

# Monks and “Others”: Acceptance of Diversity and Ascetic Tolerance

Daniel LEMENI

**Daniel LEMENI**

West University of Timisoara  
daniel.lemeni@e-uvt.ro

## Abstract

Although ecumenism is a 20th century concept that cannot transposed in the spirituality of the desert, in this paper, I intend to explore the “ecumenical” attitude of the Desert Fathers, that is their relationship of openness and acceptance towards “the other” (laymen, philosophers) generally, and towards religious alterity (pagans), especially. This attitude of the Desert Fathers is welcomed in our times, a period in which we see a tendency of increase in fundamentalist movements from the broader world.

The spirituality of the desert can be an essential landmark for our restless and troubled lives. A possible answer for the modern revival of interest in desert monasticism is doubtless associated with a search for purpose in the daily grind or frenzied race of urban life. For many, pursuing ascetic praxis of the Desert Fathers in a competitive world invites to the prospect of penetrating the surface of mere survival in order to perceive the meaning and mystery of life in abundance.

Monastic life was a lonely life, nevertheless it was not so far removed from our life today that these tales and sayings of those who tried to live that life do not have some very useful things to say to those who are trying to live the Christ-life in “the world”, even in this twenty-first century.

## Keywords

The Desert Fathers, monasticism, ascetic tolerance, *Apophthegmata Patrum*

## I. Introduction

In our days we see an increase in fundamentalism throughout the world. In this context of increasingly non-tolerant attitudes, I would like to draw attention to the monastic tolerance of the Desert Fathers as expressed in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

In this sense, I will explore the Desert Fathers' openness and acceptance of *the other* (laymen, philosophers) generally, and towards those of other religions (pagans), especially. As we will see, The Desert Fathers showed a great openness towards laypeople and a large tolerance towards people of other faiths. They thus taught us a very simple and yet profound lesson: our soul blossoms when we open towards "the Other".

## II. Monks and "Others": Love, Humility and Monastic Tolerance in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is commonly viewed as a series of sayings and stories about desert monks, individuals who withdrew physically from their local communities and very often from human society as a whole. Properly understood, this statement may stand, but its strictness could lead to misconceptions. The figure of the monk as an intolerant hater of the world, unfortunately often supported by evidence from monastic literature itself, is a wrong imagine of the authentic monk. Far from being standard-bearers of fanaticism, the Desert Fathers appear rather as "icons of sublime love":

"There is a temptation for contemporary readers to romanticize the early ascetics. Discernment – a virtue highly prized among the desert elders – needs to be exercised, so that the true meaning of spiritual authority may be discovered. Eccentricities unraveled and illusions unmasked, the desert dwellers always remain fully human. The intensity of their struggle revealed the love for their neighbor as integrity of their heart, and the love for God as the

intention of their life. So it is not so much the great fast or the impressive feat that mattered in the desert but the principle of love"<sup>1</sup>.

The desert wisdom can be characterized as an early form of deep longing for unity, a desire born not only from Christ's prayer for unity in the Gethsemane (Jn 17, 21), but also from the commandment to love our neighbour (Mt 22, 39).

From this perspective, the Desert Fathers' openness manifests itself as acceptance of diversity and tolerance towards "others". The *Apophthegmata Patrum* presents as the perspective with which the Desert Fathers engaged in their broader relationship with religious otherness.

Indeed, the renunciation from the ordinary world realized by withdrawal in the desert leads to tolerance and acceptance of difference rather than to rejection and contempt of others. Due to their holiness the Desert Fathers interacted peacefully and openly with people of other beliefs and with philosophers. Thus, as we will see, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* drew attention to such interactions because the desert elders' detachment from the world, promoted the practice of monastic tolerance<sup>2</sup>.

In this section, I want to focus on the formative relations between monks and those *outside* their immediate circle of disciples. As we know, early monks were solitaries but they conceived their ascetic life as being in relationship with God, with oneself and with "others". The early monks left the world in order to find solitude and seek holiness in the desert: "When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God saying:

---

<sup>1</sup> John CHRYSAGIS, "From Egypt to Palestine: Discerning a Thread of Spiritual Direction", in John BEHR, Andrew LOUTH, Dimitri CONOMOS (eds.), *Abba. The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 2003, p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> On religious tolerance in Antiquity, see: Peter GARNESEY, "Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity", in: *Studies in Church History* 21 (1984), pp. 1-27; for the issue of religious tolerance in *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see especially Nicholas MARINIDES, "Religious Toleration in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2/2012), pp. 235-268, and Fabrizio VECOLI, "The Other in the Spirituality of the Desert Fathers", in: Katell BERTHELOT, Matthias 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.

«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>3</sup> and “When the same (person) had retired into the solitary life he prayed again, offering the same prayer, and he heard a voice saying to him: «Arsenius, take flight, keep silent and maintain *hesychia*, for these are the roots of sinlessness»”<sup>4</sup>. Generally speaking, monasticism was defined essentially as withdrawal from the secular world. A story told of Abba Arsenius develops this need for the permanent flight of the monk:

“Somebody said to the blessed Arsenius: «How is it that we have gained nothing from so much education and wisdom, while these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired such virtues?» Abba Arsenius said to him: «For our part we have gained nothing from the world’s education, but these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired the virtues by their own labors»”<sup>5</sup>.

The world is associated with the values (pleasures, comfort, passions and so on) that the Desert Fathers wanted to escape, and withdrawal into the desert, so prominent in early Egyptian monasticism, is connected with the asceticism and spiritual life.

Here there is a deeply-rooted paradox associated with this “flight”. A tension thus arises, an inwardness here is connected with spiritual expansion, with the social relations which the Desert Fathers so vividly embody. It is in this light that the sayings and stories of the elders are of such vital concern to us. If in the new life of Christ the dividing walls are abolished, the cause of the division cannot be other than our iron-Ego, the shattering of which is the supreme task of the ascetic life. More exactly, as John Wortley has remarked,

<sup>3</sup> ARSENIUS 1, in: *Give me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Wortley, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014, p. 40. All quotes from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are from this translation.

<sup>4</sup> ARSENIUS 2 (trans. Wortley), p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> ARSENIUS 2 (trans. Wortley), p. 41. Similarly, OR 14, THEODORE OF Pherme 5, SISOES 3, MOSES 7, ANTONY 10 and 11. Abba ANTONY 33. This monastic perspective is confirmed by several sayings: Abba ARSENIUS 5, 9; Abba AGATHON 8, 9; Abba APPHY; Abba KARION 1; Abba POEMEN 44, 60, and Abba SARMATAS 2.

“the monk was on the horns of a dilemma for he was subject to two conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, he was constantly being encouraged to flee from folk: to live silently in isolation... And, being human, he was bound by the Second Commandment that stands next to the First and Great Commandment: «and you shall love your neighbor as yourself», for «there is no other commandment greater than these; on these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets» (Mt 22, 40); compare Paul: «The Whole Law is fulfilled in one word, even this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself» (Gal 5, 14)”<sup>6</sup>.

Community means neighbor, and neighbors. For Jesus Christ, “Love your neighbor” is not secondary to loving God; it’s concomitant<sup>7</sup>. This is the ascetic commandment: love your neighbor. According to Rowan Williams

“love depersonalizes when it treats the neighbor as significant primarily in relation to myself; it is rightly directed toward the unique reality of the person when it sees the other in relation to God – as, in the proper sense, symbolic, a living sign of the creator, irreducible either to generalities or to the other’s significance and usefulness for me”<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, the Desert Fathers were essentially “solitaries”, but they showed a great openness towards “others”, both to non-monastics (laymen, philosophers) and even to religious alterity (pagans). In what follows will further analyse this paradox pointed out by John Wortley in terms of love, humility and monastic tolerance. As we know, often early Christianity was

<sup>6</sup> John WORTLEY, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tim VIVIAN, *The Sayings and Stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Rowan WILLIAMS, “The Theological World of the Philokalia”, in: Brock BINGAMAN, Bradley NASSIF, *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 104.

portrayed in terms of intolerance and violence<sup>9</sup>, and early monks was defined as temple destroyers, madmen and fanatics<sup>10</sup>. This paradigm of intolerance is contradicted by Desert Fathers, the most prominent examples of the early monasticism. As we will see, the Desert Fathers interacted peacefully with non-monastic audience (laypeople, philosophers), religious alterity (pagans), and ecclesiastical hierarchy. This relationship between early monks and people of other beliefs can be conceptualized in terms of love and non-judgment.

First of all, we must say that a key monastic virtue for desert monks was love and respect. As Abba Apollo says

“«we must venerate the brothers who come [by]. It is not them we venerate but God; for when you saw your brother, you saw the Lord your God. We received this from Abraham», he said, «and when you receive [brothers] constrain them to take some refreshment. We have learnt this from Lot who constrained the angels [to enter and eat] [Gen 19.3]”<sup>11</sup>. Also, Antony the Great described this monastic perspective in the following words: “Life and death depend on our neighbor: for if we win over our brother, we win over God, but if we offend our brother, we sin against Christ”<sup>12</sup>.

The Desert Fathers knew that the lack of a personal conscience of relationship with “other” is the biggest obstacle that we can put in the path of holiness. This means that our salvation rests on our personal relationship with “other” according to this Antony’s apophthegm. For the spiritual life,

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Edward GIBBON, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols., Modern Library, New York, 1900, Ramsay MACMULLEN, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984, and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997. For more details on this subject, see H. A. DRAKE, “Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance”, in: *Past and Present* 153 (1996), pp. 3-36.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. William HARMLESS, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, pp. 466–469. For more details on this monastic tolerance in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see Paul SILADI, “The ‘Ecumenism’ of the Desert Fathers. The Relationship with the Other in Apophthegmata Patrum”, in: *Review of Ecumenical Studies (RES)*, no. 11 (1), pp. 46-57.

<sup>11</sup> APOLLO 3 (trans. Wortley), pp. 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> ANTONY 9 (trans. Wortley), p. 32.

as an exclusive relationship with God in the world, is lived most intensely in that bond with one’s fellow human beings which animates society and is the fount of its existence. Ever since God entered into our world through the Incarnation, it has been impossible for us to participate in His Life if the other person has no place in our own.

Moreover, we understand that the intensity and rigor of their asceticism revealed the love, charity and acceptance of diversity. It did not lead to intolerance, violence and fanaticism. Thus, despite their ascetic rigor, the Desert Fathers manifested a great compassion and love for the weaknesses and faults of others. So in the desert, the principle of love was considered as more important than ascetic discipline: “Abba Agathon used to say: «If it were possible for me to find a leper, to give him my body and take on his, I would do it gladly; for that is perfect love»”<sup>13</sup>, and

“They also used to say of him (Abba Agathon) that, coming once into the city to sell [his] wares, he found a foreigner lying sick in the square with nobody to care for him. The elder stayed with him. He rented a cell, paying the rent with his handiwork, and disbursed the rest for the needs of the sick man. For four months he stayed – untill the sick man was cured, then the elder returned to his cell in peace”<sup>14</sup>.

These examples illustrate that the Desert Fathers were not indifferent monks, withdrawn into themselves in the isolation of their cells and only occupied with their personal holiness. On contrary, with few exceptions, monks are not portrayed as completely isolated. The relationship between monks and laity is a recurring theme in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. According to Graham Gould, “the Desert Fathers recognized certain attitudes towards others as basic to the monastic life.”<sup>15</sup> John Colobos said:

<sup>13</sup> AGATHON 26 (trans. Wortley), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> AGATHON 27 (trans. Wortley), p. 58. Similarly, see ANTONY 9, ARSENIUS 11, AGATHON 4, ELIJAH 3, EVAGRIUS 6, MACARIUS THE GREAT 32, MATOES 2, MOSES 2, POEMEN 74, 92, 109, 116 and 156. For more details on this theme, see John WORTLEY, “Hospitality and Neighbourliness”, in: John WORTLEY, *Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, pp. 98-115, and Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, “The Call of the Desert: Purity of Heart and Power in Early Christian Monasticism”, in: *Pro Ecclesia* VII, 2 (1998), pp. 216-234.

<sup>15</sup> Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 92.

“«It is not possible to build the house from top to bottom, but [only] from the foundation up». They said to him: «What is this saying?» The elder replied: «The foundation is one’s neighbor to be won over and he ought to come first; for on him hang all the commandments of Christ» [Mt 22, 40]”<sup>16</sup>. This apophthegm explicitly teaches that any spiritual progress in the ascetic life is completely dependent on a monk’s attitude to his neighbor<sup>17</sup>.

So, how to interpret the contacts and encounters between ascetics and secular people in the *Apophthegmata*? How did Desert Fathers saw the relation of monks to those living the world? Briefly, how do Desert Fathers treated laity? What types of relationships can one identify in the desert? Isolation? Separation? Dereliction? Refusal and rejection? Or, on contrary, charity, nonjudgment, and forgiveness? Flexibility and tolerance? Acceptance of the other’s difference?

First of all, it should be said that the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* records different types of monks’ relationships with *the other*, oscillating from the advice to deny any heretic one’s friendship (Abba Matoes)<sup>18</sup>, to acceptance of religious difference. The latter is illustrated for example by the gesture of Abba Macarius who buried a pagan priest<sup>19</sup> and who blessed a pagan<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, in a well-known apophthegm we can see how Saint Macarius the Great understood the need for love and non-judgment<sup>21</sup> in the relationships

<sup>16</sup> JOHN COLOBOS 39 (trans. Wortley), p. 140.

<sup>17</sup> For more details on this subject, see Graham GOULD, “The Monk and his Neighbor”, in Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, pp. 88-106.

<sup>18</sup> Abba Matoes exhorts a brother to “have no relationship with a heretic” (MATOES 11, trans. Wortley, p. 201). Similarly, AGATHON 5, SISOES 25 and 48, Amma THEODORA 4, and THEODORE OF PHERME 4

<sup>19</sup> MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 38 (trans. Wortley), p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 39 (trans. Wortley), p. 192. Similarly, EPIPHANIUS 12 or OLYMPIUS 1.

<sup>21</sup> Non-judgment was a main feature in the ascetic teaching of the desert fathers. Again and again, one finds a radical application of the New Testament injunction not to judge (Cf. Matt 7,1–5; Rom 14,4.10–13; 1 Cor 4, 5; Jas 4,11–12; etc.). This can be illustrated in several striking sayings (cf. MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 32; MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 2; AMMONAS 9 and 10, and so on). This teaching of non-judgment has been analyzed sufficiently by others, so that I will only quote the words of Graham Gould in summary: “Prayer for the sinner; consideration of your own faults; kindness for the sake of repentance; leniency for the sake of allowing a sinner back into the community



with other people (regardless of their religion and creed), although not all of his disciples understood this.

“Once, Macarius was travelling to the mountain of Nitria; he told his disciple to go ahead and as the brother did so, he saw a pagan priest running, so the brother called out to him shouting: «Hey, hey demon, where are you running to?» The priest is incensed by this, so he turns back and beats disciple «leaving him half dead, then took his club and ran on». On his way he encounters Macarius, who says to him «I hope you are well, I hope you are well, you who toil». Being treated with such welcoming candour and love the priest wants to become a monk, thus he grasped his feet saying: «I will not let you go unless you make me a monk». Coming to where the [disciple] monk was they picked him up and brought him into the church of the Mountain. [The brothers] were astounded when they saw the priest with [Abba Macarius] and they made [the priest] a monk; many pagans became Christians through him. Abba Macarius used to say: «A harsh word makes the good bad but a good [word] benefits everybody»”<sup>22</sup>.

This story compares two different attitudes and unequivocally suggests which of the two is the best. The love for one’s neighbour, so cherished by the Desert Fathers, has no limits of any kind and leads naturally to pursuing the unity Christ prayed for. This pursuit needs to ignore the fractures caused by sin, heresy or anything else. Macarius the Egyptian,

---

where (despite his sin) he really wants to be—these, not in judgment, are the ways to respond to sin”. (GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, p. 131). I might simply add that, as in the case of the examples of specifically inter-religious interaction examined above, non-judgment does not evince an *indifference* to one’s neighbor or a relativizing of sin, but a belief that the best way to handle problems was through love.

<sup>22</sup> MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 39 (trans. Wortley), p. 192. Also, a typical attitude about of how the Desert Fathers related to religious alterity is found in a sentence of Abba Olympius. In this sentence, dedicated to the meeting pagans, we see how Abba Olympius even accommodates a group of pagan priests without making too much of it (cf. Olympius 1).

like Jesus, showed compassion to sinners; he did not despise them or avoid them, he simply loved them. In this edifying tale Macarius showed just love to all (including for pagans and heretics) helping all who encountered him. It was not by chance that Macarius was named “a god on earth” (*epigeios theós*): “They used to say of Abba Macarius the Great that he became «a god on earth» for just as God overshadows the earth, so was Abba Macarius overshadowing shortcomings, as though not seeing what he saw and not hearing what he heard”<sup>23</sup>. In my opinion, this apophthegm sums up the desert wisdom.

Abba Macarius is a holy monk who shows us the way. His charitable greeting surprised the pagan priest. It seems that the priest had become used to Christian monks coming to him, insulting him. The priest, Macarius realized, had a desire to do what was good, but because he was mistaken about what that good was, he grew weary trying to be good. Christians coming to the priest, insulting him, only made him push on as he had been trained by his pagan faith; he had no reason to think that Christians had anything to offer him. But because St. Macarius offered him the peace which he sought, the priest was willing to listen to the old man and become his disciple. Macarius knew he had to show his care for the priest. And so Macarius offered him the love and compassion he needed, showing that, indeed, through a good word, people can be turned around for the better. Macarius was righteous; his ascetic labors were not in vain. He truly understood the compassion and tolerance he needed to show others.

We understand that the religious antagonism between desert monks and pagans is replaced and surpassed by an attitude of acceptance and by toleration of difference. This experience of love and tolerance defines the Desert Fathers’ perspective in particular, and of early monasticism in general.

Indeed, we should conceive of the religious tolerance of the Desert Fathers as a spiritual principle of their life. As a spiritual principle of existence this tolerance has a single purpose: to transform the monk into a humble person. Love as a principle of life is an image of the life to

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 32 (trans. Wortley), p. 188. Similarly: “The Abba Agathon said: ... «the benefit of my brother is a fruitful undertaking»” (AGATHON 17, trans. Wortley, p. 57).

come – it becomes unbearable to the person who does not love. Abba Lot, for example, counters the Origenist propaganda of a visiting monk by forbidding the discussion of theology but treating the monk himself with every kindness and consideration:

“One of the elders came to Abba Lot at the small marsh of Arsinoe and begged him for a cell – which he accorded him. But the elder was sick and Abba Lot tended him; then if visitors came to visit Abba Lot, he would have them visit the sick elder too. [The elder] however began speaking sayings of Origen to them. Abba Lot was disturbed, saying: «Perhaps the fathers will think that we are like that too?» – but, because of the commandment [cf. Mt. 25, 35] he was afraid to throw him out of the place. Abba Lot got up and went to Abba Arsenius and told him about the elder. Said Abba Arsenius to him: «Do not chase him away but say to him: Here, eat the gifts of God and drink what you like; only do not say that thing any more, and if he is willing, he will reform. If he is unwilling to reform himself, of his own free will he is going to ask to withdraw from the place and the initiative will not have come from you». Abba Lot went off and did so”<sup>24</sup>.

The monastic literature of late antique Egypt preserves a number of stories that follow the same pattern. One of the most beautiful apophthegms is an account of Abba Macarius taking a walk through the desert. He finds the skull of a pagan priest and communicates with him; the spirit of the priest tells him that the sole comfort they have in hell is when Macarius is praying for the damned:

“Abba Macarius said: Once when I was walking around in the desert I found the skull of a dead person lying on the ground. When I prodded it with my palm-staff the skull spoke to me. I said to it: «Who are you then?» The skull answered me: «I was the high priest of the idols and of the pagans who inhabited this

---

<sup>24</sup> LOT 1 (trans. Wortley), p. 174.

place; but you are the spirit-bearing Abba Macarius. Whenever you feel compassion for those in chastisement and pray for them they are a little relieved». The elder said to him: «What is the relief and what the chastisement?» [The skull] said to him: «There is as much fire beneath us as the sky is distant from the earth [Is 55, 9] and we are located in the midst of the fire, head to feet. Nobody can see another face-to-face because the face of each one is glued to the back of another. So when you pray for us, one has a partial glimpse of the face another; that is the relief».<sup>25</sup>

This story is very significant because it shows us that the desert monks practiced religious tolerance and non-judgment to the highest degree. It is no exaggeration to say that Macarius' tolerant attitude expressed in this apophthegm is one of the most spectacular in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* because his forgiveness goes beyond any boundaries. If we love a person, we do not condemn his actions and his words. Condemnation or contempt is a way of demonstrating our superiority to other people. According to Stelios Ramfos,

“in order to co-exist with our fellow human beings, we need to fit in with them, to accommodate them. A soul which conceives of itself as condemnatory cannot share its space with another and as such cannot forgive. The value of the soul lies in its ability to accommodate, and its lack of value in the unforgivingness of detraction. Forgiveness is our spiritual openness, our power to welcome in a friendly way, not our pronouncing innocent. It is ourselves, not the other person, that forgiveness relates to and pronounces innocent – forgiveness broadens us inwardly. In censuring others we narrow ourselves in an asphyxiating way. Our psychological space cannot tolerate anyone else; hence it acts in an exclusive manner. If I do not forgive I must reduce to nothing and if I reduce to nothing I must start with God, in order

---

<sup>25</sup> MACARIUS 38 (trans. Wortley), p. 191.

to pass immediately to the "intolerable" fellow human being beside me and finally end up with myself"<sup>26</sup>.

Condemnation is our refusal to forgive and be forgiven – our refusal to accept the other person. The nobility of the monk – and of every person – lies in his willingness to permit, to accommodate and to forgive. The alternative is vulgarity, meanness and poverty. This is not simply about a higher ethos; it is about a different level of relationship with the other person.

The Desert Fathers knew this, so they manifested a great meanness, love and charity in their relationships to broader world. In other words, their tolerance meant unambiguously acknowledging difference without wanting to get rid of that difference by means of violence and coercion. As Nicholas Marinides has remarked, the Desert Fathers "held to a certain orthodoxy and sought to share that orthodoxy with others. But they choose to do this through peaceful rather than violent means"<sup>27</sup>.

The Egyptian monks did not, of course, withdraw solely in order to practice religious toleration and interaction, but it was a corollary of their entire ascetic theory and praxis. Therefore, their great religious tolerance was a consequence of their proverbial holiness. In this context it is important to reiterate that the desert wisdom can be understood as a love to all, forgiveness, humility, and a great tolerance and acceptance of difference. The essence of this monastic holiness is encapsulated in the words of Abba Matoes:

"A brother asked Abba Matoes: «What am I to do? – for my tongue is troubling me. When I go among folk I am unable to restrain it: I pass judgment on them in every good deed and am reproving them; what am I to do?» In response the elder said: «If cannot restrain yourself, run away and be alone – for this is a

<sup>26</sup> Stelios RAMFOS, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness. Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass., 2000, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> N. MARINIDES, *Religious Toleration in the Aphrothegmata Patrum*, p. 237.

weakness. *He who lives among brothers ought not to be a square peg but a round one, so he can turn toward everyone.*»<sup>28</sup>.

Desert monasticism was not a world closed in itself, a kind of ascetic monad, but, on the contrary, a world open toward “the other” in which monks had a wide interaction with various categories of people, including philosophers. Indeed, monks were not reluctant to discuss with philosophers. As we know, Abba Antony earned an great reputation for his wisdom. So, when some philosophers came to discuss with him, he dazzled them with his command of Neoplatonic philosophy, lecturing them on the origin of the soul and its natural state. He also gave them an apologia for Christianity, chiding them, as pagans, for worshiping creation rather than the Creator and for confusing verbal dexterity with wisdom. The philosophers left amazed by his monastic wisdom<sup>29</sup>. In short, the desert monks were not reluctant towards anyone, from any social or professional category.

So there are many reasons to conclude that the spirituality of the desert is deeply connected with Desert Fathers’ disponibility to relate to anyone. This point is well expressed by Abba Apollo: “We must venerate the brothers who come [by]. It is not them we venerate but God; for when you saw your brother, you saw the Lord your God”<sup>30</sup>. Abba Apollo’s attitude is relevant as an example for us.

The Desert Fathers knew that the lack of a personal commitment to relationships with “others” is the biggest obstacle that we can put in the path of holiness. The most profound ascetic teaching about the importance of the relationship between a monk and his neighbor we find in an Abba Antony’s apophthegm: “Life and death depend on our neighbor: for if we win over our brother, we win over God, but if we offend our brother, we sin against Christ”<sup>31</sup>. We understand that a monk reaps a spiritual harvest from his attitudes and actions towards others. This means that our salvation

---

<sup>28</sup> MATOES 13 (trans. Wortley), p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> For this encounter of Antony the Great with those philosophers who visited him in the desert, see *The Life of Antony (Vita Antonii)* 72-80.

<sup>30</sup> APOLLO 3 (trans. Wortley), pp. 73-74.

<sup>31</sup> ANTONY 9 (trans. Wortley), p. 32. The teaching of the Gospel is categorical here (cf. Mt 25, etc), and the elders echo it faithfully.

rests on our personal relationship with “other”. For the spiritual life, as an exclusive relationship with God in the world, is lived most intensely in that bond with one’s fellow human beings which animates society. Ever since God entered into our world through the Incarnation, it has been impossible for us to participate in His Life if the other person has no place in our lives. A tension thus arises: inwardness is connected with spiritual expansion, with the social relations which the Desert Fathers so vividly embody. It is in this light that the sayings and stories of the elders are of such vital concern to us. If in the new life of Christ the dividing walls are abolished, the cause of the division cannot be other than our iron-Ego. The supreme task of the ascetic life is thus the overcoming of this Ego<sup>32</sup>.

According to Father John Behr “one cannot escape one’s duty toward other children of God by running off to lead a solitary life. At the very least your handiwork must produce enough profit to feed yourself *and any other person in need*, for that person is your neighbor and your neighbor is Christ himself”<sup>33</sup>.

Briefly, their geographical isolation and withdrawal into the desert did not prevent the Desert Fathers to manifest an attitude of openness to “Other”. The relationship is not the end product of this desert wisdom. It is an intrinsic part of it, but implications of participating in it are so demanding that the Desert Fathers pushed life to its absolute limits. Again and again the voice of charity and tolerance prevails: non-judgment, avoid the extremes of too much or too little. Of course this comes back to a matter of individual choice, hence such sayings as: “If you have a heart you can be saved”<sup>34</sup> and We do “not need anything other than an alert intelligence”<sup>35</sup>. The Desert Fathers were not perfect, but they reflected the failures and imperfections of individuals striving toward perfection.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Stelios RAMFOS, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness. Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> John BEHR, “Introduction”, in: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by John Wortley, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> PAMBO 10 (trans. Wortley), p. 263.

<sup>35</sup> POEMEN 135 (trans. Wortley), p. 250.

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the wisdom of the desert involves opening up into the integrity of life and caring for others. It includes participating in the community of love, practising openness and sharing. This experience can be defined as Desert Fathers' monastic tolerance. In this context, it is important to stress that this monastic tolerance is clearly different from the modern concept of tolerance: "The tolerance shown by the desert fathers, however, does not correspond with the concept familiar today to citizens of liberal democracies. In modern use, tolerance often means a certain relativism in religious matters that allows people to get along"<sup>36</sup>.

This modern pseudo-tolerance has no place in the spirituality of the desert. Monastic tolerance is thus better understood as compassion and openness for others. The Desert Fathers chose to share their monastic tolerance and acceptance of difference through their love and humility, in other words, through their holy life.

Perhaps we love the Desert Fathers because in their attitude, there are qualities and virtues we love. In their lives, we see love practiced. Thus, we become confident that desert wisdom is not just theory, but rather an expression of the way to holiness. Further more, desert wisdom shows that holiness is attainable. Early desert monks are excellent examples of what humans can be.

The Desert Fathers taught us a very simple yet profound lesson: our soul blossoms when we open towards "the Other". In this context, we stress that the spirituality of the desert is of interest for us not just as a fossilized relic of religious history with survivals in our own very comfortable age, but also as a choice, an election of life, open to the spiritually minded person of today.

---

<sup>36</sup> N. MARINIDES, *Religious Toleration in the Apophthegmata Patrum*, p. 237.