CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Antony and the Desert Fathers: Did You Know?

Spiritual Wisdom of the Desert Fathers

editors

On fasting

Abba John the Short said, "If a king wants to take a city whose citizens are hostile, he first captures the food and water of the inhabitants of the city, and when they are starving subdues them. So it is with gluttony. If a man is earnest in fasting and hunger, the enemies which trouble his soul will grow weak."

On purity of heart

Abba Poemen said, "Teach your heart to keep what your tongue teaches others."

On judging

A brother asked Abba Poemen, "I am troubled in spirit, and want to leave this place."

And the old man said, "Why?"

And he said, "I have heard unedifying stories about one of the brothers."

And the old man said, "Are the stories true?" And he said, "Yes, Father. The brother who told me is a man of trust."

And the old man answered, "The brother who told you is not a man of trust. For if he was so, he would not have told you these stories. When God heard the cry of the men of Sodom, he did not believe it until he had gone down and seen with his own eyes."

And the brother said, "I too have seen it with my own eyes."

When the old man heard this, he looked down and picked off the ground a wisp of straw, and he said, "What is this?"

And he answered, "Straw."

Then the old man reached up and touched the roof of the cell, and said, "What is this?"

And he answered, "It is the beam that holds up the roof."

And the old man said, "Take it into your heart that your sins are like this beam, and that brother's sins are like this wisp of straw."

On true righteousness

Abba Poemen said, "One man seems silent of speech, but is condemning other people within his heart—he is really talking incessantly. Another man seems to talk all day, yet keeps his silence, for he always speaks in a way that is useful to his hearers."

On anger

Abba Agatho said, "If an angry man raises the dead, God is still displeased with his anger."

On temptation

Abba Abraham, who was a disciple of Abba Agatho, once asked Abba Poemen, "Why do the demons attack me?"

And Abba Poemen said to him, "Do the demons attack you? The demons do not attack us when we follow our self-wills, because then our wills become demons and themselves trouble us to obey them. If you want to know the kind of people with whom the demons fight, it is Moses and men like him."

On lust

Once the disciple of a great old man was tempted by lust. When the old man saw him struggling, he said, "Do you want me to ask the Lord to release you from your trouble?"

But he said, "Abba, I see that although it is a painful struggle, I am profiting from having to carry the burden. But ask God in your prayers, that he will give me long-suffering, to enable me to endure."

Then his abba said to him, "Now I know that you are far advanced, my son, and beyond me."

On doublemindedness

Said the abbess Matrona: "Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company."

—The Editors

From* Western Asceticism *edited by Chadwick (Library of Christian Classics Series). Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.

For more information on this topic, see:

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers,
http://pharos.bu.edu/cn/articles/SayingsOfDesertFathers.txt

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Antony and the Desert Fathers: From the Editors - Models or Kooks?

The questions that hover in the background of this issue are as pressing as ever.

Mark Galli

"After the peace of the church when the supreme test of martyrdom was no longer demanded," writes historian Christopher Dawson, "the ascetics had come in the eyes of the Christian world to hold the position the martyrs had formerly occupied as the living witnesses of the faith and the reality of the supernatural world."

Other historians note an increasing laxity of devotion in the church, and see the monastic movement as an attempt to live out the demands of the gospel more literally.

Then again, the pioneers of the movement all began their desert lives before the "peace of the church," before things went supposedly lax. Antony took up asceticism over four decades before the persecution of Christians ceased, and he visited a number of Christian hermits who had already been living apart from society for years.

There seems to have been, then, some other motive driving Christians to abandon family and property and pray their days away.

For some, it was clearly an attempt to earn God's favor, a classic case of "works righteousness." For others, it was clearly an expression of spiritual pride, an attempt to be one up on fellow believers. For others still—let's call them the kooks—it was a great way to work out their pathologies.

But I, for one, believe most monks yearned to know and love God in a way that was not possible in the hubbub of city life. Furthermore, I believe their disciplines allowed them to discover something about God that cannot be discovered unless one does what they did.

That time seems to be one of those moments when men and women touched the hem of God's garment in a special way. In this issue, we are merely trying to touch the hem of the robes of those men and women.

Questions to answer

The ultimate question this topic—early desert monasticism—raises is, What should we make of it all? Was this movement ultimately a force for good or for ill? Did men like Antony promote the gospel or hinder it? Are these desert fathers (and a few mothers) godly models to emulate or misguided enthusiasts to pity?

These questions are not rhetorical; the events may be far away, but the issues early monks addressed are very much alive. How are we to obey Jesus' command to sell our possessions and follow him (Mark 10:21)? What does Paul mean when he says Christians are to pray unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17)?

The desert monks took such passages literally. Jesus assumes that Christians will fast (Matt. 6): so did desert fathers. Paul says he disciplined his body, "training it to do what it should do" (1 Cor. 9:27): so did the desert fathers by submitting their bodies to rigorous asceticism.

If they, in fact, understood and obeyed the New Testament on these points, the desert fathers are models we should emulate in some way. If they misunderstood and misapplied these teachings, then we have to do more than scoff at them: we have to explain how such biblical injunctions are to be obeyed faithfully in our own day.

Even more crucial: the desert fathers claim their ascetic methods purified their hearts and led them to a fuller, richer experience of God. Is this true? Or were they deluded? If it's true, we need to appropriate some of their spirituality. If not, we have to ask why so many men and women spent their entire lives following the rigors of the ascetic way. People are not stupid; they don't do this sort of thing unless they are getting something out of it. If we decide it wasn't God, what could it have been?

Before we can answer such ultimate questions, of course, we have to answer the penultimate questions: Who were these men and women? What, in their own terms, were they trying to accomplish? What difference did it make to them and to the social and political world around them?

Such are the questions addressed in this issue, but the ultimate questions always hover in the background. After you've read the issue, tell us how you answer one or more of these questions.

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The Best There Ever Was

Modern Christian hermits still look to him for inspiration, as did the entire Middle Ages, but today we hardly know him. What did the illiterate recluse, known as Antony of the Desert, do to earn such adulation?

Mark Galli

Crossing the dry Egyptian desert, a band of philosophers finally arrived at the "inner mountain," the monastic abode of a Christian named Antony. The skeptical scholars asked the illiterate old man to explain the inconsistencies of Christianity, and after they got started, they ridiculed some of its teachings—especially that God's Son would die on a cross.

Antony, who spoke only Coptic (not Greek, the international language of the day), answered through an interpreter. He began by asking, "Which is better—to confess a cross, or to attribute acts of adultery and pederasty to those whom you call gods?" After questioning further the reasonableness of paganism, he moved to the central issue.

"And you, by your syllogisms and sophisms," he continued, "do not convert people from Christianity to Hellenism, but we, by teaching faith in Christ, strip you of superstition. ... By your beautiful language, you do not impede the teaching of Christ, but we, calling on the name of Christ crucified, chase away the demons you fear as gods."

A crowd of seekers stood by, waiting to see Antony, and among them were some men who were "suffering from demons." Antony asked that the men be brought forward. He called on Christ, made the sign of the cross over them three times, and, according to one ancient account, "immediately the men stood and were sound, coming to their senses and giving thanks to God."

The Greek philosophers were astonished, but Antony quickly said, "Why do you marvel at this? Is it not we who do it, but Christ, who does these things through those who believe in him."

The philosophers then departed, embracing Antony as they left, saying they "had benefited from him."

This story, and others like it, show that by the end of his life, the solitary Antony had gained a reputation across the Mediterranean world. Not only simple people but the sophisticated and mighty sought him out. His life and words inspired fellow Christians to greater devotion and, sometimes, moved pagans to convert. But it wasn't his wisdom and eloquence that astounded people as much as his laser-like devotion to Christ.

This devotion expressed itself in a way that was as impressive to his age (as well as to Christian Europe for another 1,000 years) as it is strange and off-putting to us today. The way is called asceticism, or originally, "the discipline," and the institution it created is called monasticism.

Although Antony is sometimes considered the founder of monasticism, he was not. But he put monasticism on the Christian map because of his extraordinary practice of monastic disciplines. In the novel and movie ***The Natural***, baseball player Roy Hobbs longs to be "the best there ever was." It terms of how early and medieval Christians understood the spiritual life, Antony was indeed considered the best there ever was.

Antony was born in A.D. 251, an "Egyptian by race" (all quotations are from Athansius's ***The Life of Antony***, from which the above account comes as well). Egypt was under Roman control and Christians were still subject to periodic bouts of persecution. But Egypt was also home to one of the most vibrant Christian communities in the empire and had already produced two of the church's greatest minds—Clement and Origen. Consequently, many Egyptians of wealth and influence were finding their way into the church.

Such was the case with Antony's parents, who were "well born and prosperous," and who raised Antony in the faith; Antony regularly attended church with his parents.

Though he was not interested in learning how to read or speak anything but his native Coptic, early on he showed a keen interest in hearing Scripture read.

When Antony was between 18 and 20, two events took place that altered his life trajectory. First, both his parents died—how exactly, we don't know, though plague is a likely candidate. Antony now found himself caring for "one quite young sister," as well as the family estate of over 200 acres.

The second event took place about six months later. One Sunday, as Antony made his way to church, he was contemplating the biblical passage that described early Christians' selling their possessions and giving everything to the poor (Acts 4:32-37). When he stepped into the church, the Gospel was being read, and Antony heard, "If you would be perfect, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor; and come follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven."

Antony was startled—it was "as if the passage were read on his account." He did not quibble nor hesitate, but obeyed as if it had indeed been spoken to him personally. He donated his family estate to his town (though historians are unclear as to which town that was), sold or gave away the rest of his possessions, put his sister into the care of a convent, and "devoted himself from then on to the discipline rather than the household."

"The discipline" included a variety of practices, from constant prayer and working with one's hands to severe fasts and sleep deprivation. He took up with a Christian hermit living in a neighboring village, and over the next several years visited many others: "He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one's freedom from anger and the human concern of another. ... He admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. ... He marked likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all."

Mutual love, perhaps, but there was also in early monasticism a competitive spirit, in which monks sought to outdo one another in "the discipline." This is where Antony shined; he aimed to "be second to none of them in moral improvements":

"His watchfulness was such that he often passed the entire night without sleep, and doing this not once, but often, he inspired wonder. He ate once daily after sunset, but there were times when he received food every second and frequently even every fourth day. His food was bread and salt, and drinking he took only water. ... A rush mat was sufficient to him for sleeping, but more regularly he lay on the bare ground."

Antony believed, as did most Christians of his era, that "the soul's intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened" A well-rested body, satiated with pleasure, and basking in the good things of life, becomes spiritually lazy. That is, no pain, no gain. Christians like Antony took literally the sayings of Jesus about the incompatibility of mammon and God, about earthly treasures being a stumbling block to heavenly joy, and so on. Not many took up the discipline as radically as did Antony, but even those who didn't recognized the need to discipline the body and its desires, sticking to some physical and spiritual regimen.

Though Antony already impressed many of the townspeople, he remained unsatisfied with his progress. So he moved "some distance from the village," entered a tomb, and had a friend, who agreed to supply him with bread, close the entrance.

It was here that Antony experienced some of his most horrific demonic attacks.

Staving off demons

Antony's hair-raising battles with demons are the most tantalizing parts of Athanasius's biography and became a popular subject for medieval artists. Today it is hard to determine exactly what it is that Antony experienced: were these dreams (nightmares), encounters with actual spirits, psychological wrestling, hallucinations, or what? Whatever they were, Antony's biographer clearly used them to illustrate Antony's spiritual strength, or better, how Christ aided Antony.

Early encounters seem to be of the usual sort—"a great dust cloud of considerations" one would expect Antony to experience: "The devil ... attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and finally the rigor of virtue."

But things turned violent after Antony was closed up in the tomb: "A multitude of demons ... whipped him with such force that he lay on earth, speechless from the tortures." When his friends found him, they took him for dead at first. After he was taken back to the village, he recovered and returned to the tombs, where he underwent some of his most vivid spiritual experiences:

"The place was immediately filled with the appearances of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and serpents, asps, scorpions and wolves, and each of these moved in accordance with its form. The lion roared, wanting to spring at him; the bull seemed intent on goring; the creeping snake did not quite reach him; the onrushing wolf made straight for him—and altogether the sounds of all the creatures that appeared were terrible, and their ragings were fierce."

Antony felt as if he had been struck or wounded. But Antony only mocked the demons: "If there were some power among you, it would have been enough for only one of you to come. ... It is a mark of your weakness that you mimic the shapes of irrational beasts."

After being assaulted like this for who knows how long, Antony looked up and saw "the roof being opened, as it seemed, and a certain beam of light descending toward him. Suddenly the demons vanished from view."

A confused Antony entreated, "Where were you? Why didn't you appear in the beginning, so that you could stop my distresses?"

A voice answered, "I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere."

Now Antony "was even more enthusiastic in his devotion to God." He went deeper into the desert and ran across a long-deserted fortress with a spring or well within. The now 35-year-old Antony entered the fortress, shut and barred the gate (again, after making arrangements with friends for food drops), and began living there alone.

With this, his reputation grew greater still, so that over the years, more and more people journeyed to his fortress in the hopes of catching a glimpse of this desert hero. Some reported overhearing Antony battle

demons "emitting pitiful sounds and crying out." Others received counsel through the gate. And many, inspired by his example, took up the discipline themselves.

One day, 20 years into this way of life, Antony, "having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God," opened the gate and emerged. The crowd gathered there was "amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons." Even more to the point, they were impressed that "the state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure. ... Moreover, when he saw the crowd, he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so many people."

(In this and other descriptions, Athanasius, as a theologian battling Arianism, was also trying to show Antony as an example of God's ultimate purpose in Christ: God became man that we might become godlike.)

With this, Antony began his public ministry, and Athanasius reports that he healed the sick, exorcized demons, reconciled enemies, and consoled the mourning. He also "gave grace in speech," speaking long with those who sought spiritual direction. His specialty seems to have been dealing with demons and urging others on in the discipline, saying, "Let us not consider, when we look at the world, that we have given up things of some greatness, for even the entire earth is itself quite small in relation to all of heaven."

As a result, "by the attraction of his speech, a great many monasteries came into being, and like a father he guided them all."

Going to a new level

For the rest of his life, Antony moved back and forth between monastic seclusion and public ministry, not only in the desert, but also in the city. When Emperor Maximian began persecuting Christians in 311, Antony went to Alexandria to encourage those on trial, comfort the imprisoned, visit the convicted (one of Maximian's punishments was to blind one eye, hamstring one leg, and then send the guilty into the mines) and stand by others during execution. While others rushed into hiding when the government put on more pressure, Antony continued to appear in public. But authorities refused to touch him, fearing perhaps that the martyrdom of ascetic this hero would not sit well with the public, pagan or Christian.

When Maximian's persecution ended after a couple of years, Antony returned to his desert cell and "was there being martyred daily by his conscience, doing battle in the contests of faith." And again he raised the level of his discipline: he began wearing a hair shirt (with the bristles rubbing constantly against the skin) and he stopped bathing (considered a luxury).

Though he wanted nothing more than to remain alone in prayer, people kept pestering him. Increasingly annoyed with the interruptions, he sought escape by traveling up the Nile. But as he waited one day to hop on a passing boat, he heard a voice "from above" saying, "If you truly desire to be alone, go now into the inner mountain."

He was confused as to exactly what that meant, but he joined some traveling Saracens who were going east. About 100 miles southeast of Cairo, he saw a hill that he sensed was the place revealed to him, and there he settled down.

Rather than continue to depend on donations, Antony planted wheat and some vegetables to sustain himself—and to offer something to the inevitable visitors (who kept arriving). A handful of monks joined him (including Athanasius for a time) and witnessed his asceticism, overheard his battles with demons, and sought his spiritual counsel.

Antony was about 40 by this time, and for the next 65 years (he lived to age 105), this was home base. Antony's remarkable devotion and longevity enhanced his reputation for sanctity. Athanasius records a number of remarkable stories from this period, and the historian is hard pressed to decipher what is factual and what belongs to the realm of parable.

In many stories, Antony is clearly a "new Adam," an example of restored humanity, one who is not subject to creation but master of it. In one incident, Antony scolds animals who had trampled his garden, and from then on, they no longer do so. In another story, a pack of hyenas threaten to attack him, but when Antony tells them to depart, they obey.

Other stories show Antony enjoying a variety of mystical experiences. More than one story tells of his clairvoyance; for example, one day in prayer he saw two monks journeying to see him lying beside the road miles away, dying of thirst. (By the time monks sent by Antony arrived to help the travelers, one of them had already died).

He also displayed the gift of prophecy: he told individuals why they had come to see him before they told him themselves. He even was reported to have an out-of-body experience: "He felt himself being carried off in thought, and the wonder was that while standing there, he saw himself, as if he were outside himself."

Though Athanasius includes such stories to impress readers with Antony's holiness, time and again he also reminds readers, "Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, 'It is not I, but the grace of God which is in me." And he shows Antony himself pointing people elsewhere: "He asked that no one marvel at him on his account, but rather that they marvel at the Lord."

By the time he was 105 years old, Antony's body was frail, his teeth were completely gone, and he knew death was near. He told his companions how to dispose of his few possessions (one sheepskin cloak, for example, was to go to Athanasius). Then he exhorted them, "Be watchful and do not destroy your lengthy discipline ... Strive to preserve your enthusiasm . ...You know the treacherous demons ... do not fear them, but rather draw inspiration from Christ always, trust in him."

After he died, he was buried in an unmarked grave, the location of which is lost to history.

"He is famous everywhere," Athanasius noted at the end of his biography, "and is marveled at by everyone, and is dearly missed by people who never saw him."

For a thousand years hence, Antony was considered the spiritual best that ever was, the prototypical monk and the new Adam, an example of what God could do through one devout soul.

As such, Antony inspired the monastic movement, which more than any other Christian institution, is responsible for evangelizing and then Christianizing Europe—an ironic legacy for an illiterate Egyptian who strove to live far from civilization.

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For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Athanasius: Life of Antony, Full Text
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html

Catholic Encyclopedia: Anthony, Saint

http://www.knight.org/advent/cathen/01553d.htm

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Christian History
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The Life Changing "Life of Antony"

Athanasius's biography was not only a bestseller in its day, but a book that made people stop and think—and act.

David Wright

News of Antony of Egypt, especially his sacrificial solitude, spread widely long before he died. At Rome, Marcella, a wealthy noblewoman already widowed at age 17, heard about him around 340, and in response, turned her mansion into an ascetic community devoted to prayer and Bible study. Other Roman matrons followed her pioneering example.

But when Athanasius, who had been one of those who told Marcella about Antony, put Antony's story down in writing, Antony's influence became greater still. As Athanasius told his readers at the beginning of his ***Life of Antony***, "I feel that, once you have heard the story, you will not merely admire the man but will wish to emulate his commitment as well."

Within a decade or so of publication, a Latin version (Athanasius wrote the ***Life*** in Greek) had been published and a copy came into the hands of two Roman officials in Trier, a prosperous regional center in what is now part of Germany.

As one ancient account records, "One of them began to read it. He was amazed and set on fire . ...He was filled with holy love and sobering shame. Angry with himself, he turned his eyes on his friend and said to him: 'Tell me, I beg you, what do we hope to achieve with all our labors? What is our aim in life? ... Can we hope for any higher office in the palace than to be friends of the emperor? ... If I wish to become God's friend, in an instant I may become that now.' "

He turned back to the book in turmoil as he experienced an inner conversion. "I have decided to serve God," he said, "and I propose to start doing that from this hour in this place." His companion joined him in this resolve. Soon their wives followed suit, vowing themselves to ascetic abstinence.

We know this dramatic story from Ponticianus, who told it in the mid-380s to an imperial official in Milan, a man named Augustine. Ponticianus was a high imperial official, an African (like Augustine) and a baptized Christian believer (unlike Augustine).

He was surprised one day to find Augustine and his friend Alypius reading the letters of Paul. As they talked, Ponticianius told them about Antony of Egypt and his extraordinary life—and discovered with astonishment that Augustine and Alypius had never heard of Antony nor "the flocks in the monasteries and their manner of life well pleasing to God and the fertile deserts of the wilderness."

As Ponticianus spoke, Augustine, just like the civil servants in Trier, was "violently overcome by a fearful sense of shame." The intellectual arguments that might have kept him from following these humbling examples had all been exhausted. Dare he face liberation from "the treadmill of habit?" In the heat of passion, his words to Alypius, as Augustine later put it in his ***Confessions***, "said less about the state of my mind than my brow, cheeks, eyes, color and tone of voice."

They went into the garden, where Augustine's struggles of soul raged on until he heard a child's voice telling him, "Take up and read." He remembered Antony's decisive response to an apparently chance

hearing of the words of Jesus, "Go sell all you have ... and come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). For Augustine, it was Romans 13:13-14 as Paul's letter fell open: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the lusts of the flesh." For Augustine conversion to Christianity was inseparable from commitment to a life of ascetic discipline.

Athanasius's purpose in writing Antony's ***Life*** had gained its greatest success: Augustine would become the greatest theologian in the church for the next 1,000 years.

David Wright, University of Edinburgh

For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Athanasius: Life of Antony, Full Text
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html

ATHANASIUS, St, Bishop of Alexandria
http://www.ccel.org/a/athanasius/athanasius-EB.html

Augustine's Confessions
http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/Englishconfessions.html

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Christian History
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Exorcizing the Desert

The stories of desert fathers' skirmishes with demons pointed to a larger struggle—and victory.

Diana Severance

Athanasius tells us that Antony, locked in his cell, repeatedly battled noisy, foul-smelling demons that took the shapes of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves. Many visitors approaching Antony's fortress reported hearing sounds of riotous crowds inside, wailing, shrieking, and crying, "Get out of our domain! What business have you in the desert?"—which they later surmised was the noise of demons.

We have such stories not only about Antony but other desert fathers as well. What do they mean?

To begin with, we need to understand the genre in which we find such stories. Athanasius's ***Life of Antony***, for example, which became a model for saints' lives, is not a modern history or biography; rather it is a panegyric, a form of eulogistic praise common in ancient pagan literature. Panegyrics of ancient pagan prophets and philosophers routinely included miraculous tales that raised them to the status of superstars.

In early Christian circles, we find many second- and third- century apocryphal ***Acts*** of the apostles that followed these rhetorical forms, creating a fictional romance literature that embellished the historical lives of Jesus' earliest disciples with flashy miracles (in the ***Acts of Paul***, for example, Paul baptizes a lion, and when Paul is beheaded, milk spurts from his neck). Most of the stories of the desert monks followed these pagan models.

This is not to say that all miracles they report are fictions, only that it is difficult today to determine which stories are embellished and by how much.

More important than the genre, though, is the setting. The very word "pagan," meaning "rural" or "from the countryside," came to be used of the heathen customs, beliefs, and practices that still lingered in rural areas. As Christianity consolidated its position in the cities, many believed demons were forced to flee to the desert. So Antony and other monks went to the desert to do battle, much as Christ had gone into the desert and was "tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts" (Mark 1:13).

To the monks, the unseen spiritual powers they battled took the forms of Egyptian animal gods—Anubis the jackal god, Seckmet the lioness, or Sobek the crocodile. In this the monks were only following the lead of the apostle Paul, who himself had called the pagan gods demons (1 Cor. 10:21), and bishops like Cyprian of Carthage (c.220-258), who taught, "The demons hide within the garlanded statues and images."

And how did the monks fight these demon hordes? Not with their own power or wisdom, as had pagan philosopher-magicians, but with prayer, Scripture, the sign of the cross, and the name of Jesus. For example, when a demon conjured up a mirage of a camel laden with "useful provisions" for the exhausted Macarius the Great (c.300-c.390), Macarius prayed "and immediately the camel was swallowed up into the ground."

Such stories, then, intend to show ancient readers how Christians were turning back worldliness and

paganism—more particularly, how Christ, through his warrior-monks, was spreading his lordship, even over the demon-filled desert.

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For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Athanasius: Life of Antony, Full Text
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html

The Acts of Paul and Thecla
http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/St.Pachomius/
Saints/thecla.html

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Alone in the Desert?

Why thousands of early Christians took up the monastic way.

James E. Goehring

In October 346, Alexandria was abuzz with word of Archbishop Athanasius's return from six years of exile. In that city, his Arian opponents were in retreat, and his followers were aflame with heightened zeal for their faith. Wives and husbands heeded Paul's advice (1 Cor. 7:5) to refrain from sexual relations and turn instead to prayer. Fathers persuaded children to renounce the world, and children encouraged parents in their asceticism. Young women who had looked forward to marriage chose instead to remain virgins for Christ, and young men followed the example of others and became monks. The laity's zeal had found embodiment in the renunciation of the world.

By the middle of the fourth century, asceticism was in the air and spreading, especially in Egypt. But what exactly did this life entail? And why were so many suddenly attracted to it?

Monastic growth movement

Renunciation of the world, an orientation so at odds with our modern culture, had in fact nourished the growth of Christianity from the start, and by 346, persons who wished to embark on an ascetic life had many exemplars from which to choose.

Within cities, Christian philosophers and teachers learned from the ascetic lifestyles of their non-Christian counterparts. As young people had in the past pursued wisdom by going to the philosopher Antoninus, who according to an ancient account, "despised his body and freed himself from its pleasures," so now Christian youth sought out Christian ascetics under whom they might learn the new Christian philosophy.

In Alexandria, the theologian Origen (who lived in the early third century) had taught new converts about Christianity and amazed them with his renunciations, including sleeping on the floor, going barefoot, extreme fasting, and abstaining completely from wine.

In fourth-century Leontopolis (in the Egyptian delta), one Hieracas formed an ascetic association of single persons who came together for study and worship. These Christians rejected traditional marriage and advocated instead a form of ascetic companionship, in which the partners renounced sexual activity.

More traditional Christian leaders, however, abhorred the practice. Athanasius, for example, wrote letters to virgins warning them that to live celibately with a man was to pour fuel on the flame of passion. "For does a person tie up a fire in his bosom and not burn his clothes? Or does a man walk on a fire's burning coals and not burn his feet?"

Still, Athanasius encouraged young women to become "brides of Christ" within their parents' home or in a house of virgins. Male ascetics too lived in the cities in their parents' homes, alone (this is called "anchoritic" monasticism), or in small ascetic houses.

By 325, a more elaborate form of village asceticism had also emerged. In Upper Egypt, Pachomius brought ascetics together within a walled community to practice a common life under a shared rule ("cenobitic" monasticism). Priests and deacons in Alexandria sent ascetically minded youth up river to

join the Pachomian community. Within the cities, towns, and villages of Egypt, ascetic Christians had become so commonplace that the author of the ***Historia Monachorum en Aegypto*** (a late-fourth-century travel journal) ventured to suggest that monks and virgins almost outnumbered the secular inhabitants in the town of Oxyrhynchus (on the Nile, about 100 miles south of modern Cairo). "The city," he asserted, "was so full of monasteries that its walls resounded with the monks' voices."

Gradually, the withdrawal from the world evident in these lifestyles, practiced often in the towns and villages of Egypt, became separate spatially as more and more ascetics withdrew into the desert. When Antony embarked on the ascetic life around A.D. 271, he first apprenticed himself with an old ascetic in a neighboring village. From there he moved into deserted tombs located some distance from the village, and then even farther away to a deserted fortress across the river. He eventually established a monastery at the inner mountain by the Red Sea.

Amoun, a contemporary of Antony, lived in an ascetic marriage in the Delta for 18 years before he withdrew alone (about 330) to Nitria, at the edge of the western desert beside the village of Pernoudj. By 338 so many ascetics had joined Amoun in Nitria that he withdrew six miles further into the desert to a place that became known as the Cells (Kellia). Here the monks lived in a colony of isolated cells (called "semi-anchoritic" monasticism), each located out of earshot of its nearest neighbor.

Initially cells must have been small, though archaeological excavations reveal that in later times some came to include a courtyard, a vestibule, an oratory, two bedrooms (one for the ascetic and one for his disciple), an office, a kitchen, and a latrine.

In this setting, less advanced monks practiced the ascetic life under the tutelage of a more experienced master. Thus when a novice asked Abba Paisios what he should do to fear God, he was told, "Go, and join a man who fears God, and live near him; he will teach you, too, to fear God."

Feats of spiritual athletes

In spite of the severe demands, communal asceticism proved increasingly attractive through the fourth century. Palladius reported that eventually 600 monks lived at the Cells and that they had their own church and priest. Even further into the desert beyond the Cells lay Scetis, which had been founded at about the same time by Macarius the Egyptian. Distant enough to satisfy the desire for solitude, yet close enough to meet transportation and economic needs, it became famous and attracted many ascetics.

Palladius, who visited Egypt toward the end of the fourth century, reported 2,000 monks living in the monasteries around Alexandria and 5,000 in Nitria. (The population of Alexandria has been estimated at about 180,000 in the fourth century.) In Athanasius's famous words, "The desert was made a city by monks who left their own people and enrolled for citizenship in heaven."

The sayings and stories of these desert ascetics are filled with accounts of amazing trials and extraordinary feats. One hears of monks who walked on hot coals or scorpions or asps with their bare feet, of others whose unshaven hair alone served as their clothes, and still others who grazed with the antelope for food. Some monks wore chains and let their hair grow long, much to the dismay of others. Women shaved their heads and passed as male ascetics, their ruse discovered only in their death.

Onnophrius withdrew so far into the desert that Paphnutius had to walk over eight days and receive miraculous aid to reach him. Abba Bessarion avoided sleep for 14 days and nights by standing upright in the midst of thorn bushes, and Eulogius often fasted an entire week, eating only bread and salt. Pachomius bound ashes against his loins so that they ate away at him, and another monk's body became so irritated through his ascetic practices that he was infested with vermin. A solitary, or hermit, in lower Egypt avoided the temptation of a woman by shutting himself in his cell and dousing the flame of lust by thrusting his fingers one by one into the flame of his lamp.

Fantastic tales such as these, however, only tell part of the story. While the tales emphasize the remoteness of the desert, most early ascetics dwelled near towns and villages or within relatively easy reach of them. Contact among monks was frequent, and the necessities of life required at least minimal contact with the world. The monks' handiwork required markets, and food and other necessities required an income.

John the Dwarf wove baskets that a camel driver picked up from his cell in Scetis, and Isidore went to the local market to sell his goods. Esias worked in the local harvest, and Lucius purchased his food with money earned plaiting ropes. Poemen interceded on a villager's behalf with a local magistrate, and in a letter, one writer appeals to the hermit John to obtain his release from military service. The "remoteness" of the desert was, in fact, not that remote. In the stories, it serves as a description of the monks' "otherness."

Yet even the near desert proved a difficult abode. If monks fled the city to avoid its temptations, they found in the desert the home of the demons. If they sought in the desert a place to avoid contact with the opposite sex, they found the desires and images of the flesh ever present in their minds. Theirs became a psychological battle, and ascetic techniques were aimed to conquer the mind as well as the body. Work and fasting became essential tools. Solitude and silence curtailed careless chatter. Hands busy weaving mats kept the mind occupied.

A carefully controlled diet helped. Monks recognized, along with medical writers of the day, that certain foods lowered one's sexual drive. Wine, meat, and rich foods, which had the opposite effect, were of course avoided. Jerome, citing the physician Galen, states that "bodies of young men ... and women glow with innate warmth" and that "all food is harmful which tends to increase that heat." He advised them, "Drink only water ... avoid all hot dishes. ... With vegetables also avoid anything that creates wind or lies heavy on the stomach. ... Nothing is so good for young Christians as a diet of herbs. ... By cold food the heat of the body should be tempered." Monastic diets varied, but bread, lentils, and vegetables were among the staples.

Living Bibles

Scripture served as the ultimate guidebook for these men and women. They read it carefully and committed large portions of it to memory. Antony paid such close attention when he heard the Scriptures read that his memory served him in place of books. Pachomian monks memorized large portions of Scripture, especially the Psalms, and meditated upon them. In an ancient rock-cut tomb used by a monk as a cell, the owner painted the first line of each Psalm on the wall to aid him in his recitation of the entire text. The memorized text was then embodied in the ascetic's life.

The tales of the desert monks are replete with examples of such "lived" Scripture. When Abba Macarius returned to his cell one day, he found a man stealing his belongings. He reacted calmly and helped the thief load his donkey with the objects from his cell. As the man departed, Macarius recited the words from Job, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Sarapion loved his copy of one of the Gospels and read it often. Yet he sold it and gave to the poor, following its advice to "sell what you have and give to the poor."

Theodore refused a visit from his mother, citing Matthew 10:37: "He who loves his father or his mother more than me is not worthy of me."

The radical Christians who responded to the ascetic call embarked on a path of personal change. They sought to embody the teachings of Scripture, to live as angels on earth by imitating Elijah, Christ, and

the ascetic heroes about whom they heard. As angels were not bound by family and belongings, they sought to free themselves of such encumbrances. As angels were passionless, they sought to control the passions. As angels were asexual, they sought to overcome sexuality.

Late fourth-century monk and spiritual writer John Cassian wrote, "To pray 'thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven' is to pray that men be like angels, that as angels fulfill God's will in heaven, men may fulfill his will, instead of their own, on earth." Ascetic practices tore down the old self as defined by "the world" and fashioned a new self defined in terms of radical Christian spirituality. Arsenius, a man of senatorial rank who served as tutor to the Roman princes Arcadius and Honorius, prayed to God to lead him in the way of salvation. "And a voice came saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.' " Arsenius renounced his rank and wealth and became a monk in Scetis.

When later a relative, a senator, left him a large inheritance, he returned it saying, "I was dead [to the world] long before this senator who has just died." Arsenius had become a new man in Christ. His transformation is described more mystically in reports that "a brother came to Arsenius's cell at Scetis, and waiting outside the door, he saw the man entirely like a flame" (symbolizing the monk's ascetic perfection). Heaven and earth met in the successful ascetic.

The stories and sayings of the desert monks served as spiritual guidebooks for those who would embark on an ascetic life. Novices in the ascetic life strove to imitate the great ascetic heroes of the past. The sayings and stories, however, served not only future monks, but other Christians as well. Stories like that of Macarius related above, after all, convey their moral within an idealized story. The reader need not help a thief plunder his home in order to recognize in Marcarius's detachment a challenge to his own attachment to the things of the world.

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For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Athanasius: Life of Antony, Full Text
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html

Chapter 37; The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire
http://www.ccel.org/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap37.htm

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Diet For a Large Soul

What monks meant by fasting, and what they ate when they didn't.

Benedicta Ward

Desert fathers specialist Benedicta Ward notes that monks were forced to order their dress, sleep, sexuality, and eating because of "the nature of life in the desert," (that is, the severity of the conditions), and because they longed to be "free to feed on the word of God without distraction by appetite." To get a feel for early asceticism, especially fasting, and how it affected the daily lives of monks, we've included a portion of Ward's introduction to The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto***, translated by Normal Russell, (Cistercian, Kalamazoo, 1980, p. 23-25). (***The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto ***is a late fourth-century journal of seven Palestinian monks who traveled to Egypt to learn from the monks living there).***

Some of the monks ate very little, like John of Lycopolis who ate only a little fruit each day and Pityrion who had a light diet of a little corn-meal soup each day. At Bawit it was customary to keep the canonical fasts of Wednesday and Friday, days of complete abstinence from food, in memory of the Passion of Christ, but on other days a meal in the evening, usually after Communion, was the norm. Older monks might eat very little simply because of age, but the custom observed by the travelers seems to have been as in this story:

"Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, 'How should one fast?'

"Abba Poemen said to him, 'For my part, I think it better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.'

"Abba Joseph said to him, 'When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, Abba?'

"The old man said, 'Yes, even for three and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able, and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.'"

By the time Cassian came to Egypt (in the late 300s), this custom seems to have become universal, and the visitors from Palestine observed that this was already the case. They were given food when they arrived at a place, but usually the monks ate a light meal at the ninth hour of the day.

It was not only the frequency of eating that was restricted but also the kind and quantity of food. The quality of food in the desert was, of necessity, not noticeably poorer than that of the average peasant; indeed it might be better. A comparison that delighted the monks was that between the sophisticated food eaten by Arsenius at court and the poor fare he had in the desert.

One story, in various versions, contrasted this with the experience of the average peasant-turned-monk, who was asked, "What was your food in the fields and what wine did you drink?"

"I ate dry bread and, if I found any, green herbs and water."

This is precisely the diet described in the ***Historia Monachorum*** for the hermits the visitors encountered or heard of: dried bread and green herbs. The bread, ***paxamatia***, consisted of small loaves, about 12 ounces in weight, which could be taken into the desert and stored indefinitely. To this salt might be added when the loaves were soaked again to make them edible, and only the most austere of hermits regarded that as a luxury. A hermit might cultivate a small garden, but any vegetables he grew would be for visitors. It seems from the ***Historia Monachorum*** that the vegetables were salted in brine to preserve them for future use.

In the monasteries, some cooking was possible, and at Nitria the visitors saw fresh bread. The Pachomian monks ate soup, as well as olives with bread, as did the disciples of Helle. The merchant who gave away beans and lentils to the monks at his conversion does not seem to have had his gift rejected, while it was said of Apollo that he did not eat lentils, as if this were unusual.

Water was the usual drink and in this account that is all the visitors were offered, though elsewhere in this literature wine is mentioned as not being forbidden.

Heavenly banquets

The dry parched air of the desert, the amount of salt in food, the brackish water, are all reflected in the visions and fantasies of the monks. What they dream about is fresh, juicy fruit, and from such dreams one obtains a very clear if oblique light on the fasts of the hermits.

What were their luxuries? Grapes, which would be passed from hand to hand in wonder; figs, sometimes monstrous figs that were held to be the real fruits of paradise. Apollo and his first disciples were given an exotic gift one Easter, from the hand of an angel:

"Things which do not grow in Egypt: fruits of paradise of every kind, and grapes and pomegranates and figs and walnuts ... and honeycombs, and a pitcher of fresh milk, and giant dates, and white loaves still warm."

The milk that is fresh, the bread that is warm, the honeycomb, the only source of sugar for the ancient world, and above all the soft, delicious fruits. When Patermuthius and Macarius each dreamed themselves into paradise, the first thing they did was eat, and it was of fruit, "rich and many-colored" fruit; that was the real reward.

Photos for this article provided by Michael McClellan (m_mclellan@hotmail.com). For more, see www.innerlightproductions.com.

For more information on this topic, see:

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers
http://pharos.bu.edu/cn/articles/SayingsOfDesertFathers.txt

The Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobia
http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/inst/index.html

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Antony and the Desert Fathers: Christian History Timeline

A Christian History Timeline

Pioneer Years (251-312)

c. 251 Antony is born; Paul of Thebes begins living in the desert

c. 271 Antony takes up "the discipline," learning from scattered Christian hermits in Egypt

c. 275 Chariton settles in Fara, becoming the first monk in Palestine

286 Antony withdraws into his fort

306 Antony emerges from his fort

c. 308 Hilarion begins ascetic life near Gaza

311 Antony visits Alexandria to comfort those persecuted by Maximin

Persecution

249-251 Decius instigates empire-wide persecution of Christians; many in Egypt flee to the desert

251 Novatian teaches that the lapsed (those who denied the faith in persecution) should not be admitted back into the church—the first sign that some Christians believe the church is becoming lax

254 Origen dies from injuries suffered in the persecution

303 The "Great Persecution" of Diocletian begins; copies of Scripture confiscated and destroyed; thousands of Christians suffer

Explosive Growth (313-357)

313 Antony withdraws to the Inner Mountain, near the Red Sea

c. 320 Pachomius founds the first monastic community, at Tabennesi

c. 330 Athanasius flees authorities, hiding with monks in the Thebaid; **Amoun** moves to Nitria, inspiring a monastic settlement; **Marcarius the Great** begins a monastery in Scetis, which grows rapidly; monasteries spring up in Palestine

338 Antony visits Alexandria and Nitria; founding of the Cells, a monastic community near Nitria

340 Athanasius, Ammonius the Tall, and Isidore visit Rome, and the monastic ideal spreads in the West

c. 350 John of Lycopolis begins his 48 years as a recluse

356 Antony dies

357 Athanasius writes his ***Life of Antony***, which becomes a "best seller"

Toleration

313 Edict of Milan gives official toleration to Christians

325 Constantine calls for the Council of Nicea to unify church and empire; council condemns Arianism, affirms divinity of Christ

328 Athanasius becomes bishop of Alexandria

328-361 Arians control key political and ecclesiastical posts; orthodox bishops in exile

c. 340 First conversion of the Goths by (Arian) missionary Ulfilas

Second Generation (358-403)

358 Basil the Great founds his first monastery

360 Martin of Tours takes up the monastic life

383 Evagrius moves to Nitria

385 Jerome and companions found a monastery near Bethlehem; **Cassian and Germanus** arrive in Egypt

388 Palladius visits Alexandria, Nitria, and Cellia

391-2 Monks help destory the Temple of Sarapis in Alexandria

394 Seven monks from Jerusalem visit Egyptian monks (and will later, 405, record their journey)

399 Theophilus turns against the teachings of Origen

400 Synod at Alexandria condems Origenism; **Tall Brothers** and others exiled from Egypt

403 Synod of the Oak condemns **Tall Brothers** and John Chrysostom; exiled monks return to their monastaries

Christianization

380 Theodosius I makes Christianity the official religion of the empire

381 Council of Constantinople reaffirms Nicene Creed

386 Augustine converts after hearing about Antony

391 Theodosius I, in his Christianizing campaign, orders the closing of pagan temples

Movement Memorialized (404-500)

404 Jerome translates the ***Pachomian Rule*** into Latin

405-10 The ***History of the Monks of Egypt*** (based on the journey of 394) is completed

407-8 First devastation of Scetis by Berber tribes

419-20 Palladius writes ***Lausiac History***, a key source for this era

420 Cassian begins writing his ***Institutes and Conferences***

423 Simeon Stylites begins living on a pillar in Antioch, Syria

483 Sabas establishes a monastic settlement outside of Bethlehem

c. 500 Benedict of Nursia withdraws to a cave to begin the monastic life

Refining Theology

410 Alaric sacks Rome; Pelagius begins teaching salvation by good works

431 First Council of Ephesus condemns the Nestorians and affirms that Christ is one person; Pelagius is also condemned

451 Council of Chaldecon condemns monophysitism and affirms that Christ has two natures

For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Athanasius: Life of Antony, Full Text
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.html

ATHANASIUS, St, Bishop of Alexandria
http://www.ccel.org/a/athanasius/athanasius-EB.html

A Eulogy for Basil the Great
http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~salomon/nyssa/basil.htm

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Chapter 37; The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire

http://www.ccel.org/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap37.htm

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Christian History
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Ascetic Agitators

The early monks not only prayed in the desert but sometimes rioted in the cities.

Kenneth Calvert

The Roman philosopher Celsus warned his second century audience that if the "seditious rebels" called Christians were allowed to prosper, they would threaten not only ancient pagan tradition but the entire Roman order. "If everyone were to do the same as you Christians," he wrote, "there would be nothing to prevent the emperor from being abandoned, alone and deserted, while earthly things would come into the control of the most lawless and savage barbarians."

Celsus did not get it exactly right, but by the middle of the fourth century, Christians were indeed helping create a new world order. Crucial doctrinal and political battles were fought by fierce competing factions, and some of the key players were the new "martyrs," monks and hermits who had "died" to self and to the world. They opposed and attacked—sometimes physically—any authority they deemed unrighteous.

Ariomaniacs

The political influence of monks was most obvious in Egypt. Even Antony, despite being a hermit and a teacher of semi-eremetic monasticism, helped shape the larger theological movements of this day. In the Arian controversy (Arius denied the divinity of Christ), he stood with the orthodox side at a time when the imperial court was Arian-dominated. It was among Egyptian monks like Antony, in fact, that Athanasius (c.296-373), bishop of Alexandria, found protection for five years when the secret police of the Emperor Constantius II, an Arian, sought to arrest him.

At one point, according to Athanasius, Antony traveled to Alexandria and "denounced the Arians, saying that their heresy was the last of all and a forerunner of Antichrist." He even called the heretics "madmen" ("Ariomaniacs" in one translation). Despite the efforts of the Arian Emperor Valens (364-378) to destroy pro-Nicene monasticism in Egypt, pro-Nicene monks only grew in influence. The Christian historian Sozomen wrote that, "The monks were prepared to subject their necks to the sword rather than to swerve from the Nicene doctrines."

International politics

With the help of pro-Nicene Theodosius I, Nicene orthodoxy won in 381 at the Council of Constantinople. Theodosius then began a campaign to hinder paganism in the empire, and the desert monks became key players in this campaign.

When the emperor outlawed polytheistic rites in 391, the bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus (reigned 385-412), confiscated pagan properties, especially the Temple of Sarapis, the most sacred site of Greco-Roman Alexandria. Seeing that the pagan population would not go down without a fight, Theophilus requested imperial troops for assistance and, according to one ancient source, "summoned some fathers to go to Alexandria one day, to pray and to destroy the heathen temples there."

When the monks arrived, they tore down the Serapeum and other smaller temples. Such heavy-handed tactics, as well as his program to build grand churches in place of the old pagan temples earned this bishop his nickname, "church pharaoh" of Egypt.

These monastic allies, however, were not easy to control. In 399 Theophilus found himself in trouble with the monks when he publicly defended the teachings of Origen (whom opponents said denied the importance of created matter, among other things). One source says, "The majority of the fathers (at Scetis) decreed that ... the bishop ought to be abhorred by the entire body of the brethren as tainted with heresy of the worst kind." In anger the monks left their monasteries and again marched to Alexandria, "where they excited a riot against the bishop ... and threatened to put him to death."

Theophilus tried to calm the mob, saying, "When I look upon you, it is as if I beheld the face of God." He was forced to change his views on Origen to save both his office as well as his life.

For personal and political reasons, Theophilus took up the anti-Origenist cause with a vengeance, and he enlisted the monks to help him. He condemned defenders of Origen, such as Isidore, four monks known as the "Tall Brothers," and various pro-Origen church officials in Egypt. He removed many "heretics" (as he called them) from office and expelled the Tall Brothers from their monastic houses. He also sowed division in monastic communities, so that, as Sozomen put it, "A terrible contention prevailed among the monks, for they did not think it worthwhile to persuade one another ... but settled down into insults."

The Tall Brothers fled to Constantinople and asked for justice from Emperor Arcadius (r.395-408) and Archbishop John Chrysostom (c.347-407). As archbishop of Constantinople, Chrysostom had the right to settle a dispute in Alexandria, so he called for a fact-finding hearing.

Theophilus arrived in Asia Minor in 403 to defend himself against the charges of Tall Brothers—and to seek revenge on Chrysostom. Some years earlier, Chrysostom had been appointed archbishop in place of Theophilus's candidate; in addition, Theophilus was furious that the see of Constantinople had recently been raised in status over the see of Alexandria.

So Theophilus gathered 36 allies, mainly bishops from Egypt and a few disgruntled locals (who had been subject to one of Chrysostom's denunciations). They met at the Palace of the Oak, outside of Chalcedon, at a "synod," and condemned the Tall Brothers and Chrysostom. With the support of the emperor (whose wife Chrysostom had recently likened to Jezebel in a sermon), Chrysostom was exiled.

Sozomen wrote that the people of the capital, who loved the archbishop, "ran to the churches, to the marketplaces, and to the palace of the emperor, and with howls and groans demanded the recall of John." Theophilus was forced to flee and Chrysostom was recalled from exile. When a second exile was successfully orchestrated in 404, John's allies, which included many monks, were also severely suppressed. Ironically, the Tall Brothers, who had been at the center of the original controversy, faded off into history.

Physical monasticism

Monkish politics surfaced again with the consecration of Cyril to the Alexandrian bishopric in 412. He was a brilliant theologian determined to continue his uncle Theophilus's policies. Cyril worked to rid Egypt of heretics, Jews, and pagans, often using heavy-handed methods such as inciting a mob against Hypatia (c.375-415), one of the last, great pagan philosophers of Alexandria. Such efforts brought him into alliance with one of the most important monastic leaders of the time, Shenouda (c.348-466), abbot of the Great White Monastery in Atripe, Egypt.

Raised in a monastery, Shenouda became a vibrant, strict, and successful governor over a community that eventually included thousands of men and women. When foreign brigands, called the Blemmyes, attacked upper Egypt, Shenouda offered refuge to the population. He also protected Christians from economic and political abuses by pagans, who still retained control of the region.

His power was such that when unhappy monks called upon secular authorities to intervene, Shenouda personally beat and kicked the leading magistrate and had loyal followers assault the magistrate's companions. Shenouda went so far as to attack the homes of wealthy polytheists as well as destroy their temples, their idols, and their private shrines.

Once he struck an opponent on the head and dragged the man to the Nile for baptism. Witnesses proclaimed Shenouda to be "the authority of God ... sent to take vengeance upon that impious Greek."

Shenouda eventually gained prominence along the entire length of the Nile. While Shenouda was independent of Cyril's authority, he supported the bishop's efforts to make Egypt a thoroughly Christian region. Shenouda reportedly announced to some opponents, "I shall make you acknowledge ... Cyril, or else the sword will wipe out most of you, and ... those of you who are spared will go into exile." This alliance with Cyril, as well as Shenouda's powerful personality, won him an invitation to the ecumenical council of Ephesus, which condemned Nestorius for teaching that Christ has two persons (versus one person with two natures).

The monks, staunch and often audacious Christians, could be compliant or dangerous, depending upon the ebb and flow of any given controversy. The emperor Theodosius tried in 390 to limit their influence by bringing them under greater imperial control, and the great Byzantine emperor Justinian tried to do the same in 519. Both were only partially successful, because these monks, as the new martyrs, could never be entirely controlled. They insisted that righteousness, as they understood it, prevail.

Kenneth Calvert is a professor of history at Hillsdale College (Michigan), and he dedicates this article "to Dr. Nigel Kerr, a true Doctor of the Church."

For more information on this topic, see:

Chapter 37; The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire
http://www.ccel.org/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap37.htm

Catholic Encyclopedia: Origen And Origenism
http://www.csn.net/advent/cathen/11306b.htm

Catholic Encyclopedia: St. John Chrysostom
http://www.csn.net/advent/cathen/08452b.htm

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Wordly Monk

Jerome was a disciplined ascetic who was on top of current affairs.

Kelvin Crow and Mark Galli

Worldly Monk

Worldy Monk

Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, a.k.a. Jerome, was probably the greatest Christian scholar in the world by his mid-30s. Perhaps the greatest figure in the history of Bible translation, he spent three decades creating a Latin version that would be the standard for more than a millennium.

But this monk was no bookish egghead nor solitary man of prayer. Though an extreme ascetic, he could show a nasty disposition, and he wasn't afraid to enter the public fray.

Jerome was born around 345 to wealthy Christian parents in Stridon, Dalmatia (in modern Slovenia), and educated in Rome, where he studied grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy. There he was baptized at age 19.

He followed his studies with travel. But instead of discovering the sensuous pleasures of the empire, Jerome found himself drawn to the ascetics he met along the way, including those in Trier (now in southwest Germany) and Aquileia, Italy, where he joined a group of elite ascetics. When this group disbanded, Jerome went to Antioch to resume his studies of Greek. But his plans were interrupted during Lent 375 by a dream (one of the most famous in church history): dragged before a tribunal of God, he was found guilty of preferring classic pagan literature to Christian: "Ciceronianus es, non Christianus," (You are a follower of Cicero, not of Christ) said his judge.

Shaken, Jerome vowed never to read or own pagan literature again. (More than a decade later, however, Jerome downplayed the dream and again began reading classic literature.) He then shuffled off to the Syrian desert, rediscovering the joys of an ascetic "prison, with none but scorpions and wild beasts for companions." He learned Hebrew from a Jewish convert, prayed and fasted, copied manuscripts, and wrote countless letters.

He slowly became recognized as an important scholar and monk. In 382 he was summoned to Rome to be secretary to Pope Damasus. But during his short three-year stint there, Jerome offended the pleasure-loving Romans with his sharp tongue and blunt criticism. As one historian put it, "He detested most of the Romans and did not apologize for detesting them."

He mocked the clerics' vanity ("The only thought of such men is their clothes—are they pleasantly perfumed, do their shoes fit smoothly?") and their pride in their beards ("If there is any holiness in a beard, nobody is holier than a goat!"). Those who might have supported him, though already skeptical of his interest in "correcting" the Bible, were completely put off when one of his female disciples died during a severe fast. When Damasus died in 384, Jerome fled "Babylon" for the Holy Land.

A wealthy student of Jerome's founded a monastery in Bethlehem for him to administer. Here he finished his greatest contribution (begun in 382 at Damasus's instruction): translating the Bible into everyday Latin (later to be called the Vulgate, meaning "common").

Though at the edges of the empire, Jerome remained immersed in the controversies of his day. He wrote polemical works defending the veneration of martyrs and against Origenism—among many other tracts. He continued to correspond with people all over the empire, including great public figures like Augustine, until his death in 420.

For more information on this topic, see:

Catholic Encyclopedia: St. Jerome
http://www.csn.net/advent/cathen/08341a.htm

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Holy Land

Sabas just wanted to pray where Christ had lived and died but ended up establishing the most famous monastery in the Judean Desert.

John Binns

One night in the year 478, a 40-year-old monk from Cappadocia (in what is now central Turkey) was praying in the gorge of Siloam about 10 miles southeast of Jerusalem, in the heart of the barren Judean desert. The monk's sixth-century biographer noted, "He was praying by night, and there appeared to him an angelic form in dazzling apparel who said to him ... 'Stay here and make this cave your home and God will himself take care of you.' " Though the cave was some distance from a water source and accessible only by rope, the monk was overjoyed and immediately took up residence there.

After five years of solitary struggle in this cave, the monk, whose name was Sabas, began to allow others to join him, and the monastery slowly grew. Under Sabas's leadership, it would become the most important early monastery in Palestine.

Communal solitude

Sabas was no novice at the solitary life. To escape a custody battle between two uncles, he had become a monk at age 8. Like many others, he felt called to follow a life of renunciation in the place where Christ himself had lived and died, so at age 18, he moved to Jerusalem and settled at the famous monastery of Euthymius, a few miles to the east. He soon developed a taste for taking lengthy retreats into the wilder parts of the desert, and it was on one of these sojourns that he received his vision.

As the monastery grew, access to water became an increasing problem. But, according to Cyril of Scythopolis, Sabas's biographer, another miracle occurred: Sabas was again praying by night when he saw a wild ass "digging deep into the earth with its hooves, then lowering its mouth and drinking." The spring of water he discovered provided for the needs of the monks. Then a new church was built, followed by a tower for observation and defense. The numerous caves nearby were claimed by new arrivals as places to live and work, and eventually small dwellings were built to provide even more space.

The monastery was really a settlement rather than a community. The rough and rocky terrain was not suited to the compact enclosed buildings and the cultivated fields of a "cenobitic," or communal, monastery. Instead, the monk in a "laura," as this style of monastery was called, lived through the week in his own cell, either alone or with one or two others. He prayed and occupied himself with simple handicrafts, such as making baskets or rope. On Saturdays he went to the buildings at the center of the laura for worship, a communal meal, and to exchange the completed baskets for raw material for the following week's work.

This laurite style of life enabled much solitude, yet with the support of a community, and developed especially in the area around Jerusalem. Approximately a third of the monasteries of the Judean desert were laurae.

Sabas's monastery wasn't the first monastery in Palestine, but it became arguably the most important. Chariton founded the first Palestinian laura around the year 330, and there had been a steady influx of monks since then. Archaeological research has identified about 70 Byzantine monastic sites in the desert around Jerusalem and Jericho, which could have accommodated up to 3,000 monks. A few nuns lived in

the area as well, especially in the city of Jerusalem, but it was mainly a male world.

Sabas himself loved the solitary life but was also a natural leader and organizer. Cyril describes him as a "faithful and prudent steward who by the favor of God, the assistance of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit colonized the desert with a huge number of monks and founded seven famous monasteries." He was appointed leader of the hermits while his friend Theodosius cared for the cenobitic (communal) monasteries. Sabas used to joke with Theodosius, "You are a superior of children while I am the superior of superiors, for each of those under me is independent, the superior of his own cell."

On two occasions the patriarch of Jerusalem sent Sabas on diplomatic missions to the empire's capital, the city of Constantinople. On one of these trips, Sabas submitted the requests of the monks to the emperor and then, while the emperor busied himself giving the necessary orders, Sabas sat in a corner saying his prayers. One of the monks felt that this was a little rude and rebuked Sabas for not being more appreciative. "They, my child, are doing their work," the saint replied, "let us in our turn do ours."

Rebellion in the ranks

When Sabas had overseen his monasteries for nearly 20 years, his leadership was severely tested by doctrinal controversy. The main conflict involved the teachings of Origen, a third-century Egyptian theologian who was condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. In about 500, a dissident group expelled Sabas from his own monastery.

After the patriarch of Jerusalem reinstated him, the rebels took up pickaxes and destroyed the tower where he lived, then moved to another monastery. Sabas eventually forgave the renegade monks and later helped them build a church and bakery at their compound, which came to be called the New Laura. Heresies, especially surrounding the Origenist controversy (see "Ascetic Agitators") continued to plague the New Laura, but while Sabas lived (he died in 532), orthodoxy was maintained.

The monastery that grew up around the cave that was so miraculously revealed to Sabas in 478 came to be known first as the Great Laura, and later as Mar Saba. It has continued to be a center of scholarship, spirituality, and especially church music until the present.

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For photos of Mar Saba, see: Jerusalem 96
http://almashriq.hiof.no/palestine/900/910/919/jerusalem/jerusalem-96/mar-saba-picts.html

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Antony and the Desert Fathers: The Gallery - Getting Their Act Together

Monasticism was more or less a solitary affair until these four came along and taught monks how to live in community.

Columba Stewart; John Cassian; Frederica Mathews-Green; Macrina Basil; Marci Rae Johnson

THE MONKS' MONK
John Cassian
(c.365-c.435)

John Cassian was only a teenager when he, with his friend Germanus, left his home in Scythia Minor (present-day Romania) and joined a monastic community in Bethlehem. One day, an Egyptian monk named Pinufius sought lodging in their monastery. Pinufius filled the young men's imaginations with stories of the asceticism of the Egyptian desert, making their Bethlehem community seem tepid in comparison.

Soon Pinufius was discovered by a posse of Egyptian monks who had been hot on his trail. He was their abbot, they said, and they wanted him back. It turned out that Pinufius had a tendency to run away from home in search of anonymity, hoping to preserve his humility.

John Cassian and Germanus were dazzled by such spiritual discipline. "After our first infancy in the faith, we had begun to long for some greater grace of perfection," wrote Cassian in his ***Conferences***, "and we were determined to go to Egypt."

Cassian and Germanus settled in the famous center of Scetis and spent the next dozen or so years in monastic paradise. What Cassian experienced there provided the template for his later monastic teachings.

At the very end of the fourth century, Cassian, Germanus, and many famous Egyptian monks were driven from the region because of the Origenist controversy (see "Ascetic Agitators"). Cassian went first to Constantinople and worked closely for a few years with John Chrysostom, the famous bishop and theologian, until Chrysostom's fall from imperial favor in 404.

After several years, Cassian found his way to Marseilles, then as now, a busy port. His monastic experiences in Palestine, Egypt, and Asia Minor (and perhaps other places) soon made him a recognized authority in the region. He put down his insights in his ***Institutes***, and later his ***Conferences***, which laid out a comprehensive program for the monks of Gaul (today's France), as well as the bishops eager to support and guide them. Cassian professed to give his readers "a perfect recollection" of Egyptian monastic wisdom; in fact, he brilliantly synthesized and adapted traditional monastic teaching. For example, though he praised the solitary Egyptian hermits, he shaped their insights for the community-dwelling monks of Gaul.

In the ***Institutes***, Cassian spoke of "eight principal faults" he had learned in Egypt from his teacher Evagrius (354-399). This menu was the basis for the later western list of seven deadly sins. In the ***Conferences***, he described a method of unceasing prayer based on a one-verse formula taken from the Psalms. By praying in that simple, scriptural way, Cassian taught, "whatever we breathe, whatever we

know, whatever we speak, is God."

While many details of his life remain obscure (the monastic call of humility kept him from sharing much autobiographical information), his teachings have been preserved and are still used by monks East and West.

Columba Stewart, associate professor of theology at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, and author of* Cassian the Monk *(Oxford, 1998).

SAINTLY SIBLINGS
Macrina
(c.327-380)

Basil
(330-379)

Still stunned by his younger brother's death, Basil sat and listened to his older sister Macrina as she delivered a harangue that touched on every area of his life—and his pride.

Ever since you came back from college you've been stuck up, she said. You're always quoting the classics, but do you quote the Christian Scriptures? Our father, may his memory be blessed, was renowned for his gift of oratory, and he employed it in the praise of Christ. You inherited that gift intact, but you use it only to feed your pride.

Think of our brother Naucratius, she continued. One day he went out to fish, and that afternoon was brought home dead. Death took him without warning, like a bolt of lightning. Basil, consider and act!

Macrina had already given some consideration to how she was going to shape her life—and the lives of others. She was drawn to monasticism, but in contrast to the prominent patterns of her day (the solitary life of a hermit or the circle of followers gathered around a spiritual athlete), Macrina envisioned something more stable and serene: a community of women living in mutual submission, dedicated to prayer, and supporting themselves by the work of their hands. She founded the first such community at her grandmother's estate in Annesi, a town on the Iris River in Cappadocia (part of present-day Turkey).

Macrina is a standout, even in a family bursting with saints. Not only her grandmother and namesake, Macrina the Elder, but both her parents and three of her brothers earned the title of saint (some lists include as well a fourth brother, Naucratius).

Macrina, the eldest, was a natural leader who showed her fortitude in early youth. She was betrothed to a young man who died before their wedding, and she determined never to take another husband. Her betrothed was not dead, she said, but alive in Christ and waiting for her, and she would likewise wait to join him. "It is a sin and a shame if the spouse does not keep faith when the partner goes to distant climes," she said.

Her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, described how she cared for the family when their mother was widowed soon after the birth of her tenth child. Macrina became to the infant Peter "father, teacher, guide, mother, giver of good advice," and to her mother she ministered as a servant, preparing her bread with her own hands.

Her brother Basil did not immediately enter the monastic life but instead embarked on something of a fact-finding tour. Down he went through Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, visiting hermits and secluded communities of prayer. "I was amazed by their persistence in prayer and their capacity to triumph over sleep," he wrote. "They showed how a man can sojourn for a while in this life, while having

his true citizenship and home in heaven."

Returning home, Basil immediately appealed to the close friend of his college years, Gregory of Nazianzus, to join him in monastic life. (These two men, with Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa, comprise the "Cappadocian Fathers.") Basil sang the praises of a patch of land across the river from his sister's monastery: a high mountain watered by cool streams, thick with trees, thronged with singing birds, "more beautiful than the island of Calypso."

Gregory was not so charmed by the place; he found the mountain shrouded in heavy shadow, crossed with steep and treacherous paths, and cut by fierce wind. Yet Basil's forceful personality overruled, and the two began a monastery there that was to become the most organized yet seen.

Basil, a firm believer in the necessity of community, was skeptical about the benefits of a hermit's life. To those who wished to retire to the desert alone, he recalled Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. "Whom, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be lowest, if you live alone?"

In his pursuit of an orderly communal life, Basil composed nearly 200 pages of instructions and advice, regulating monks' behavior down to the number of covers each could have on his bed. His "Broad Rule" discusses 55 topics in depth, and his "Brief Rule" another 313 more concisely. Both rules are written in question-and-answer format, heavily referenced to Scripture:

Q. "When a man has abandoned all more expensive clothing, does he sin, and, if so, how, if he wishes his cheap upper garment or shoes to be becoming to him?"

A. "If he so wishes in order to gratify men, he is obviously guilty of the sin of man-pleasing. He is alienated from God and is guilty of vain glory even in these cheap belongings."

Q. "If a man is generally in the right and falls into one sin, how are we to treat him?"

A. "As the Lord treated Peter."

"There is only one way out," Basil wrote, "complete renunciation of the world!" And yet Basil's monastic life lasted but five years, after which he was compelled to return to Caesarea and serve the bishop as a priest. Basil found himself in the front lines of the battle against the Arian heresy, preaching twice daily to congregations so large he described them as a sea.

The rest of his day he spent wearing an apron, doling out soup to victims of famine. The poor remained his particular concern, and he thundered at the rich who waved away beggars with a hand studded with rings. He accomplished an astonishing civil works project: a self-contained village occupied by the poor and ill, who were offered food and medical care and assisted in finding appropriate work. A remarkable success, this "Basiliad" was famous long after the founder's death.

Once called to public service, Basil never returned to the monastery. He nevertheless kept himself to a strict ascetic life, which was compounded with a painful chronic illness to bring him to early death at the age of 49. At his death, the streets of Caesarea were crowded with noisy mourners, and even Jews, pagans, and strangers joined in grieving the bishop called Basil the Great.

Macrina, for her part, never left the monastery. Nine months after Basil's death, their brother Gregory of Nyssa visited to find her lying on two boards, at the edge of death, radiant and peaceful. As the evening lamps were lit, Macrina prayed, "You, O Lord, give rest to our bodies in the sleep of death for a little time. ... Forgive me, and grant that, when my soul is parted from my body, it may be presented before

you stainless and without sin, and that it may be as incense before you." She made the sign of the cross, then surrendered her last breath.

Her brother looked about for a cloth to cover her body, but no such superfluities as extra linen were part of monastic life. The only shroud he could find was the length of coarse peasant fabric that had been her veil.

Frederica Mathewes-Green, author of* At the Corner of East and Now: A Modern Life in Ancient Christian Orthodoxy *(Tarcher/Putnam, 1999).

FOUNDER OF THE FIRST ***COMMUNITY***
Pachomius
(c.290-347)

One day Pachomius and his brother John were throwing reeds in the water when suddenly a crocodile rose up right beside them. John ran off to a safe distance, but Pachomius filled his hand with water and hurled it in the crocodile's face saying, "May the Lord condemn you never again to come back here." With that, the crocodile submerged.

John, overwhelmed at this display of holiness, decided that, even though he was the elder of two, he would call Pachomius "father." In time, many more monks came to call him "father" as well, for Pachomius had a vision from God that changed the face of monastic life forever.

Pachomius was born of pagan parents in Seneset, Egypt (now Kasr-es-Sayad). At age 20, he was drafted into the army of the Egyptian emperor, Maximinus Daia. On the way to the front, Pachomius and his fellow conscripts had to stop in Thebes, where they were housed in a prison. Here Pachomius was greatly impressed by Christians who brought food to the conscripts. He decided that if God delivered him from prison, he too would give himself to Christ and serve humankind. The war ended soon after, and the conscripts were discharged. Pachomius immediately went home to be baptized.

He spent the next three years serving the communities surrounding his home by growing food, distributing firewood, and encouraging his neighbors. He began feeling "much inconvenienced" by being surrounded by many people, and he found himself yearning for the more solitary life of monasticism. He spent the next seven years learning the monastic disciplines under the guidance of Abba Palamon, a monk who lived alone outside Seneset.

Four years into his training with Palamon, Pachomius experienced a vision: "He saw the dew of heaven descend on his head, then condense in his right hand and turn into a honeycomb." The honeycomb "dropped onto the earth and spread out over the face of all the earth." Pachomius didn't understand his vision until one day God led him out about ten miles upstream from Seneset to a deserted village on the banks of the Nile called Tabennesi. Here, as Pachomius prayed, he heard the voice of God speaking to him, "Build a monastery; for many will come to you to become monks with you."

Palamon, just before he died, helped his disciple build a cell at Tabennesi around A.D. 320. Pachomius's first follower was his brother John, then three more men came. Before long the community had grown to 100. The men shared everything in common, worked together, prayed together, and followed the rules and ascetic practices that Pachomius instituted.

This doesn't seem extraordinary until we remember that up to this time, monasticism (from the Greek, ***monachos***, meaning, "alone") had been a solitary affair; at best, hermits gathered weekly for fellowship and prayer. Pachomius had succeeded in establishing the first "communal monastery" (and maybe the first oxymoron) in Christian History.

Marci Rae Johnson, a freelance writer, earned her master's degree in theological studies from Wheaton College (Illinois).

For more information on this topic, see:

Medieval Sourcebook: Gregory of Nyssa: Life of Macrina
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/macrina.html

Gregory of Nyssa Texts and Introductions
http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~salomon/nyssa/texts.html

A Eulogy for Basil the Great
http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~salomon/nyssa/basil.htm

The Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobia
http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/inst/index.html

St. Pachomius
http://saints.catholic.org/saints/pachomius.html

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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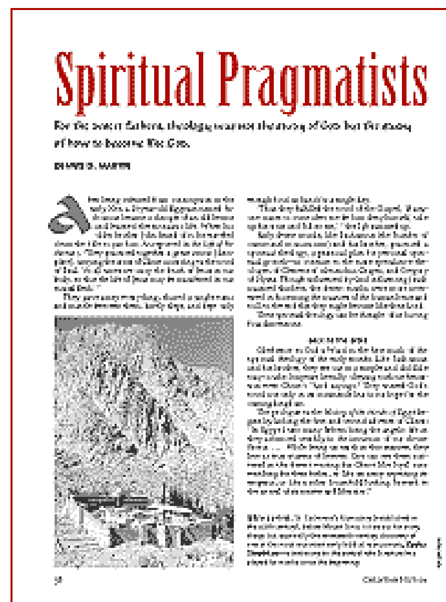
Spiritual Pragmatists

For the desert fathers, theology was not the study of God but the study of how to become like God.

Dennis D. Martin

Spiritual Pragmatists


Spiritual Pragmatists

After being released from conscription in the early 300s, a 20-year-old Egyptian named Pachomius became a disciple of an old hermit and learned the monastic life. When his older brother John heard of it, he traveled down the Nile to join him. As reported in the ***Life of Pachomius***, "They practiced together a great ***ascesis*** [discipline], carrying the cross of Christ according to the word of Paul, 'At all times we carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.'"

They gave away everything, shared a single tunic and mantle between them, barely slept, and kept only enough food on hand for a single day.

"Thus they fulfilled the word of the Gospel, 'If anyone wants to come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me,'" the ***Life*** summed up.

Early desert monks, like Pachomius (the founder of communal monasticism) and his brother, practiced a spiritual theology, a practical plan for personal spiritual growth—in contrast to the more speculative theologies of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. Though influenced by (and influencing) such nuanced thinkers, the desert monks were more interested in discerning the nuances of the human heart and will, to the end that they might become like their Lord.

Their spiritual theology can be thought of as having four dimensions.

Back to the Bible

Obedience to God's Word is the first mark of the spiritual theology of the early monks. Like Pachomius and his brother, they set out in a simple and childlike way to take Scripture literally, obeying without hesitation even Christ's "hard sayings." They trusted God's word not only in its commands but in its hope for the coming kingdom.

The prologue to the ***History of the Monks of Egypt*** begins by linking the first and second advents of Christ: "In Egypt I saw many fathers living the angelic life as they advanced steadily in the imitation of our divine Savior. ... While living on earth in this manner, they live as true citizens of heaven. One can see them scattered in the desert waiting for Christ like loyal sons watching for their father, or like an army expecting its emperor, or like a sober household looking forward to the arrival of its master and liberator."

Meditation on Scripture was the method by which these monks took Scripture seriously. They tried to literally "pray without ceasing" by chanting the Psalter, and other Scripture passages, as they wove

baskets throughout the day. Many memorized large portions of the Bible in this way: Abba Ammonius is said to have memorized the entire Old and New Testaments plus thousands of lines from Origen, Didymus the Blind, and other early writers.

The need for discernment

The second theme in desert theology is ***discretio***, that is, discernment or guidance from a wise senior monk. When a young monk sought entry to a hermit community, he approached a senior monk and said, "Abba, give me a word," thereby entrusting himself to the guidance of this spiritual father. John Climacus (d. c.649), a monk of St. Catherine's in the Sinai, advised monks to choose their spiritual father carefully, but, having chosen, not to second-guess him.

Spiritual fathers, for their part, were careful in their guidance. One ancient account says that Abba Pambo, when asked about a scriptural phrase or some other problem, "would never answer on the spur of the moment but used to say: 'I have not found it.' Often a period of three months would go by and he had not given an answer, saying that he had not comprehended it. So they accepted his answers as though they were from God himself, approved and shaped by his will."

Discernment extended to all matters, from interpretation of Scripture to the seemingly small aspects of daily life—which sometimes became parables for larger spiritual truths (some of which are lost on modern readers).

For example, a story is told of Abba Agatho, who was on a journey with his disciples when they came across a little bundle of green peas on the road. One of his disciples said to Agatho, "Father, if you will, I shall lift that."

The old man looked at him quizzically and said, "Did you put it there?"

The disciple replied, "No."

To which Abba Agatho said, "How could you wish to lift up that which you did not put down?"

Discernment was not a luxury but a matter of spiritual life and death. In the words of sixth-century Dorotheus of Gaza, "I know of no fall that happens to a monk that does not come from trusting his own judgment. ... Do you know someone who has fallen? Be sure that he directed himself. Nothing is more grievous than to be one's own director, nothing is more pernicious."

The role of discipline

What one might have expected to be the main theme in the desert fathers' theology was actually third in importance to them: asceticism. For the monks "the discipline" proceeded from a commitment to the Bible and the need for discernment.

Plotinus and other pagan sages treated the body as if it were a transient and accidental adjunct to the self. Not the monks. For them, the body was grippingly present. One spoke of it as "this body, that God has afforded me, as a field to cultivate, where I might work and become rich."

John Climacus, using running as a metaphor for bodily self-discipline, put it more strongly: "We must run, brothers, we must run. We have to run very hard because we have fallen behind our holy company. So let us run, driving on this foul and wicked flesh of ours, killing it as it has killed us."

Though Climacus sounds harsh, the early monks did not believe that matter or the body was evil—after all,

it was created by God, and nothing God made could be evil in and of itself. The "flesh" the desert fathers sought to subdue was not merely their physical bodies but their sinful "flesh," in the New Testament sense of the word.

Historian of the ancient world Peter Brown said, "Seldom, in ancient thought, had the body been seen as more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul, and never was it made to bear so heavy a burden."

Desert monks believed that the passions of body and heart were unruly and disordered as a result of sin, and that the body needed to be disciplined to make it obedient so that the soul could rejoice in Christ.

In spite of the stereotype, this required a certain amount of moderation, as most monks were well aware. A hunter once came across Antony "talking gladly" with other monks, and he questioned the great ascetic about his seeming lack of rigor (one monastic discipline was to live in silence).

Antony replied, "Put an arrow in your bow, and draw it." When the hunter did so, Antony told him to draw it further.

Again he obeyed but then said, "If I draw it too far, the bow will snap."

Antony answered, "So it is with God's work. If we go to excess, the brothers quickly become exhausted. It is sometimes best not to be rigid."

What constituted "moderation"? We need to recall that these monks lived in a world in which, by modern Western standards, the average peasant's life was involuntarily ascetic. The poor, rural or urban, lived on the simplest of diets and in houses we today would call shacks. The "extreme" nature of the desert monks' asceticism must be seen in this context.

It is true that, on occasion, discretion failed spiritual fathers, but criticism of extreme asceticism was never lacking. ***The History of the Monks of Egypt*** says that Abba Apollo "severely censured" those who wore iron chains and let their hair grow long: "For these make an exhibition of themselves and chase after human approbation," he said, "when instead they should make the body waste away in fasting and do good in secret. Rather than do this, they make themselves conspicuous to all."

In the end, asceticism was designed to help monks achieve ***apatheia***, which has nothing to do with "apathy" and everything to do with reordering the disordered "stirrings" of the soul caused by sin. The Latin equivalent would be ***puritas cordis***, a clearly focused, pure, "single" heart.

"Whatever can guide us towards purity of heart is to be followed with all our power," said Abba Moses. "Whatever draws us away from it is to be avoided as hurtful and worse. It is for this end—to keep our hearts continually pure—that we do and endure everything. ... If we do not keep this mark continually before the eyes, all our travail will be futile waste that wins nothing."

Back to the world

Despite the appearance of abandoning the world, the monks' flight into the desert ultimately allowed them to reintegrate with society, serving it in unexpected ways.

Their renunciation of sex, marriage, and property lifted them out of kinship and property networks. This, combined with their reputation for sanctity, made them favorite arbitrators for quarreling villagers. Abba Apollo more than once resolved conflicts over land boundaries between pagan and Christian visitors by performing miracles. In another instance, he converted a group of pagan priests by a miracle, catechized

them, and turned them over to the local parishes.

Another example is John of Lycopolis, profiled in the ***History of the Monks of Egypt***, who counseled Emperor Theodosius, as well as generals, tribunes, and wives of military officers.

The early monks were also integrated into the life of the church. Some writers have portrayed the early monastic movement as an anti-ecclesiastical layman's protest against an increasingly institutional church. Not so. Saturday and Sunday eucharistic worship in the nearest parish church, for example, was a regular feature of the earliest hermit and cenobitic communities.

Integration into the church extended all the way to the top: Pachomius advised Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria. And the traffic also went the other way: Archbishop Elias repeatedly sent Sabas (see "Holy Land," page 32) to Constantinople to plead with Anastasius on behalf of the church. Theodoret of Cyrrhus tells of a hermit named Abraham who was drafted to become bishop. And many of the early bishops of Gaul, including Martin of Tours, were chosen from monastic-hermit ranks.

Preparing for the end

These early monks perceived more clearly than most the disorder sin causes in the soul and in society— as well as its ultimate consequences. They were driven ultimately by a vivid realization of Christ's coming judgment.

"Go and meditate like the criminals in prison," said Abba Ammon to one of his disciples. "For they keep asking, where is the judge, and when will he come? And because they await him, they lament their punishment. The monk ought always to be awaiting his trial and to chide his soul, saying, 'Woe is me, how shall I stand before the judgment seat of Christ? How shall I give an account of my actions?' If you always meditate like this, you will be saved."

Dennis Martin is a professor of theology at Loyola University in Chicago. He is an adviser for* Christian History *and the author of* Fifteenth-Century Carthusian Reform *(Brill, 1992).

For more information on this topic, see:

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers
http://pharos.bu.edu/cn/articles/SayingsOfDesertFathers.txt

Medieval Sourcebook: Evagrius: St. Simeon Stylites from Ecclesiastical History, I.13
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/evagrius-simeon.html

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Antony and the Desert Fathers: Christian History Interview - Discovering the Desert Paradox

What many found when they sought God in a seemingly God-forsaken landscape.

conversation with Belden Lane, Presbyterian professor of theology at St. Louis U

Discovering the Desert Paradox

It is difficult to fathom today why the desert fathers did what they did, or why the church, East and West, was so taken by their example for the next millennium. It requires a great deal research and historical imagination to see what the desert monks were getting out of their ascetic discipline.

Belden Lane, a Presbyterian professor of theology at St. Louis University, is one who has done the research and has the historical imagination. His The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Mountain and Desert Spirituality (Oxford, 1998) is a brilliant analysis of how geography has played a vital role in the history of Western spirituality. Christian History asked Professor Lane to help us grasp the attraction of desert asceticism throughout Christian History.

Why did the desert fathers choose to work out their spirituality in the desert?

They sought God, first of all, and they knew that God was most easily found in a place without distractions. Second, the desert was also a marvelous laboratory for dealing with the self, which was their other major spiritual project.

How do you handle the ego and its anxiousness, its constant need for support? You walk into the desert, which doesn't care one bit about who you are or what you bring to it. That kind of terrain offers a marvelous antidote to the problem of the ego, the false self.

In the Bible and Greco-Roman culture, the desert is not so much a place of spiritual growth but a place of evil and temptation. Didn't the monks believe that?

They did, and that is another reason they went into the wilderness. They found precedents in the life of John the Baptist (you won't find a desert monastery without an icon of John the Baptist) and especially in Jesus. Throughout his life, Jesus withdrew into the desert to pray. He began his ministry in the wilderness, being tempted for 40 days. Likewise, Antony started his ministry by going into the desert to empty himself and face temptation there.

The desert is a place where you expect the temptations of hunger, of power, of beauty—the things the desert lacks are the things you find yourself wanting desperately. The monks looked on demons and temptation as aides to their spiritual lives. But they were not overwhelmed by trials and temptations. Instead, they found God in the midst of temptation and struggle.

Today, many go into the wilderness to "get back to nature." Was that part of the monks' motivation?

No. It's so easy for us to romanticize their motivation today. Abba Macarius in Egypt was said to be a lover of the desert, but this was only after spending years there. For the monks, the desert was primarily a training ground.

How did the desert as such shape these monks' spiritual lives?

The desert asks two questions: What do you learn to ignore? And what do you learn to love? In other words, how do you let go, and what do you hold onto? Those are the basic dimensions of the spiritual journey that the desert monks went through as they embraced

the desert.

Let me paraphrase one of the best illustrations of this, found in ***Sayings of the Desert Fathers***: A young man, a spiritual groupie of sorts, comes to Scetis, west of the Nile, to seek out the great monk Abba Macarius. He asks Abba Macarius, "How do I get to be a holy man? I want to be a holy man. And I want to be one tomorrow."

Macarius smiles and says, "Spend the day tomorrow over at the cemetery. I want you to abuse the dead for all you're worth. Throw sticks and stones at them, curse at them, call them names—anything you can think of. Spend the whole day doing nothing but that."

The young man must have thought the great monk was crazy, but he spent the next day doing everything he was told. When he returned, Abba Macarius asked him, "What did the dead people say out there today?"

The young man responded that they didn't say a thing. They were dead. Macarius said, "Isn't that interesting? I want you to go back tomorrow, and this time spend the day saying everything nice about these people. Call them righteous men and women, compliment them, say everything wonderful you can imagine."

> "The desert is a perfect place to let go of the need for recognition"
> ***—Belden Lane***

So the young man went back the next day, did as he was told, and returned to Macarius. The monk asked him what the dead people said this time.

"Well, they didn't answer a word again," replied the brother.

"Ah, they must indeed be holy people," said Macarius. "You insulted them, and they did not reply. You praised them, and they did not speak. Go and do likewise, my friend, taking no account of either the scorn of men and women or their praises. And you too will be a holy man."

It's a wonderful story that asks two questions: What do you ignore? The answer is the scorn and praise of others. The other question is more indirect—What do you love? That is, since you are not going to be motivated by what others think, what are you going to give yourself to fully?

But how is it possible to learn love when you're solitary?

The monks learned that the desert teaches you how to live apart from others, how to live without compulsively needing them to give you worth or make you feel loved. In the desert, you learn how to live with yourself. Only then are you capable of giving love—sacrificial love that accepts or needs nothing in return.

Let me give an example from our lives, because even when we live in the city, we can have this type of desert experience. There's a point when you realize you have to let go of what you love most if you ever hope to really keep it. And only when you reach that point (e.g., in your career or your marriage or your deepest relationships with others), when you move beyond a compulsive need for them. Only then is it going to be possible really to love for the first time.

It's incredibly painful letting go. But once you do that, there is an incredible sense of the desert, as Isaiah says, blossoming like a rose. Suddenly in the place of abandonment, in the place where you let go of everything you knew, you realize that what you could not hold God gives back. And love is born there in the very place where you had lost everything.

Now as the monks learned, the desert makes no promises. If you're going out there to suddenly become a deeply loving person, if like the young man you want to become holy, there are no guarantees. It is only at profound risk—letting go, ignoring yourself and the distractions of the world—that love and compassion might occur. But as many mystics, East and West, have discovered, "The experience of emptiness engenders compassion."

In a lot of the desert father stories, it feels as if the monks practiced ascetic disciplines to earn salvation.

You could interpret it that way on a surface level. But I see them living out what medieval mystic Meister Eckhart once said, that the spiritual life isn't so much a matter of addition as subtraction.

Though we Protestants talk about justification by faith (versus by works), we often act as if the key to the spiritual life is adding all the active virtues, doing great things for God, sharing the gospel with others, and the like. Eckhart said, no, it's a matter of subtraction. How much can you let go of? It's not a matter of anxiously having to prove yourself to your teachers, to your parents, or to God so as to finally make yourself acceptable. It's a matter of letting go of all those compulsive needs for approval and recognizing that only after you abandon those compulsions will you be able to accept God's utterly free grace that comes in the gospel, in Jesus.

The desert is a perfect place to let go of the need for recognition. I love the image of the canyon cliff that Gregory of Nyssa used back in the fourth century. Being on top of that cliff, in a place of beauty and uneasiness—that's where you discover the majesty, greatness, and glory of God. You look at that canyon cliff, think about it being there thousands, maybe millions of years, and you ask yourself, how did that canyon cliff change on the day your personal world fell apart?

What's an example of that?

For me, that was the day my father was tragically killed when I was 13, and I thought the whole world had fallen apart. What did that canyon cliff do that day? Or how did it change on the day of your divorce, or the day you admitted your dependence on alcohol, or the day you finally shared a hidden shame with someone else?

And you find, sitting there watching that canyon wall, that it didn't change at all. In the midst of your world falling apart, something didn't change. It was waiting, staying there as if for you, in the same way that God does not change. That stone cliff, a metaphor of God, invites you to pour out all the grief and anguish you can muster, then accepts it all without rebuke, receives it all right there in the desert.

Something amazing happens at that point. When you become silent enough and empty enough, pouring out your needs to God in that desert place, you are able for the first time to hear what you had never heard before, and that's a single word whispered by Jesus: love. It's one of those words that you can't hear until you are utterly silent and utterly empty.

Speaking about what the most devout desert monks had experienced, John Climacus wrote, "Lucky the man who longs for God as a smitten lover does for his beloved."

To me, this is what attracted and held monks in the desert, and why it still attracts some souls to this day.

For more on Belden Lane, see his bio at:

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 64: Anthony & the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith

Antony and the Desert Fathers: Recommended Resources

Antony and the Desert Fathers

Mark Galli

The topic of this issue confronted us with three major problems, each of which we tackled, as we are wont, by examining books.

Ancient documents

The first problem had to do with the veracity of the fantastic stories told about the desert monks. Many modern historians are automatically cynical about any extraordinary event recorded in ancient documents. We tend to view these stories on a case-by-case basis, making judgments at least partly by a careful reading of the earliest accounts. Sometimes a miracle that sounds crazy in summary form (someone rising from the dead, e.g.), actually sounds credible when you read the original sources (the Gospels, e.g.).

Five key primary source documents for the desert fathers are these:

(1) Athanasius's ***Life of Antony***,

(2) ***The History of the Monks of Egypt*** (a.k.a, ***Historia Monachorum en Aegypto***),

(3) ***The Sayings of the Desert Fathers***,

(4) Cyril of Scythopolis's ***The Lives of the Monks of Palestine***, and

(5) John Cassian's ***Conferences***.

You'll find portions of (2) and (3), as well as other ancient histories, in Helen Waddell's ***The Desert Fathers*** (Vintage, 1998); Owen Chadwick's, ***Western Asceticism*** (Westminster, 1958) contains translations of (3) and (5).

Benedicta Ward's ***The Lives of the Desert Fathers*** (Cistercian, 1980) is a full translation of (2) and R. M. Price's ***Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*** (Cistercian, 1991) is what it says it is, as is Robert C. Gregg's translation of ***Athanasius: The Life of Antony*** (Paulist, 1980).

Fortunately, all these are modern, accessible translations and fascinating reads.

In addition, you can find older translations of these documents on the Internet. The Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org) has Cassian's ***Conferences*** (www.ccel.org/fathers/NPNF2-11/jcassian/conferen/), and The Ecole Initiative (www2.evansville.edu/ecoleweb/) has the ***Life of Antony***, as well as many other minor works (e.g., lives of Paul of Thebes or Mary of Egypt).

Ancient context

The problem with reading only primary sources, of course, is that it's difficult to get perspective. The ancient writers were not interested in social or political context, and they write as if monks lived their lives, for the most part, independent of the world.

The book that best helped us understand the movement as a whole was Jacques Lacarriere's ***Men Possessed by God*** (Doubleday, 1964). It's out of print but still available in used book stores (try www.abebooks.com for a start). Lacarrier's book is the most accessible. We found Derwas J. Chitty's ***The Desert a City*** (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1995) a mighty difficult read, but pretty thorough. James E. Goehring's ***Ascetics, Society, and The Desert*** (Trinity, 1999) is more scholarly than his article in this issue but also full of fresh insights into the desert fathers: e.g., they weren't so divorced from larger society as we thought.

Probably the most significant single work on the desert fathers has been an essay by Princeton historian Peter Brown: "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity." He argues that these men were key figures in the transition from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages. The essay is reprinted in his ***Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*** (University of California, 1982), and a revised assessment can be found in ***Authority and the Sacred*** (Cambridge, 1995).

Other accounts that we found useful and readable were Douglas Burton-Christie's ***The Word in The Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*** (Oxford University, 1993) and John Binns's ***Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine, 314-631*** (Clarendon, 1994).

Lasting meaning

What does it all mean for today? That's the final issue that concerned us. We found Belden C. Lane's ***The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*** (Oxford, 1998) supplied a lot of the answers. If you enjoyed his insights in the Link Interview ("Discovering the Desert Paradox"), you'll find more in this book.

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