaching on discernment. Concepts such as the noetic and pneumatic aspects of human consciousness, the metaxy, the pull of the golden cord and of the lesser cords, and the importance of a formed consciousness can be illustrated in Basil's writings.

Noetic elements as described by Voegelin, can be further illustrated by Basil's statements on the nature of the human being, and the intellectual processes of discernment. According to Basil, the human being is soul (*psuxe*), and possesses a body with sensations. The soul is described as a light, spiritual/intellectual being, which comes together with a body which is seen as a vehicle for carrying on life. The soul, which Basil sees as being discernible only in its operations, has two parts. The first of these is the rational (*logikon*) and intelligent (*noeron*), and is meant to govern the other part, the non-rational (*alogon*) and the emotional (*pathetikon*). This indicates that the emotions belong to the soul rather than to the body. At the same time, Basil sees reason as being the servant of faith, "supporting faith by reason" (*te dianoia epitrephe ten pistin*). The presence of the faculty of reason is reflected in his many references to the intellect, the mind, the rational and the intelligent, in such words as nous, logikon, noeron).

Pneumatic elements What Voegelin refers to as "pneumatic elements" of human consciousness, can be seen in Basil's teaching about love, virtue, and the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Basil says that we are born with the love of God. The "spark of divine love hidden within you according to the power given us by the Spirit.... Virtue, likewise, exists in us by nature", Basil explains, "in the sense that we naturally hate illness and honor temperance, justice, and courage". Likewise, he continues, we do not need a master to teach us to avoid vice (Hex. 1).

Formation of consciousness If we want to reach the goal of our faith, we need first to have a consciousness formed in that faith. A Christian consciousness articulates the direction our life needs to take and informs the search for the path leading to the end for which we Christians were created, eternal life beyond this created existence. It enables us to recognize and put to use the rational and the spiritual elements present in human nature, needed to achieve this

goal. Basil was dedicated to forming people as Christians and exhorting them to the imitation of Christ. It is in these two approaches that we see him reflecting those elements of pneumatic awareness as expressed by Voegelin, and the discernment stemming from this awareness. Basil taught the importance of seeing Creation as a training ground, training the spiritual senses, reading Scripture, participating in Liturgy, praying and keeping God in one's memory. All these elements come together in his description of antiphonal psalm singing. Here he describes the melodies used to accompany the singing of the Psalms as a means to keep God's message alive and attractive within us: "What enters the mind with joy and pleasure is more likely to endure than a forceful lecture" (Hom. on Psalms 1). Added to this are the efforts to imitate Christ in his love, obedience, service and humility.

Metaxy is the environment in which a discernment takes place. Basil describes the yearning he felt for God, and the attraction God exerted on him (Longer Rules 2). What Voegelin calls the pull of the **golden cord** can be illustrated by many examples in Basil's writings. He describes the powerful attraction God exerted on him in his second conference to ascetics (Longer Rule 2), and the more subtle pull that can be experienced in the liturgy. He sees the harp with its harmonious rhythms as a gift of the Spirit, which create order and harmony in the soul, thus making the path to things above easier. "Now God is good", Basil goes on to say, "and all things desire good. Therefore, all things desire God. We do not have to be taught", Basil says, "to have affection for those who are dear to us or to show spontaneous good will to our benefactors" (Longer Rules 2). The spark of divine love in us, Basil explains, has the capacity to grow, for when we are cleansed from sin we yearn for God. The Spirit reveals the rewards that await one who is faithful to the path, so as to exert a pull that enables one to triumph over present labors and sufferings. This is compared to a traveller whose knowledge of a suitable lodging ahead makes the journey over a rough and difficult road lighter (Hom. on Ps. 1).

Pull of lesser cords We find in Basil three sources for the pulls which counter the pull of God in our lives, our own self-will, the world's attractions, and what he calls the tactics of the Enemy. Self-will, putting one's desire for personal glory ahead of God's glory and thus choosing to depart from the Lord's way is said to be the principal cause of sin. The world with the abundance of material things, possessions, vainglory, lusts of the flesh can also pull us away from God. And thirdly, the Enemy can manipulate these two pulls and also add some of his own. In Basil's early life as a Christian, these lesser pulls were also seen in the differing positions of bishops fighting with each other to force their point of view as the official Christian teaching. Basil felt a bit tossed about by their various arguments.

Struggle as necessity Basil goes further than saying that struggle exists, he says that it is a necessity. He says that, if we want to win the prize of eternal life, then a contest, an adversary, and affliction are all necessary. We cannot win if we have not contested, and there is no contest without an adversary, and no adversary without affliction. Indeed, he considers the struggle not only necessary, but even desirable.

It is not suffering for the sake of the Faith that is painful; but what is hard to bear is to fail to fight its battles.... What athlete does not so much complain of being

wounded in the struggle, as of not being able to secure admission into the stadium.
(..., *alla to me enathlesai aute dusphorotaton*).

Discernment process For Basil, the discernment process can be seen to have three basic components, maintaining our integrity; availing ourselves of God's help; and strengthening our commitment.

Maintaining our integrity The struggle of discernment involves striving to maintain the integrity of our faculty of reason and our inner balance, by which we weigh the alternatives. Our faculty of reason can lose its control when the mind permits it to be enslaved by the passions, thus leading to sin and death. As for evil, Basil says that God is the origin of all that exists, but in another place, he says that God is not the origin of evil, "because the contrary cannot proceed from its contrary". "Evil is not a living animated essence; it is the condition of the soul opposed to virtue".

Basil teaches that the human being is created with free will, the ability to choose freely what is right and what is wrong. This contrasts with the generally held belief at the time that according to Greek thinking, the human being is incapable of choosing knowingly what is evil, that all such choices are due to ignorance. Basil explains that the human being has a built in "balance", so named because, like a balance which tests weights, it can incline equally both ways, in the direction of good or of evil, depending on our free judgment. Basil calls it our inner tribunal by which we weigh and choose.

Availing ourselves of God's help In Basil's view, the principle agents of God's help are Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the good angels. This takes the form of fighting with us against the enemy and guiding us as we progress along the Christian path. God's grace is necessary, not only if beauty is to exist in the soul, but also if fulfillment is to be achieved. And so, as God is our helper in the "war" against the devil, we must "breathe him [in]", (*auton anapneontes*), Basil says. Christ directs and strengthens us, especially by way of his utterances and commandments found in the Scriptures. Christ is also a "Way" we can depend on to bring us to the Father, a way, Basil says, where erring and straying are unknown, and a way which enables us to advance in stages through the illumination that knowledge gives (*tou photismou tes gnoseos*). And he quotes the Gospel of John, "through him we know the Father" (Jn. 14. 6). The help of the Holy Spirit is most fully described in the *De Spiritu Sancto*, where the Holy Spirit is said to bestow gifts, to illuminate us, to reveal mysteries, and to impart wisdom. The healthy eye represents the purified soul, but the power of seeing, in the spiritual sense, represents the work of the Holy Spirit, and enables us to cry, "Abba, Father". At one point, Basil compares the Holy Spirit with art, in that they both exist in the human person in a potential and an actual form. The potential to create a work of art lies within the artist, but becomes actual when activated to create something. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is present within us as potential help, which becomes actual when called into action in response to a need.

Good angels, sometimes referred to as good spirits, are mentioned on several occasions as helpers to the Christian. They are the angelic host who accompany the Lord, the ministering

spirits present to those in need, and the guardian angels. A good angel can also serve as a guide along the path. These good spirits are seen to have an auxiliary role to that of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Strengthening our commitment In order to strengthen our commitment to authentic discernment, Basil teaches fasting, abstinence, renunciation, steadfastness and the practice of virtue. The true purpose of fasting, Basil replied, was the control of one's appetite and the prevention of satiety. Closely related to proper fasting is the abstinence from one's own will. Basil says that this is what abstinence is about, rather than the refraining from certain foods. Because our self-will is the principal cause of sin and a hindrance to following Christ, it is best to give it up. Not doing so is contrary to good reason. At the same time, abstinence from evil acts is not enough, we must resist the impulse to evil and pursue doing good. Renunciation is a form of freedom, for it loosens the chains binding us to this present transitory life so that, freed from human obligations we can start on the "God-ward way". This takes the form of impassivity towards one's life and detachment from things external to us such as possessions, vainglory and useless things. Basil does not always tell those with many possessions to give them up, but rather to practice responsible stewardship by administering them wisely and using them to promote the common good. He teaches the importance of steadfastness, which requires a fixed and persistent purpose, and a determination to go on in spite of obstacles. As "resolution in the heart is the root of actions,. . . one must take counsel with oneself, strengthen one's resolution and continue unchanged in what has been determined." Job is cited as a good example of steadfastness.

Our faith informs our reason, which in turn weighs the alternatives and makes a choice. In this way Basil warns his young listeners not to let go of the "rudders of your mind", the built-in faculty used to determine one's direction, the guiding mechanism within each of us.

This is then, an introduction to Basil's teaching on discernment, helped along by an order provided by Voegelin's insights.