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# Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism

Daniel LEMENI

**Daniel LEMENI**

West University of Timișoara

E-mail: dlemeni@yahoo

## Abstract

In this paper we explore the issue of spiritual authority and the central role of spiritual guidance in late monasticism. Our premise major is that in the Christian communities of Late Antiquity, the monk played a role comparable to that of the spiritual guide. It is also important to keep in mind that this role are dealing with the concept of spiritual authority. The aim of this paper is one: I will examine to what extent one fundamental monk role, namely the monk as a spiritual guide. Our conclusion is that the monk becomes a significant medium for spiritual progress in late antique monasticism.

## Keywords

monk, spiritual authority, asceticism, Late Antiquity, Apophthegmata Patrum

## I. Monks, Bishops and Spiritual Authority in Late Antiquity

The first section of our paper is consecrated to the understanding of the nature of authority in late antiquity in general. Thus, in order to understand how monk assumed the role of spiritual guide în late monasticism, we will analyze the nature of his authority. In this sense, we use the Rapp's model for explaining spiritual authority of the monk.

In other words, Claudia Rapp introduces two types of authority: episcopal authority and ascetic authority. The first is defined in the following mode: “Spiritual authority indicates that its bearer has received the *pneuma*, the Spirit from God. Spiritual authority has its source outside the individual. It is given by God, as a gift. Spiritual authority is personal. It is given directly to a specific individual, without personal participation or preparation by its recipient”<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, a pious man who is reputed for charismatic qualities, such as the healing or wisdom, can be regarded by others as true “spirit-bearer” (*pneumatophoros*) and attain a personal form of spiritual authority. In this sense, their special qualities are understood as gifts from the Holy Spirit and signs of their holiness. They are regarded as holy men<sup>2</sup>, who can mediate between world and God through prayer and wisdom. A particular form of spiritual authority is bestowed upon priests and bishops during

<sup>1</sup> Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity. The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transformation*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> The exegetical literature on the late-antique holy man is vast. For an introduction, see in particular P. BROWN, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101; reprinted in P. BROWN, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 103–152; now revised in P. BROWN, *Authority and the Sacred* (1995): chapter 3 “Arbiters of the Holy: the Christian holy man in Late Antiquity”, pp. 57–78. For assessments of the evolution of Brown’s view of the holy person in Late Antiquity, see S. ELM, “Introduction”, 6 (1998), pp. 343–51; and see Brown’s own assessment, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 353–76. The *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (Fall, 1998) is completely devoted to a re-assessment of Brown’s holy man. The significance of Brown’s original article is manifest from the fact that in March 1997 a conference was held in Berkeley, California, to celebrate the quarter-centenary of its publication, the proceedings of which were published in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), and from the publication of a symposium inspired by Brown’s article: James HOWARD-JOHNSTON and Paul Anthony HAYWARD, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). And Patricia COX MILLER, *Biography in Late Antiquity: a Quest for the Holy Man*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. On the role of the holy man in rural society in Late Antiquity, see P. BROWN, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982; on the Roman period, see G. ANDERSON, *Sage, Saint and Sophist: Holy Men and Their Associates in the Early Roman Empire*, New York: Routledge, 1994; on the textual implications of the cult of the saints, see David SATRAN, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets*, Leiden: Brill, 1994, pp. 97–105.

*Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

their ordination. Therefore, “the bishop is a successor of the apostles and partakes of the same Spirit as they had. It is the apostolic succession of the bishop that bestows on him the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, spiritual authority can reside not just in the *person* of the bishop, but also in the episcopal *office per se*”<sup>3</sup>. Briefly, spiritual authority is the authority that comes from the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

As we know, the ordination occurs through the imposition of hands by one patriarch. The prayer accompanying this gesture contains an interpretation of the spiritual and practical features of the clerical function. Briefly, the priest or bishop assumes this role as pastor of his community.

From this perspective, as Claudia Rapp has remarked the bishop or priest

“must minister to his community, and he must represent them to God through his prayers. He holds the same authority as the apostles to forgive sins. And he ought to lead a life pleasing to God, excelling in meekness and purity of heart. After the ordination, the new bishop receives the kiss of peace from all who are present and then celebrates the eucharist”<sup>4</sup>.

In other words, the bishop’s main sacerdotal task is the administration of the sacraments: the celebration of the Eucharist, baptism, confession and so on. Also, as Renate Dekker has noted

„a bishop or priest who is considered as a true Spirit-bearer has both personal and professional spiritual authority. If people believe that he can read souls and detect hidden sins, they may adjust their behavior and confess more readily, hoping that he will not expose their faults unexpectedly and in public”<sup>5</sup>.

But we do not treat spiritual authority in isolation, given that it is, indeed, often correlated with ascetic authority. First of all, the bishop or priest must be an ascetic man. In this context, the ascetic authority is understood

<sup>3</sup> Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Peeters, 2018, p. 45.

as a precondition for the clerical function or office. This emphasis on the ascetic virtues of the clergy as a precondition for the authentic discharge of their clerical tasks is strongly presented in late antique monasticism. For example, in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, many priests are also ascetic men who teach spiritual life to monks or learn their spiritual life from monks: in a sentence Abba Isaiah said that

„when there was an agape in the church and the brothers were eating and talking to each other, the priest of Pelusium reproved them, saying: «Be quiet, brothers; I personally saw a brother eating with you and drinking as many cups as you and his prayer is going up before God like fire»”<sup>6</sup>.

Also, another apophthegm points out that Abba Isidore, the priest of Scetis, is a great teacher of ascetic life: Abba Poemen said that Abba Isidore, the priest of Scete, once spoke to the people, saying: “Brothers, was it not for adversity that we came to this place? Now there is no longer adversity, so for my part I am packing up my sheepskin and going off to where there is adversity and there I will find repose”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the priest as a teacher derives from his ascetic and holy life. As Zachary B. Smith has remarked

“the monks usually required priests to fulfill necessary sacramental functions, and people desired their bishops and priests to be holy people; however, ordination to ecclesiastical roles was reserved for those who wished such – the position of priest or bishop was not necessarily superior for a monk”<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, the spiritual authority of bishop derives not from his ecclesiastical position, but his ascetic life. In this case, we send to the Cassian’s view

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<sup>6</sup> ABBA ISAIAH 4, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, p. 111. For bishop’s ascetic authority as precondition for pastoral necessity, see Juliette J. DAY, “The Bishop as Mystagogical Teacher”, in P. GEMEINHARDT, Olga LORGEUX, and Maria Munkholt CHRISTENSEN (eds.), *Teachers in Late Antique Christianity*, Mohr Siebeck, 2018, pp. 56-75

<sup>7</sup> ABBA POEMEN 44, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Brepols, 2018, p. 113.

*Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

on spiritual authority, as it regards monks and bishops, that can be well summarized by a comment from Abba Moses. In other words, the spiritual authority of the bishops and priests is characterized by their asceticism not by their ecclesiastical position:

„In this way, therefore, we shall very easily be able to attain to the knowledge of true discretion. Thus, following in the footsteps of the elders, we shall presume neither to do anything new nor to come to any decisions based on our own judgment, but we shall proceed in all things just as their tradition and upright life inform us. Whoever has been thoroughly instructed in this manner will not only attain to the perfect ordering of discretion but will also remain absolutely safe from all the snares of the enemy. For by no other vice does the devil draw and lead a monk to so sudden a death as when he persuades him to neglect the counsels of the elders and to trust in his own judgment and his own understanding”<sup>9</sup>.

From this perspective, ascetic authority played a fundamental role in Late Antiquity. In this context, we stress the role of ascetic teacher in monastic literature. The monk is understood as a great teacher because he is characterized by spiritual abilities, especially the ability to teach others. This ability is legitimized by ascetic holiness. The monk has authority because he is a holy person. As Claudia Rapp has remarked

“Ascetic authority derives its name from *askesis*, meaning «practice». It has its source in the personal efforts of the individual. It is achieved by subduing the body and by practicing virtuous behavior. These efforts are centered on the self, in the hopes of attaining a certain ideal of personal perfection. Ascetic

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<sup>9</sup> JOHN CASSIAN, *Conf.* II.11 in *Conferences*, edited and translated by E. PICHÉRY, SC, Paris. For more details on the relationship between monks and bishops, see C. LEYSER, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*, Oxford University Press, 2000; A. STERK, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 2004; Philip ROUSSEAU, “The Spiritual Authority of the ‘Monk-Bishop’: Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries,” *Journal of Theological Studies* n. 22 (1971), pp. 380–419.

authority is accessible to all. Anyone who chooses to do so can engage in the requisite practices. Finally, ascetic authority is visible. It depends on recognition by others, as it is made evident in the individual's appearance, lifestyle, and conduct"<sup>10</sup>.

It is notable that several of sayings where the monks are described as teachers are in the context of spiritual guidance. The practice of spiritual guidance in late antique monasticism will be discussed in the next section. For the moment, we will take some examples from *Apophthegmata Patrum* that illustrates very well this feature of the monk.

First of all, the monk employs a variety of ascetic practices to transform himself and thereby achieve salvation. In a sentence, Abba Matoes provides a list of his spiritual exercises for transforming the soul, including prayer, humility, control of speech, and abstinence from food and drink:

„A brother asked Abba Matoes: «Tell me a saying», and he said to him: «Go and beseech God to give you sorrow in your heart and humility. Be always aware of your sins and do not judge others but be inferior to everybody. Have no friendship with a child, no relationship with a woman, no heretic as your friend. Disassociate yourself from loose talk; master your tongue and your belly, (refraining) from any more than a little wine. If somebody speaks to you about any matter whatsoever, do not argue with him. If he speaks well, say: «Yes; if he speaks badly, say: You know what you are talking about, and do not contend with him about what he said; this is humility»"<sup>11</sup>.

Also, Abba John Colobos connects the ascetic practice with gathering the virtues and fulfilling spiritual life:

“Abba John said: «Personally, I would like a person to participate a little in all the virtues. So when you arise at dawn each day, make a fresh start in every virtue and commandment of God with greatest patience, with fear and long-suffering, in the love of

<sup>10</sup> Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> ABBA MATOES 11, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 201.

### *Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

God, with all spiritual and physical zeal and much humiliation; enduring affliction and constriction of the heart, with much prayer and intercession, with groans, in purity of the tongue and restriction of the eyes...»<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, ascetics transform their lives with several types of asceticism: manual work, prayer, sleep, solitude, humility and so on. This ascetic practices serve to destroy the old self in order to rebuild a new self. Moreover, this asceticism infused the life of the monk with a great ascetic authority. According to R. Dekker,

„Ascetic authority implies the public recognition of an individual’s spiritual abilities as a result of his personal efforts, for instance the subjection of his body to a strict regime and a high ethical standard in imitation of Christ. Strict ascetics are recognizable by a frail body and a piercing gaze, resulting from a lack of food and sleep, a neglect of the body, a preference for modest clothing and a simple dwelling, an inner state of detachment from the world and a firm control over their emotions. Holy men were believed to actively collaborate with the Spirit through intercessory prayer, reinforced by their ascetic practices”<sup>13</sup>.

In conclusion, we can say that the late antique monasticism presents complex dynamics of spiritual authority in Late Antiquity. This relationship between spiritual authority and ascetic authority remains an ambiguous issue in Eastern spirituality.

## **II. Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity**

In this section, we discuss the issue of spiritual guidance in the late monasticism. My argument is twofold: first, the central figure of the spiritual guide is epitomized by the desert spirituality<sup>14</sup>, because the monk was

<sup>12</sup> ABBA JOHN COLOBOS 34, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> R. DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks...*, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> For this theme, see see Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-monks, Episcopal authori-*

regarded as spiritual father characterized by a great ascetic authority. Therefore, the monks did not assume the authority to “bind and loose” that characterize the ecclesiastical institution.

In our opinion, the monk or spiritual guide is mainly defined as an *anthropos pneumatikos* because he has a great ascetic wisdom. Briefly, he is an ascetic teacher that imparts wisdom through his example. In other words, he proposes to his disciple a living assimilation of a spiritual teaching: “A brother asked Abba Sisoës: «Tell me a saying» but he said: «Why do you oblige me to speak in vain? Look here and do what you see (me doing)»”<sup>15</sup>.

First of all, the elder teaches by personal example, and only secondarily by word: a brother asked Abba Poemen:

“A brother asked Abba Poemen: «There are brothers living with me; do you want me to direct them?» «No, said the elder; first perform the (monks) task and, if they wish to live, they will see for themselves». The brother said to him: «But they themselves want me to direct them, father». The elder said to him: «No; be an example to them, not a law-giver»”<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, the desert elders wanted to teach more by personal example than by words. In certain cases, the ascetics chose to respond with silence

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*ty, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Brepols, 2018; Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity: Cognition and Discipline*, Cambridge University Press, 2017; Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, especially, pp. 26-87; John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008, and K. WARE, “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, in: Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Valdimir’s Press, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> ABBA SISOËS 45, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 290. For a good introduction to the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, see John WORTLEY, *An introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge University Press, 2019; John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert...*; Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers...*; Columba STEWART, *The World of the Desert. Stories and Sayings from the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, SLG Press, Oxford, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> ABBA POEMEN 173, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 255-256. For a good analyse of spiritual guidance in antique monasticism, see Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the care of Souls ...*



*Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

instead of words, which forced the disciple to move from the theoretical to the experiential level: Abba Poemen said: “A person who teaches but does not do what he teaches is like a spring that waters and washes everybody but is unable to cleanse itself”<sup>17</sup>.

The spiritual elder, then, does not aim at imposing rules and punishments, but offers a personal relationship. In the spirituality of the desert, for many desert monks, teaching and learning required sustained oversight. This required geographic proximity and longer acquaintance with a desert *abba*. Graham Gould writes that teaching “takes place in the context of a personal relationship, which makes great demands on both parties involved”<sup>18</sup>. The process of learning required “self-disclosure, endurance, and obedience” on the part of the disciple<sup>19</sup>. Desert abbots often tailored their teaching to the specific needs of their disciples. For their part, the disciples were convinced that their elders were “able to identify and describe their personal problems, and to propose for them suitable solutions”<sup>20</sup>.

As we saw above, the Desert Fathers never prescribe rules but rather become a living model of holiness: “Be their model, not their legislator” is the advice of Abba Poemen. According to John Chryssavgis

„If the Desert Fathers became beacons of spiritual direction, it was because they first rejected human structures of power. An ages-long spiritual heritage, of which they comprised only a part, taught them that alongside the more institutional lines of «apostolic succession» there was also a complementary inspirational element of «spiritual succession». This is why they did not establish regulations or write down fixed rules. The only rule was that there were no hard rules. Flexibility was the sole rule of the desert”<sup>21</sup>.

Therefore, the spiritual father became what in the early monasticism is termed an “elder”, a spiritual guide who teaches others not through book-

<sup>17</sup> ABBA POEMEN 173, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers ...*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers ...*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Philip ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert...*, p. 66.

learning but through personal experience, and not through words only but also more profoundly through his own example. From this perspective, the elder is mainly defined as an *anthropos pneumatikos* that is, a man who by his long experience in the desert, has learned the skills of spiritual life. As Claudia Rapp remarked

“The spiritual guide acted like the *pneumatophoroi*, namely he was able to offer guidance to others because he had attained certain spiritual qualities: the discernment between good and evil thoughts in himself and in others, the gift of immediate recognition of the causes of a troubled soul, and the ability to gauge accurately the degree to which a young disciple needed to be challenged to stimulate his growth, without the risk of breaking him”<sup>22</sup>.

In the tradition of desert spirituality the spiritual father is a spiritual man in the full sense of the word, with appropriate experience, which could teach and guide in this subtle and mysterious life. In this sense, a strong example is Abba Antony the Great:

“Three of the fathers were in the habit of going to the blessed Abba Antony each year. Two of them would ask him about *logismoi* and the soul’s salvation, but the third always remained silent, asking nothing. After some considerable time, Abba Antony said to him: «Look, you have been coming here for such a long time and you ask me nothing». In reply he said to him: «It is enough for me just to see you, father»<sup>23</sup>.

As Columba Stewart says,

“The desert abba was not a guru: disciples did not just sit and listen to words of wisdom. Often there were no words to listen to. Nor was the elder a magician: there was real work to be done, and most of it was to be done by the disciple. The religious, medical, legal, and other sorts of images which began

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<sup>22</sup> Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> ABBA ANTONY 27, in *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 37.

*Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

to accumulate around the figure of the desert elder can obscure the actual means by which desert father worked with desert child. The elder was not a source of power. The elder was not a distributor of self-help guidelines. The elder was sometimes called «healer», but was really more a sort of witness or midwife than an omniscient, self-assured professional. The desert elder was certified by experience rather than by vows or by an academic degree or by ordination”<sup>24</sup>.

In the *Apophthegmata* there is no theorizing, no trains of logical argument, no intricate analysis of biblical texts. Their exchanges focus on the specifics of desert living and the spiritual quest. In the spirituality of the desert the term “elder” or “Abba” was synonymous with the term of ascetic teacher. An indeed, in ascetic education monks put under the spiritual guidance of a *geron*, so that learning and spiritual authority went hand in hand. This authority was fundamental in the practice of the spiritual guidance, as the young ascetic-geron relationship was individual and direct. And indeed, “the knowledge a teacher possesses given him a sort of authority that the student willingly accepts in exchange for instruction”<sup>25</sup>.

This spiritual authority has profound implications for the practice of spiritual guidance because “teaching was an activity whose success depended upon a master’s ability to continue to assert direct, personal authority over disciples”<sup>26</sup>.

In conclusion, we can say that the elder occupied an important role in late antique monasticism. In this sense, the spirituality of the desert had replaced spiritual guidance as the dominant element in Late Antiquity. In other words, *Apophthegmata Patrum* points out that the elder defined the path of authentic guidance to the exclusion of clerical or institutional authority. According to Zachary B. Smith, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*’s compiler „slipped the peacemaking seeds of monastic autonomy and philosophical self-determination into the fertile imaginations of ascetic practitioners”<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Columba STEWART, “The Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty”, in: *Sobornost* 12 (1990), pp. 25-39 and pp. 143-56.

<sup>25</sup> E. WATTS, “Teaching the New Classics: Bible and Biography in a Pachomian Monastery”, in: Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve VAN HOOF and Peter VAN NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity*, Routledge, 2016, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> E. WATTS, “Teaching the New Classics...”, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self*, p. 257.

### III. Conclusion

Therefore, the authority of a spiritual father is not confined to that authority claimed by the priest, as one might think. Whereas the confessor-priest exert an authority delegated by an “institution”, thus an officially conferred one (*de jure* authority) a spiritual father’s authority is, *a contrario*, based on his personal charisma (*de facto* authority). We understand that the two types of authority, the “administrative and charismatic” one (F. Neyt) or the “institutional and practical” one (K. Ware) are not mutually exclusive. They are to a certain extent compatible and they can intersect, since a priest can assume the role of spiritual father.

Our conclusion is reaching a *via media* between the two dimensions of the Church, because due to its charismatic character the practice of spiritual guidance provided by the Desert Fathers complement the Church’s institutional character. This twofold character of the Church, defined by both the ecclesial side (priest or bishop), and the charismatic one (*abba* or elder) actually achieve the communitarian dimension of the Church.

Thus, although in approaching this (ir)reconcilable tension between *pneumatic* asceticism and *hierarchical* authority, we have opted for a mediating solution, believing that the issue of charismatic authority *versus* institutional authority is still an object of theological reflection in the Christian East. By placing the practice of spiritual guidance in the realm of spiritual expertise, the tenet we support is that an elder is *stricto sensu* a spiritual man. Thus, spiritual expertise is the distinctive characteristic of a spiritual father in Eastern Christian spirituality. From this perspective, by looking into *Apophthegmata Patrum* we have been able to render the dynamics of spiritual guidance in its depth.

On this point, we argue that the mainstream model of spiritual guidance, exercised by ordained clergy (by bishops and, from the third century onwards, also by the presbyters), and the model represented by the monastics influenced each other, and that a synthesis between the two was gradually realized. Beginning with the fourth and fifth centuries, the charismatic authority of non-ordained monks was backed up by their ordination to the priesthood, so that monks could serve as both Eucharistic and spiritual leaders.

*Spiritual Authority and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Monasticism*

Our conclusion is that the tradition of spiritual guidance is based on a personal, rather than institutional, model. In any case, the figure of spiritual guide, either ascetic, either priest or bishop, has retained its full significance up to the present day in Orthodox Christendom.