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The Wisdom of the Desert Spirituality: An Introduction to the Desert Fathers

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Abstract

The desert spirituality is fundamental to Christianity and I am certain that the ascetic wisdom of Desert Fathers have a great deal to teach us today. Therefore, in this paper I will point out this profound spirituality of the desert. This paper is divided into two sections: in the first part, I shall focus on the crucial importance of the desert in the earlier ascetic tradition. In this sense, I will point out the essential themes of desert spirituality, such as spiritual guidance, silence, discernment, and so on. As we will see, the true spirituality of the Desert Fathers is absolute simplicity. In the second, I shall highlight that the desert spirituality is understood as a transformation of the body, so that desert monasticism represents a lived territory of holiness. From this perspective, the desert has a special place in the earliest monasticism history because it is a symbol of total withdrawal and rejection of the world, a training ground for those who aspire to holiness.

Keywords

Desert Fathers, ascetic wisdom, monasticism, desert spirituality, spiritual guidance

I. Egyptian Desert: A Oasis of Monastic Wisdom

In the history of the Judeo-Christianity, the desert has always played a special role, beginning with the story of Moses in the Exodus where the desert functioned mostly as a place of encounter with God. Moses comes to Horeb (which scholars identify with Mount Sinai, at the south of the Sinai Peninsula): “An the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, «I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt». When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, «Moses, Moses!» And he said, «Here am I». Then he said, «Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground». And he said, «I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob». And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3, 2-6).

Therefore, Moses’s first encounter with God occurred in the desert, near Mount Horeb, “the mountain of God”. On this “mountain of God”, as Andrew Louth has remarked,

“Moses knows an overwhelming sense of the holiness of the place, such that he feels impelled to remove his shoes. And then God commands Moses to be the instrument by which he will save the people of Israel from the Egyptian oppression... The desert seems a fitting place for such a revelation: the desert, itself devoid of anything in terms of which any comparison might be made, the desert whose barrenness matches, by contrast, the transcendent fullness of God”¹.

The desert means the relinquishing of human matters so that God alone can be their unique concern. Also, the desert was for Moses, and through him for the whole of Israel, the place where they lived in dependence on God. The story of the forty years in the desert is a story in which the people of Israel were directly dependent on God for the sustenance.

The wilderness continued to play an important role in the New Testament. In accordance with Old Testament, the desert, barren for

¹ Andrew LOUTH, *The Wilderness of God*, Darton-Longman-Todd, London, 2003, p. 30.

human purposes, is open to divine purposes. Therefore, as the time of the New Covenant begins to dawn, its herald, John the Baptist, the “voice in the desert”, appears in the desert. But John the Baptist is more than a prophet *from* the desert, he is a prophet of the desert. Moreover, John the Baptist assumes the desert, its nothingness, its barrenness, in being a voice: a sound, bearing a meaning, nothing in itself. And in being that, John becomes a model for every Christian because he “incorporates the desert, not just in lifestyle, but in his very being, he becomes the vehicle for God’s purposes, the messenger, the forerunner, the one who points to Christ”².

But the desert was not only a space where one could encounter God, it was also a space where the demons might be present³. According to New Testament, after his baptism Jesus Christ is driven out into the desert by the Spirit (cf. Mark 1, 12): “And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him” (Mark 1, 13). As Claudia Rapp has remarked “only once Jesus had proven himself through this test – just as the people of Israel had to undergo tribulations on their forty-year journey to the promised land – could he begin his active life of preaching and healing”⁴.

We understand that if Christ fled to the desert, so too his followers ought to flee because Christian flight is a sign of fortitude, not of fault. For the true Christian, Christ is the supreme example. The desert was a

² Andrew LOUTH, *The Wilderness of God*, p. 37.

³ Also, the spiritual combat against the demons was an essential component in desert spirituality. In this sense, the *Life of Antony* is among the earliest examples of this battle. For a discussion of this subject, see Eva ELM, Nicole HARTMANN (eds.), *Demons in Late Antiquity. Their Perception and Transformation in Different Literary Genres*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2019; David BRAKKE, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006; Nienke VOS, “Demons Without and Within: The Representation of Demons, the Saint and the Soul in Early Christian Lives, Letters and Sayings”, in: Nienke VOS, Willemien OTTEN (eds.), *Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 159-182), and Sophie SAWICKA-SYKES, “Demonic Anti-Music and Spiritual Disorder in the *Life of Antony*”, in: Siam BHAYRO and Catherine RIDER (eds.), *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period*, Brill, Leiden, 2017; Richard VALANTASIS, “Daemons and Perfecting of the Monk’s Body: Monastic Anthropology, Demonology, and Asceticism”, in: *Semeia*, nr. 58, 1992, pp. 47-49.

⁴ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity. The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 109.

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commitment to a counter-cultural way of life, so that it is a synonymous for the spiritual elevation.

Also, in the early ascetic tradition, the desert again became the place of intense spiritual experience. Monastic life is often understood as consisting in the renunciation of the inhabited world. Therefore, withdrawing from the world is correlated with the desert (gr. *eremos*)⁵. In ascetic literature the desert appears as a continuum of possible ascetic locations defined in terms of distance from the world.

James Goehring observes that its meaning “in monastic literature has as much or more to do with the concept of withdrawal from the space traditionally occupied by civilization as it does with any precise definition based on annual precipitation”⁶. The desert in the ascetic literature has also been described as the “encroaching desert,” in the sense that, whatever the social reality may have been, the ideal came to be associated with the desert⁷.

⁵ Desert literally means “withdrawing, abandonment”, so that the term “hermit” is a derivation. For the theme of the desert in modern scholarship, see Alexander RYRIE, *The Desert Movement. Fresh Perspectives on the spirituality of the Desert*, Canterbury Press, 2011 and Andrew LOUTH, *The Wilderness of God*, Darton-Longman-Todd, London, 2003.

⁶ James E. GOEHRING, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999, p. 81.

⁷ A small index of this encroachment may be seen in the fact the word desert (*eremos*) occurs 11 times in the Life of Antony and 63 times in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. By the fourth century Egyptian monasticism had begun to flourish in the Egyptian deserts and countryside. For more details on desert monasticism, see John WORTLEY, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge University Press, 2019; William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 1993; Daniel CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks. Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 2002; Derwas CHITTY, *Pustia – cetatea lui Dumnezeu. O introducere în studiul monahismului egiptean și palestinian din timpul Imperiului creștin*, Editura Sophia, București, 2010; Susanna ELM, “Virgins of God”. *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 1994; Lucien REGNAULT, *Viața cotidiană a Părinților deșertului în Egiptul secolului IV*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2004; Philip ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 1978; Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Clarendon Press, 1993; Alexander RYRIE, *The Desert Movement. Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert*, Canterbury Press, 2011.

As we will see, the efforts of the monk were closely tied to their geographical settings.

The later (late fifth century) compilation of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* added to this conception of early monasticism. The literary ideal in turn influenced the actual behavior of many of those who set out to live a monastic life. More exactly, what was the authentic significance of the desert?

The desert, or rather various deserts, represent progressive degrees of union with God. And indeed, for monks, the purpose of their journey in the desert was to encounter and experience God in an intimate and personal relationship. According to John Chryssavgis

“the desert is a place of spiritual revolution, not of personal retreat. It is a place of inner protest, not outward peace. It is a place of deep encounter, not of superficial escape. It is a place of repentance, not recuperation. Living in the desert does not mean living without people; it means living for God. The desert hermits never sought to cut off their connections to other people instantly. They sought rather to refine these relationships increasingly”⁸.

Claudia Rapp points out a large and complex range of associations of the desert in early monasticism: first, the desert of Egypt as a specific geographical or typological setting landscape; second, the desert as a state of mind⁹.

The first significance refers to the concrete geographical setting of their ascetic life. In this sense, the desert was understood as a “city” (*polis*). The key passage that evokes this transformation is provided by *Life of Antony*: “He persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens”¹⁰.

⁸ John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008, p. 35.

⁹ In that sense I am heavily influenced by Claudia Rapp in understanding of the desert spirituality. For more details on this subject, see Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, pp. 105-154.

¹⁰ *Life of Antony* 14, trans. by Robert C. Gregg, Paulist Press, 1980, pp. 42-43.

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The transformation of the desert into a city is a powerful image in early monasticism as it appears from *Life of Antony*, *Lausiac History*, *Life of Mary of Egypt*, *Life of Sabas*, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and so on.

And indeed, as Claudia Rapp has remarked “ever since Athanasius coined the phrase in the *Life of Anthony*, the transformation of the desert into a city through a communal monastic endeavor became a hagiographical commonplace and was applied to other desert landscapes”¹¹.

In this context we stress that the transformation of the wilderness into a city was a good opportunity for a great spiritual guidance. Strictly speaking, the transforming of the desert in a city is correlated with the practice of spiritual direction. Briefly, this practice had been a normal part of early desert life. For example, the teaching relationship among the early monks as one of known forms of interaction revealed in Egyptian desert.

Therefore, the need for spiritual guidance is a central theme throughout the Sayings of the Desert Fathers:

”The old men used to say: If you see a young monk climbing up to heaven by his own will, grasp him by the feet and throw him down, for this is to his profit... If a person places his faith in someone else and surrenders himself to the other in full submission, he has no need to attend to the commandment of God, but he needs only to entrust his entire will into the hands of his father. Then he will be blameless before God, for God requires nothing from beginners so much as self-stripping through obedience”¹².

¹¹ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 112.

¹² *Apophthegmata Patrum*, anonymous collection, trans. by Benedicta Ward, p. 158. As we know, the essential relationship in the Egyptian desert was that between an elder and his disciple. There is an extensive literature on spiritual guidance in early monasticism. For pertinent reflections on spiritual guidance in the desert spirituality, see Kallistos WARE, “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, in: Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, pp. 127-152; Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert...*, p. 59; William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Lillian LARSEN, *Pedagogical Parallels: Re-Reading the Apophthegmata Patrum*, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2006; Jean-Claude GUY, “Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers”, in: *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974), pp. 44–51; Irenée HAUSHERR, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publica-

The importance of the spiritual guidance in the eastern spirituality is underlined in almost every ascetic work. And indeed, this theme of the elders, so important in the early Egyptian monasticism, has retained its full significance up to the present day in Eastern spirituality.

Another vital aspect of desert spirituality is its inner tranquility because the desert was synonymous with *apatheia* or *hesychia*. One of the sentences in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers describes a visit by Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria, to the monks of Scetis. Anxious to impress their guest, the monks appealed to Abba Pambo:

“The Abba Theophilus the archbishop once visited Scete. When the brothers were assembled they said to Abba Pambo: «Tell the pope one saying so he might reap benefit in this place». Said the elder to them: «If he reaps no benefit from my silence, nor can he benefit from my speaking»¹³.

Also, in another sentence we find same emphasis: “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»¹⁴. Finally, we recall a strong apophthegma that illustrates very well the ascetic virtue of the silence: “Abba Aio asked Abba Macarius: Tell me a saying. Abba Macarius said to him: Flee from folk; remain in your cell; weep for your sins; take no delight in human conversation – and you are being saved”¹⁵.

These sentences indicate the radical importance attributed by Desert Fathers to silence or inner tranquility¹⁶. To understand the ascetic wisdom of the elders we must always keep in mind that they chose this life as an authentic vocation. Although their ascetic life stood in strong contrast to

tions, 1990; 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

¹³ THEOPHILUS OF ALEXANDRIA 3, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 126.

¹⁴ ARSENIUS 1, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 40.

¹⁵ MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 41, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 192.

¹⁶ For an overview perspective on this subject, see Kallistos WARE, “Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hesychia”, in: Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, pp. 89-110.

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the world they left, it became a source of silence to them. In this context we emphasize that the silence did not mean an absolute embargo on speech for ascetics, but it did mean a radical limitation of speaking. In this sense, a sentence is very suggestive:

“All the days of your life remain a stranger to them, just as you were the first day you came to them – so there be no familiar communication with them. Abba Macarius said to him: «Why, what does familiarity do?» The elder said: «Familiarity is like a great heat wave: when it happens everybody flees from the face of it and it destroys the fruit of the trees». Abba Macarius said: «Is familiarity as dangerous as that?» and Abba Agathon said: «There is no other passion more dangerous than familiarity; it is the begetter of all the passions. The working monk should not indulge in familiar talking even when he is alone in his cell»¹⁷.

Since human language affects the lives of others in such profound ways Desert Fathers valued silence as a steward of both hearing and speech. Of course, inner tranquility requires time, and in that

“timeless space the monks often received grace to control emotions and learn how to respond to conflict without perpetuating conflict. Unless we have the courage to enter our hearts and be pastured by God’s grace and wisdom we will never learn the restraint and respect necessary for living in peace with each other and our neighbors. Silence is the womb of civility and compassion”¹⁸.

All these aspects of desert spirituality send to the our authentic vocation, namely eternal life. In this context, we point out that these early monks do not like to speak about metaphysical matters or about spiritual perfection. Rather, they simply record the daily aspects of their journey, the painful steps along the way, and the gradual stages towards this sublime

¹⁷ AGATHON I, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 54. For pertinent reflections on silence in the desert spirituality, see John WORTLEY, “Hesychia”, in: John WORTLEY, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 48-51.

¹⁸ David G. KELLER, *Oasis of Wisdom. The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 92.

goal of perfection. They recognize that this alone is within our grasp and realisable¹⁹. The desert remains a powerful image of the authentic vocation of the man, so that

“through the desert experience, one learns – or, rather, re-learns – what in the Orthodox hymnography is defined as the reality of matter, «the truth of things». The desert came alive in its monastic dwellers during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, and we have something vital to learn from them about our relationship with God”²⁰.

II. Ascetic Praxis: The Mystery of Human Transformation

As we seen in the earlier section, from a monastic perspective, the desert functioned as a stage for bodily transformation and a contrastive arena for viewing ascetic bodies as part of a monastic practice. In other words, the desert was a positive place for transformation of the body and soul.

The desert monasticism is based on renunciation and movement, briefly on the flight from the body: “Abba John the Cilician, higoumen of Rhaithou, used to say to the brothers: «As we fled from the world my sons, so let us flee from the desires of the flesh»”²¹.

Also, Anthony’s way to paradise was the desert. And indeed, the experience of the desert restored his body to its natural harmony. In this sense, the scene at the desert fortress is an essential moment. When Abba Anthony the Great emerged, not only did he display luminous physical face, but also the state of his soul was one of purity:

“And when they beheld him, they were 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, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The

¹⁹ Cf. John CHRYSOAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers...*, p. 49.

²⁰ John CHRYSOAVGIS, *Creation as Sacrament. Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2019, p. 59.

²¹ JOHN THE EUNUCH 3, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 155.

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state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection... He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature”²².

This profound relationship between physical effort and spiritual progress is fully attested in the early monastic literature. For example, Abba Anthony was able to exist in the “natural state” until the end of his life. Although he lived to be more than one hundred: “He possessed eyes undimmed and sound, and he saw clearly. He lost none of his teeth – they simply had been worn to the gums because of the old man’s great age. He also remained healthy in his feet and hands”²³.

Here Abba Anthony appears in harmony with God as God had intended in the beginning because Anthony’s equilibrium comes from reason, and the reason is Christ. In other words, for Athanasius, becoming like Jesus Christ included taking on the calm unchanging passionlessness of God. As William Harmless has remarked here

”Athanasius has chosen his words carefully: Anthony’s soul is «calm»; his character is «stable»; his senses are «undisturbed»; his face has an imperturbability that radiates joy. This divine passionlessness rendered visible. This is the way Athanasius imagines the deification made possible by Christ”²⁴.

Desert monasticism understood the body to be the ascetic environment for the training of the soul. From this perspective, the spirituality of the desert is part of monastic deification because as Columba Stewart has remarked

”the utter simplicity of the desert landscape itself, the lack of comforts and material distraction, the isolation from the complexity of human society, are all seen to create an atmosphere of simplicity where one may grow in humility and spiritual insight”²⁵.

²² *The Life of Antony* 14, trans. by Robert C. Gregg, Paulist Press, 1990, p. 42

²³ *The Life of Antony* 14, trans. by Robert C. Gregg, Paulist Press, 1990, p. 98.

²⁴ William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature...*, p. 92.

²⁵ Columba STEWART, *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings from the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, Fairacres: SLG Press, 1995, p. 19.

The desert is a powerful image in the Eastern ascetic tradition because it constitutes an important and indispensable stage for spiritual elevation. Through the desert experience, one learns the truth of his life. The desert is a place of beginning, a place where the human person is refined. The monks who withdrew to the desert from the world were searching for a new mode of life. This new way of life was understood as a process of self-knowledge and purification from the passions and desires of the body and soul.

It is known that in spirituality of the desert there is a special link between the control of the body and spiritual progress. And indeed, desert asceticism provides some examples to see monks living a holy life, elders whose bodies were characterized by a divine light. Some apophthegms are extremely conclusive:

”They used to say of Abba Pambo that, as Moses received the likeness of the glory of Adam when his face was glorified, so too did the face of Abba Pambo shine like lightning, and he was like an emperor sitting on his throne. Abba Silvanus and Abba Sisoës were similarly distinguished”²⁶. Another sayings points out same feature: “One of the fathers said that somebody once met Abba Silvanus and, having seen his face and body shining like an angel’s, he fell face down. He used to say that others had acquired this spiritual gift”²⁷. Finally, we recall a Abba Arsenius’s saying: “A brother went to the cell of Abba Arsenius at Scete and, looking through the window, saw the elder as though he were all fire, for the brother was worthy to see (this)”²⁸.

We understand that the monks cultivated holiness through ascetic practice, and the purpose of this ascetic discipline was the spiritual transformation of the body²⁹. In spirituality of the desert, the body was

²⁶ ABBA PAMBO 12, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 263.

²⁷ ABBA SILVANUS 12, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 295.

²⁸ ABBA ARSENIUS 27, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 45.

²⁹ For more details on this subject, see Hannah HUNT, “Desert Teachings on the Body and Asceticism”, in: Hannah HUNT, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the*

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not an insignificant part of the monk but it was an essential component of deification (*theosis*). The end of the practice of ascetic discipline through overcoming the passions is not only to be made like God, but to become God, or a god. Briefly, the goal of ascetic training is deification (*theosis*)³⁰. Deification is a concept which plays an important role in the desert monasticism. According to Paul M. Blowers, the desert's stark purity adumbrated for its monk-residents the holiness of the new creation: "The desert habitat into which monks flooded in the fourth and fifth centuries itself epitomized in its simplicity and stark beauty, an adumbration of the sanctity of the new creation"³¹.

In this context, we must stress that Christ was the supreme instance of divinity enfleshed because only in Christ is the human person saturated with divine presence. From this perspective, desert asceticism offered one the boldest theological articulations of the theological doctrine of the Incarnation. Briefly, the sanctity of the elder is based on this doctrine because Nicaea points out the Christian doctrine of deification³².

As Jonathan Zecher has remarked the monk "spend his life cutting them and taking on, little by little, a heavenly lifestyle. But this change is the work of deification, of becoming in some sense divine"³³.

Strictly speaking, the ultimate purpose of the monastic discipline was to acquire "heavenly citizenship" (Phil 3, 20) because the monk is

Spiritual in the Late Antique Era, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 47-62, and Patricia COX MILLER, "Subtle Bodies", in: Patricia COX MILLER, *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, pp. 116-130.

³⁰ Deification is a term which was to have an enormous important dimension in the Eastern theology. For the theme of the deification in Eastern theology, see especially Alexis TORRANCE, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ*, Oxford University Press, 2020; Norman RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2006, and Mark EDWARDS, Elena ENE-VASILESCU, *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, Routledge, 2016.

³¹ Paul M. BLOWERS, *Drama of Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 328.

³² Cf. Daniel LEMENI, "You Can Become All Flame: Deification in Early Egyptian Monasticism", in: John ARBLASTER and Rob FAESEN (eds.), *Mystical Doctrines of Deification. Case Studies in the Christian Tradition*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 16- 34.

³³ Jonathan L. ZECHER, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 173.

understood as a “foreign” (*xenos*). By the way, in the second century an anonymous letter written to a Roman official called Diognetus describes the authentic Christian in these words:

”Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like that of aliens (*paroikoi*); they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to everything as if they were foreigners (*xenoi*). For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country”³⁴.

And indeed, ascetic life can be understood as a spiritual way through which the monk gain the eternal life. The following story is indicative of the monks’ awareness of the theology of deification and their understanding of the newness of life regained by the resurrection:

“One of the Fathers recounted of a certain Abba Paul, originally from Lower Egypt but residing in the Thebaid, that he would hold asps, snakes, and scorpions in his hands (Lk, 10, 19) and cut them in two. The brothers prostrated themselves before him saying: «Tell us what kind of activity you undertook so that you acquired this spiritual gift». «Forgive me, fathers, he said, if one acquires purity, everything is subject to him as it was to Adam when he was in Paradise before he contravened the commandment» (Gen, 1, 28)”³⁵.

The culmination of monastic discipline is a state of return to humanity’s Adam. In other words, the monks saw in the ascetic life an opportunity to regain the primordial state of Adam. Briefly, desert monasticism is connected with the restoration of the monk’s natural condition. This natural status expresses the passing from the flesh to spirit, so that the

³⁴ *From a letter to Diognetus* 5.5. The Holy Fathers take as symbols of the Christian way, the two Old Testament figures of Abraham and Moses. Let us reminder that Abraham journeys from his familiar home into an unknown country, and Moses progresses from light into darkness. And so it proves to be for each one who follows the spiritual way (cf. Kallistos WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 2018, pp. 20-21).

³⁵ ABBA PAUL OF THEBES, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 271.

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monk is a new sort of human person, namely a holy man³⁶ rather than a bodily human. And indeed, this monastic emphasis on the attainment of bodily incorruptibility through the spiritual exercises provided the general background for desert monasticism:

“Abba Agathon was asked: «Which is the greater: physical labor or interior vigilance?» and the elder said: «A person is like a tree; accordingly, physical labor is the leaves, interior vigilance the fruit. Given that which is written: Every tree not bearing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire (Mt 7, 19), it is clear that our entire concern is with the fruit, meaning the vigilance of the mind; but there is also need of the protection and ornamentation the leaves provide: there are physical labor»³⁷.

In this context, we stress that authentic monasticism is a struggle not against the body but for the body, so that ascetic life has a positive goal: it seeks not to impair but to transform the body. The idea is very well expressed in one of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*:

„Abba Issac visited Abba Poemen and saw him pouring a little water over his feet. As he was quite familiar with him, he said to him: «How is it that some used severity and treated their bodies harshly?» Abba Poemen said to him: «We were not taught to slay the body but to slay the passions»³⁸.

³⁶ There is an ample literature on the holy man in late antiquity. In this sense, see especially Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self. The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Brepols, 2017; Rafat KOSINSKI, *Holiness and Power: Constantinopolitan Holy Men and Authority in 5th Century*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2016, and Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, 2013, and Graham ANDERSON, *Sage, Saint and Sophist: Holy Men and Their Associates in the Early Roman Empire*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 112.

³⁷ ABBA AGATHON 8, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 55. For more details on this subject, see Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity. Cognition and Discipline*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³⁸ ABBA POEMEN 183, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 257-258.

Therefore, the spirituality of the desert insisted on the need to control the body to find communion with God. And indeed, body and soul were to be embraced, with a radical ascetic discipline. But this ascetic training is not negative, but positive. In this sense, we recall Abba Anthony's example that when he emerged from his isolation outside, we find that:

„His friends were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, being neither too puffed up from lack of exercise nor too emaciated from fasting and warfare against the demons. He was just as they had known him prior to his retreat into the desert... He was altogether balanced, just as one guided by reason and abiding in a natural state”³⁹.

In fact, Saint Athanasius in his work even offers us more details: „His eyes were undimmed and quite sound; and he saw clearly. He had lost none of his teeth; they had simply become worn down to the gums because of the old man's great age. He remained strong in both feet and hands”⁴⁰.

There is no dualistic hatred of the body here because asceticism has not subverted Antony's physicality but restored it to its “natural state”, that is to say, to its true and proper condition as intended by God.

In other words, the ascetic life was an instantiation of Christ's own life in each elder through monastic training. Thus, the early monks offered a powerful glimpse of a humanity renewed in and by Christ. Briefly, the Incarnation played a positive role in the early ascetic tradition. As Peter Brown has noticed, it was in the desert monasticism that the transformative implications of the Incarnation for human beings were put into practice: “Through the Incarnation of Christ, the Highest God reached down to make even the body capable of transformation”⁴¹.

Generally, in the early monasticism of Late Antiquity, the body was seen to be problematic, not because it was a body, but because it was not a body of plenitude. Therefore, ascetic labor does not reject the body because the human person – body and soul – is created to become a dwelling place

³⁹ *Life of Antony* 14.

⁴⁰ *Life of Antony* 93.

⁴¹ Peter BROWN, *Body and Society*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, p. 31.

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for God. According to Caroline T. Schroeder⁴², the ascetic struggle between flesh and spirit, cultivating physical purity results in a certain level of spiritual purity. The flesh may even be made spirit.

Thus, the ascetic discipline led the monks toward personal transformation, toward the realization of holiness. No story illustrates the profound link between holiness and the ascetic life more clearly than the sentence of Abba Antony the Great:

“Three of the fathers were in the habit of going to the blessed Abba 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»⁴³.

III. Conclusions

The spirituality of the desert was intended to create a new humanity, a humanity open to Christ. Briefly, the desert is a place through which the redeemed humanity could be accomplished. From this perspective, the desert becomes a place of holiness and life because it is an invitation to transfiguration. Therefore, the desert was, on a profound level, always more than simply place because it was a spiritual way. In other words, the desert is a necessary stage on the spiritual journey. In the early ascetic tradition, sands of the desert resembled the unending search of these monks for “abundant life” (John 10, 10) and “a living spring of water” (John 4, 14).

The Desert Fathers realize that spiritual growth and insight come from renunciation and they are willing to abide his time. In order to walk, one must take the first step, and in order to swim, one must throw oneself into the water. It is the same with the ascetic life. We are all wending our way along. Each tends to experience himself as the center of it all. But seen in perspective, we are but pilgrims, each, on the path.

⁴² Caroline T. SCHROEDER, *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2007, p. 110.

⁴³ ABBA ANTONY 27, in: *Give Me a World. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 37.