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# Monks, Laymen, and Hidden Sainthood in Desert Asceticism

Daniel Lemeni

**Daniel Lemeni**

West University of Timisoara, Romania  
daniel.lemeni@e-uvv.ro

**Abstract**

This paper explores the theme of hidden deification in early monasticism. Holiness was not solely the privilege of desert monks. In other words, deification was open to all people (monks and laymen). Indeed, as we will see, we have plenty of evidence for the instructional impact of holy laymen on the monks. Briefly, the holiness remains pertinent to every Christian's life. It is an essential perspective that spiritual progress in early asceticism is just development in the life of holiness. But this spiritual progress can also be seen among the laymen. Indeed, as we will see, we have plenty of evidence for the instructional impact of holy laymen on the monks.

**Keywords**

Desert monasticism, holiness, early monks, laymen

## I. Introduction

In this paper I will explore the way in which laymen exerted a spiritual and formative influence over the desert monks. I will discuss the concept of non-monastic holiness or hidden sainthood as a social and religious phenomenon in late antiquity. Deification was not solely the domain of monks. It was the domain of all. Monks have no monopoly on holiness.

Indeed, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* contains many stories of common people attaining the highest levels of holiness. As we will see, in some accounts, Desert Fathers learned from these ordinary people how to become a person of holiness.

My conclusion is that the spirituality of the desert comes to us in a variety of forms, so that it cannot be reduced to a simple separation from the world. Generally speaking, this paper tries to shed some more light on the manner in which the Desert Fathers interacted with the wider context in Late Antiquity.

## II. Learning from “Others”: Desert Fathers and Laymen in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

A central theme throughout the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is the relationship between ascetic discipline (*askēsis*) and deification (*theōsis*). In the spirituality of the desert, the holiness of the monk was associated with a physical renunciation of the world. In short, monastic life was understood as a physical withdrawal of the world and its futility.

Generally, the world was associated with the passions, and withdrawal into the desert, so prominent in early Egyptian monasticism, was connected with holiness. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, this close relationship between renunciation of the world and holiness is expressed by sayings such as: “When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God saying: «Lord, guide me as to how I can be saved», and there came to him a voice saying: «Arsenius, flee from people and you shall be saved»”<sup>1</sup>, and “He who flees from folk is like a bunch of ripe grapes, but he who is among folk is like an unripe grape”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> ARSENIUS 1, in: *Give me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 2014, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> MOSES 7 (trans. Wortley), p. 195. This monastic perspective is confirmed by several sayings: ANTONY THE GREAT 10; ARSENIUS 2, 7, 8, 13, 31, 34, 37, 38, 44; CRONIOS 5; MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 27; MATOES 13 and so on. Of course, desire for solitude is not rejection of the people, but despised of the passions of the flesh: “Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all physical repose. Renounce this life so you may live for God... Despise the flesh in order to save your souls” (Abba ANTONY 33, trans. Wortley,

In line with this perspective, Saint John Climacus write about the superiority of the monastic path:

“Someone caught up in the affairs of the world can make progress, if he is determined. But it is not easy. Those bearing chains can still walk. But they often stumble and are thereby injured. The man who is unmarried and in the world, for all that he may be burdened, can nevertheless make haste toward the monastic life. But the married man is like someone chained hand and foot”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, comparing the monks with those in the world, Climacus writes,

“Who in the outside world has worked wonders, raised the dead, expelled demons? No one. Such deeds are done by monks. It is their reward. People in secular life cannot do these things, for, if they could, what then would be the point of ascetic practice and the solitary life?”<sup>4</sup>.

Finally,

“Angels are a light for monks and the monastic life is a light for all men. Hence monks should spare no effort to become a shining example in all things, and they should give no scandal in anything they say or do. For if the light becomes dark, then all the deeper will be the darkness of those living in the world”<sup>5</sup>.

How can this position be compared with earlier ascetic literature, especially *Apophthegmata Patrum*? In other words, how do Desert Fathers see the relation of monks to those living in the world?

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pp. 38-39) or “The person who learns the sweetness of the cell does not dishonor his neighbor in avoiding him” (THEODORE OF PHERME 14, trans. Wortley, p. 120). Similarly, LONGINUS 1, MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 16.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, SPCK, London, 1982, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 234.

First of all, if we look at Desert Fathers, we do not find such a sharp opposition. Although they do believe in the superiority of the monastic path, they are not as categorical as Saint John Climacus. According to them, all people shall give account to God, both monks and married people. For when Christ transmitted the Father's commandments, as told in the Gospels, He was addressing people living in the world. When He once was asked a question and answered His disciples in private, He testified saying: "What I say unto you, I say unto all" (Mark 13, 37). The Desert Fathers' logic is simple: spiritual life consists of nothing else but fulfilling the Gospel commandments, which are by definition the same for everyone.

Moreover, there are some edifying stories in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* aimed to teach that in the world one can reach greater spiritual progress than in monastic life. The most famous account is that about Antony and the doctor in a certain town "who provides those in need with his superfluous income and is singing *Holy, holy, holy* with the angels of God all day long"<sup>6</sup>, or of another lay person, a shoemaker in Alexandria, so perfect that he surpassed even the great Anthony himself: "They used to say of the holy Antony that he too was once praying in his cell when there came a voice to him saying: «Antony, you have not yet attained the stature of a certain shoemaker in Alexandria»". As we know, in his youth, near his village, the young Antony visited all the ascetics who distinguished themselves by their virtues<sup>7</sup>.

So no one was surprised to see the old man take his palm-wood staff and go to be edified by the holy shoemaker. Thus, he rose early, took his palm-wood staff and set out to see him.

“When he came to the place he went in to him; the man was troubled at the sight of him. The elder said to him: «Tell me what you do». «I am not aware that I have done anything worthwhile»,

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<sup>6</sup> ANTONY 24 (trans. Wortley), p. 37. This good doctor's claim to merit that equaled that of Anthony's asceticism was based not on his ascetic discipline, but on his chanting and his charity. Finally, the highest of the ascetical – and human – virtues is love and charity. In its essence love is the new law of Christ and the distinguishing mark of the perfect Christian. "A new commandment I give to you", says the Gospel to John (13, 34-35), "that you love one another".

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Vita Antonii* 3.

he said, «unless it is that, in the morning when I get up to sit down to my work, I say that this entire city, from the least to the great ones, will enter the kingdom by virtue of their righteous deeds, while I alone will inherit punishment because of my sins. I say the same thing again in the evening before I sleep». On hearing this Abba Antony said: «Truly, you have inherited the kingdom like a fine goldsmith sitting restfully in his house while I, failing in perception, have lived the whole of my time in the desert without catching you up»<sup>8</sup>.

Generally speaking, the Desert Fathers left the vanity of worldly society in order to find solitude and seek God in the desert. Was this simply frustration with the people and places where they lived? Were they exchanging a flawed human existence for a more perfect spiritual way of life? For some, the answer was yes. But the majority learned that a change of venue, by itself, did not change their lives. The Desert Fathers continually searched deification, though they often fell short of this goal. A saying of Abba Poemen expresses this point very well: “Folk talk at great length but achieve very little”<sup>9</sup>. Deification was the goal of the monk, but often that goal went unrealized.

Thus, Antony the Great, looking to the doctor and shoemaker from Alexandria, understood that monks have no monopoly on holiness. This ascetic teaching is frequently repeated in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: holiness can be attained, whoever and wherever you are, in the desert or in the city, and no matter what you are wearing.

Indeed, in some edifying stories from this monastic collection, we can see that those living in the world surpass desert monks in specifically monastic virtues and lifestyle. In other words, in the world one can reach

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<sup>8</sup> N 490, in: *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, trans. John Wortley, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 328-329. Also, in *Historia Monachorum* Paphnutius learned about a flute player, a village head man (“municipal councilor”), and even a pearl merchant who competed with him by their asceticism and piety (cf. ch. XIV, in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. by Norman Russell, Cistercian Publication, Kalamazoo, 1980, pp. 95-98).

<sup>9</sup> POEMEN 56 (trans. Wortley), p. 236.

greater spiritual progress than in monastic life. An interesting account may be found in a story in which Eucharistus the Secular became the object of attention after two monks asked God to reveal to them how far they had advanced. They visited Eucharistus and his wife in a village, and found out that the two led a chaste marriage, that they wore hair shirts by night, and that the income he derived from his work as a shepherd was divided into three parts: one for the poor, the second for hospitality, and the third for their personal needs.

Briefly, this apophthegm describes how two monks received a revelation, to see a husband and a wife who exceeded them in virtue: A husband, who is a shepherd, admits:

“Look, we got these sheep from our parents. Whatever profit the Lord grants us to gain from them we divide into three parts: one part for the poor, one for hospitality, the third part for our own need. From when I took my wife neither I have been defiled nor she. She is virgin; each of us sleeps on his own. We wear sackcloth by night, our clothes by day. None amongst humans knew this until now. The elders were amazed when they heard this and they went their way glorifying God”<sup>10</sup>.

Also, in another sentence we can see that the virtue of the laymen could be a challenge for early monks. For example, in Isaac’s day, a brother came into the church of Kellia, “wearing a little hood”:

“One of the fathers recounted how one of the brothers once came into the church at The Cells in the time of Abba Isaac wearing a little cloak and, looking at him, the elder chased him out, saying: «This is a place for monks; you who are a worldling (*kosmikós*), you cannot stay here»”<sup>11</sup>.

In a similar way, when Sisoës was living on Antony’s mountain – the very area in which Antony had affected the hunter – he chanced upon

<sup>10</sup> EUCHARISTUS THE WORLDLING (trans. Wortley), pp. 99-100.

<sup>11</sup> ISAAC OF THE CELLS (trans. Wortley), p. 148.

another such, from Pharan. It transpired from their conversation that the hunter had been out there for month, no less isolated than Sisoës; and Sisoës later mourned his own presumption:

“Abba Sisoës was once residing alone at the mountain of Abba Antony; as his attendant was taking his time in coming to him, he had not seen anybody for upwards of ten months. As he was walking about on the mountain, he came across a Pharanite hunting wild beasts. He said to him: «Where do you come from and how long have you been here?» «Truth to tell, abba, I have been on this mountain eleven months and I have not seen anybody but you», he said. When the elder heard this, he went into his own cell and smote himself, saying: «Here you thought you had accomplished what this worldling has already done»<sup>12</sup>.

Silvanus was taken up (in ecstasy) to the judgement and I saw many of our sort going off to be punished and many seculars entering the Kingdom:

“Abba Silvanus was once sitting with some brothers when he went into a trance and fell on his face. After some considerable time he got up and began to weep. The brothers enquired of him: «What is the matter, father?» but he remained silent and went on weeping. But when they urged him to speak he said: «I was snatched away to the judgment and I saw many of our type going off to punishment and many worldlings going off into the kingdom». The elder was mourning and would not come out of his cell. If he was obliged to come out, he would hide his face in his cowl, saying: «Why do I want to see this transitory light that offers no advantage?»<sup>13</sup>.

Who are those people? Presumably people like Eucharistos (in the apophthegm above), revealed to two ascetics who wanted to know how far they had advanced in virtue. When they called at the man’s home, they

<sup>12</sup> SISOES 7 (trans. Wortley), p. 282.

<sup>13</sup> SILVANUS 2 (trans. Wortley), p. 292.

found he was a shepherd, living as a celibate with his virgin wife, and dividing his income equally between the poor, guests, and personal needs.

Like the desert elders, the essential aim of the laymen was to achieve holiness through loving their neighbors. The people (men and women) who abandoned the futility of the world were not all hermits, anchorites, or living in monastic communities in the desert. Many (such as Eucharistus and his wife), perhaps the majority, remained in or near their villages, towns, or cities. Their “fleeing” was from the vanity of the world and from the conventional norms of family life, labor, sexual activity, and material possessions. Eucharistus and his wife, Mary, raised sheep and divided the profit in thirds among the poor, hospitality, and their own needs. During the day they wore ordinary clothes and hair shirts at night. They were celibate and slept separately. They dedicated their lives God and neighbor where they were: “A brother asked Abba Poemen: «I have found a place that offers complete repose for the brothers; do you want me to stay there?» The elder said: «Stay in a place where you do your brother no harm»”<sup>14</sup>.

It can thus be concluded that the experience of the desert can be lived anywhere (in the middle of the world or in a monastery) because holiness and loving one neighbors are not incompatible with living in the world. From this perspective, the desert is not so much a physical place, but above all a spiritual way. According to John Chryssavgis:

“the desert was, on a deeper level, always more than simply a place. It was a way. And it was not the desert that made the Desert Fathers, any more than it was the lion that made the martyrs... It is the clear understanding of these elders that one does not have to move to the geographical location of the wilderness in order to find God. The desert is a necessary stage on the spiritual journey... Everyone does go through the desert, in one shape or another. It may be in the form of some suffering, or emptiness, or breakdown, or breakup, or divorce, or any kind of trauma that occurs in our life. Dressing this desert up through our addictions or attachments – to material goods, or money, or food, or drink,

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<sup>14</sup> POEMEN 158 (trans. Wortley), p. 253.

or success, or obsessions, or anything else we may care to turn toward or may find available to depend upon – will delay the utter loneliness and the inner fearfulness of the desert experience. If we go through this experience involuntarily, then it can be both overwhelming and crushing. If, however, we accept to undergo this experience voluntarily, then it can prove both constructive and liberating”<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, whenever the Desert Fathers risked thinking themselves superior to others, God revealed to them that there were lay people as virtuous as they were. For instance, an interesting account can be found in the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Abba Macarius was told that he has not yet attained the spiritual level of two women in a city. When he finds them, they say:

“«we have not been absent from our husbands’ beds to this very day; what sort of work do you expect of us?» The elder apologised to them and begged them, saying: «Show me the way you live», at which they told him: «We are unrelated to each other in the worldly sense, but it happened that we were married to two natural brothers and, look, today we have been living in this house for fifteen years. We are not aware of ever having quarrelled or spoken a shameful word. It crossed our mind to leave our husbands and to join the ranks of the virgins but, despite frequent pleading on our part, our husbands did not agree to release us. So, frustrated in that project, we took an oath to each other and before God that we would let no secular talk pass our lips until we died». When Abba Macarius heard this, he said: «Truly, there is no virgin or married woman or monk or worldling, but God looks for a deliberate choice and he gives the Holy Spirit to everybody»”<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> JOHN CHRYSAGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2003, pp. 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> N 489/20.21 Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca (BHG) 999yb, in: *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, p. 327.

In this story the desire of the two women is crucial, more exactly the desire of the two women to become nuns earned them sanctity. In other words, it is possible to obtain holiness in the world, following a non-monastic path. In all the stories above the holy men were content to admire the beautiful examples they discovered and returned to the desert filled with new fervor. Also, from these narratives we understand that the mission of monasticism – that of ‘spiritual lighthouse’, that provides a landmark to everyone else is assumed by lay people<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, sometimes we saw that the non-monastic asceticism of the lay people surpassed that of the monks.

One of the more humbling stories tells of a monk who found that the most virtuous person of all was not himself, nor even another monk, but a man who lived in the heart of the city, engaged in commerce, and was surrounded by all of the temptations which the young monks were taught to abhor and despise. Thus, this anchorite learned from an angel that he wasn’t as saintly as a certain layman who cultivated and sold vegetables. He, too, immediately went to visit him and was uplifted by the greengrocer’s words:

“I only eat in the evening. When I leave work, I only take what I need for food; the rest I give to those in need or, if I receive one of the servants of God as my guest, I use it up on them. On getting up at dawn, before sitting down to manual work, I say: «This city, from the smallest to the greatest, shall enter the Kingdom [of God] by virtue of their righteous deeds; but I alone shall inherit chastisement on account of my sins. Then again, in the evening, I say the same thing before going to sleep». On hearing this, the elder said to him: «This is indeed a fine observation of the commandments, but not worthy to surpass my drudgery over so many years». Now, just as they were going to eat, the elder heard some people singing songs on the road, for the greengrocer’s cell was in a notorious place. «Brother», the

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on this subject, see Kallistos WARE, “The Monk and the Married Christian: Some Comparisons in Early Monastic Sources”, in: *Eastern Churches Review*, 6. 1 (1974), pp. 72–83.

elder said to him, «since you so wish to lead a godly life, how do you stay in this place? Are you not disturbed now when you hear them singing these songs?» «I tell you, abba», said the man «I have never been troubled or scandalised». On hearing this, the elder said: «Well, what are you thinking in your heart when you hear these [songs]?» and he said: «[I am thinking] that they are certainly going off to the Kingdom». Amazed at hearing this, the elder said: «This is obedience of the commandments that surpasses my toiling of so many years». He prostrated himself saying: «Forgive me, brother; I have not attained this stature» and he retreated into the desert again without having eaten”<sup>18</sup>.

Abba Sisoës’ apophthegm follows the same pattern: a monk in the desert is humbled by encountering a layperson who surpasses him in virtue and holiness:

“Abba Sisoës was once residing alone at the mountain of Abba Antony; as his attendant was taking his time in coming to him, he had not seen anybody for upwards of then months. As he was walking about on the mountain, he came across a Pharanite hunting wild beasts. He said to him: «Where do you come from and how long have you been here?» «Truth to tell, abba, I have been on this mountain eleven months and I have not seen anybody but you», he said. When the elder heard this, he went into his own cell and smote himself, saying: «Here you thought you had accomplished something, Sisoës, and in fact you have not yet accomplished what this worldling has already done»”<sup>19</sup>.

Certainly it is in principle easier for a hermit, dwelling in the silence of the desert and practicing, like Abba Sisoës or Abba Antony, a rigorous

<sup>18</sup> N.67/20.22, BHG 1438i, in: *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> SISOES 7 (trans. Wortley), p. 282. Similarly SISOES 7. For more details on this subject, see Claudia RAPP, “Christian Piety in Late Antiquity: Contexts and Contestations”, in Harriet I. FLOWER (ed.), *Empire and Religion in the Roman World*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 161-186.

ascetic discipline to achieve a great state of holiness. For a lay person engaged in the world (whether he is doctor, shoemaker or green grocer) reaching the state of holiness is inevitably harder: harder, but not impossible. In other words, there is the firm conviction in the Eastern spiritual tradition that all of these can, through Gods mercy, come to a great state of holiness.

In these stories above we encounter the laymen who, in their own way, are trying to lead an ascetic and saintly life *in the world*, not in out of it. They are not only trying, but also succeeding. It thus follows that the moral significance of these edifying tales is loud and clear: monks have no monopoly on holiness. This point is very well expressed by John Wortley: “I suppose the fact of the matter was that some monks did have a tendency to think of themselves as more holy than «those of the world», and that they had to be continually reminded that this was not necessarily the case”<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, as we saw above, monks can recognize the spiritual hidden treasures of the “others”, more exactly of the lay people who live in the world. In this sense, laypeople assume a kind of hidden sainthood that monks discover as the result of a divine revelation<sup>21</sup>. From this perspective, these people appear as models for the monks to follow. Therefore, the *Apophthegmata* brought forth a particular kind of narrative that evokes the theme of hidden sanctity<sup>22</sup>, with the purpose was to encourage the non-

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<sup>20</sup> John WORTLEY, “The Spirit of Rivalry in Early Christian Monasticism”, in: *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* vol. 33, no. 4 (1992) p. 404.

<sup>21</sup> As Lucien Regnault has remarked one exceptional reason for outings of the monks was of revelation given to an elder of the eminent saintliness of some person living in the world: “The great old fathers who achieved a high degree of perfection risked thinking themselves superior to all others. God took care to protect them from this pretension by letting them know that there were lay people as virtuous as they” (Lucien REGNAULT, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt*, trans. by Étienne POIRIER, jr., Petersham, Mass: St. Bede’s Publications, 1999, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> The theme of hidden sanctity manifest in pious laypeople who are assiduous in prayer and chanting and provide charity to the needy and hospitality to traveling monks, is very much a phenomenon of Late Antiquity. In my opinion, this theme can be correlated with the stories of holy fools or “fools for Christ’s sake”. For a discussion of this topic see, Sergey IVANOV, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, Oxford University Press, 2006, especially pp. 43–48, and see now also Youval ROTMAN, *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium: The Ambiguity of Religious Experience*, Harvard University Press, 2016.

monastic audience to achieve holiness. As Claudia Rapp has remarked, these stories of hidden sanctity from *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,

“should be seen as subversive way of questioning the predominance of organized monasticism as the only form of social organization for a life of dedicated Christian values... Moreover, these tales challenge the assertion of the church and its representatives in an increasingly state-sponsored administration to offer the only legitimate space in which to practice Christian spirituality”<sup>23</sup>.

Usually, early monks were trying to realize a big change in themselves, others, and the world around them. They viewed themselves as uniquely qualified to change their world, in any case better qualified than other Christians (including bishops and priests) or than the philosophers of their time. But sometimes, the others (especially, laypeople) provoked a change in the life of the monk. It seems that the roles have reversed. As John Wortley has remarked, we are clearly dealing with some stories of rivalry between monks and laymen because in all stories above it “is the salutary warning that neither the desert nor the monastic profession can in themselves confer holiness; there are holy men and women in all walks of life”<sup>24</sup>.

The point of these stories of spiritual rivalry was the “chastisement” of the desert ascetic who finds himself humbled by the superior virtue of laypeople in an urban environment. According to Claudia Rapp,

“the narratives of spiritual rivalry reveal significant uncertainty about the ideal setting for the attainment of spiritual perfection, drawing attention to individual laypeople who earned their living in towns and cities and whose extraordinary piety, expressed through generous charity, was only revealed at second glance.

<sup>23</sup> Claudia RAPP, “Christian Piety in Late Antiquity”, p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> John WORTLEY, “The Spirit of Rivalry in Early Christian Monasticism”, pp. 383-404, here p. 390.

Although these men and women were admired for their active expressions of piety, they are not recognized under a label”<sup>25</sup>.

It is true that there is a common perception according to which the high spiritual life cannot exist without external solitude and withdrawal in the desert. But this is not at all the universal view. As we saw, there are stories in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* where laymen and even women, fully committed to a life of active service in the world, are compared with hermits and solitaries. Moreover, as we saw, sometimes, their sanctity even surpasses that of the monks<sup>26</sup>.

This last point leads us to consider the question of the exemplary nature of holy lay people proposed by the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Certainly, their presence in monastic hagiography indicates that they were regarded as models that could potentially be appreciated and imitated<sup>27</sup>.

In all narratives discussed above there is the salutary warning that neither the desert nor the monastic vocation can in themselves confer holiness. There are holy men and women in all walks of life. Thus the monk tells of the greengrocer quite candidly: “This is obedience of the commandments that surpasses my toiling of so many years”.

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<sup>25</sup> Claudia RAPP, “Christian Piety in Late Antiquity”, p. 181.

<sup>26</sup> In this context it should be stressed that the term *praxis* (or *praktike*) signifies not the life of direct service to the world – preaching, teaching, social work and the like – but the inner struggle to subdue the passions and acquire the holiness. Using the phrase in this sense, it may be said that many hermits and monastics living in strict enclosure are still predominantly concerned with the “active life”. By the same token, there are men and women fully devoted to a life of service in the world who yet possess many ascetic virtues and of them it may justly be said that they are living the “contemplative life”. We understand that the fullness of the spiritual life is possible in the middle of cities as well as in deserts and cells. In other words, married people, with secular jobs and children, burdened with the anxieties of running a large household, may yet achieve the holiness. The criterion is not the external situation but the inner reality. This criterion makes it possible for a man who lives in the world to become a saint. We touch here upon the ancient question of the comparative value of the contemplative and the practical life.

<sup>27</sup> A similar perspective can be found in F. VECOLI, “The Other in the Spirituality of the Desert Fathers”, in K. BERTHELOT and M. MORGENSTERN (eds.), *The Quest for a Common Humanity: Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 159-178.

So there are many reasons to conclude that there are no standard forms of holiness and no higher vocations. No external condition, however distracting, is in itself incompatible with asceticism, inner prayer and holiness. Of all professions, that of doctor is probably one which requires the deepest involvement in worldly affairs. Yet the doctor in Antony's sentence was spiritually the equal of St. Antony, the greatest of the early monks.

In the *Apophthegmata Patrum* it is made clear that monks worked and prayed in order to be the best examples of holiness, but sometimes even better examples were found in the non-monastic world. As we saw above there are many stories without any reference to monks at all. Their inclusion in this monastic collection shows that the virtues of seculars can be instructive even for those who have 'left' the world. In other words, it is most likely that these stories were intended to be a pedagogical reminder to the monks, rather than a lesson to the laypeople. Let's remember that doctor from Alexandria who was regarded as the spiritual equal of St Antony the Great himself or that holy shoemaker so perfect that he surpassed even the great Egyptian monk. Also, the two elders learned that in a village, Eucharistus and his wife Mary were far ahead of them in spiritual matters, living like a monk and a nun in celibacy and good works. Finally, Macarius heard a celestial voice telling him he hadn't yet reached the spiritual perfection of two married women living in a certain town. He went to see them and found them living normally with their husbands in spite of their desires to join a monastery. Even though they lived in the same house, they had never argued or uttered any vain words.

There is, therefore, in all these stories a lesson for those prone to making too-neat distinctions between monk and secular. In other words, just as the Desert Fathers were "icons" of deification, so pious laymen can become epiphanies of holiness.

In view of these insights, a clear conclusion may be drawn: the experience of the desert can be assumed by anyone because it is a symbol, a powerful reminder of the unending search of the people (monks and laymen) for "abundant life" (John 10, 10) and "a living spring of water" (John 4, 14).

### III. Conclusion

This contribution has presented a conceptualization of the theme of monastic tolerance and hidden holiness in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

I will make two final remarks. First, the Desert Fathers promoted and developed a great openness towards “the Other” (laymen, philosophers and pagans). From this perspective, the spirituality of the desert can be understood as a profound and subtle theology of monastic tolerance. Second, the desert monks have no monopoly on holiness, so that we see many pious and saintly laymen in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Sometimes this non-monastic holiness or “hidden sainthood” of the seculars surpassed even that of the Desert Fathers. In this case, those living in the world became models of holiness for the desert monks.

My conclusion is that the spirituality of the desert comes to us in a variety of forms. Therefore its essence cannot be reduced to a simple separation from the world. Generally speaking, this paper tried to shed some more light on ways in which the Desert Fathers interacted with the wider context in Late Antiquity.