

The Desert Tradition

Father Charles Talar, S.T.D.

January 14, 2006

Among the sayings of the Desert Fathers we find:

One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor.

In all honesty, it difficult to know what to do with such an uncompromising literalism.

One could, of course, choose to regard it as the act of an uncompromising literalist—and, having so categorized it, dismiss it as an inadequate mode of gospel interpretation. Perhaps even characterize Serapion as a species of fanatic, an extremist and therefore not to be taken seriously.

And yet, there is the lingering impact of the seriousness with which this monk heeds the gospel message and tries to put it into practice. Even the categorization of “fanatic” cannot turn aside entirely the suggestion that our own relation to that gospel message may well be too comfortable, too lukewarm.

In a study entitled *A Passion for Truth* (1973), Abraham Heschel examined the life and thought of Reb Mendl of Kotzk, whose uncompromising views on religion and on human nature invited comparison with those of Soren Kierkegaard. Heschel concluded that such religious figures did not invite strict imitation. But they do function to remind us of the depth and seriousness of their religious commitment and, on that level, challenge us to examine and judge our own responses.

Let me suggest that, although the early desert monks did indeed invite strict imitation during the period of the early church during which they flourished, and while they still attract imitators even today (as we'll see), for us they can function in much the same way as Reb Mendl and Kierkegaard did for Abraham Heschel: as challenges to our own comfortable living out of the Christian message, as reminders that “much is required of those to whom much has been given.” It's in that spirit that I invite us to spend some time with them this morning.

To anticipate: it was once common in seminary instruction to divide spirituality (our term; theirs “the interior life”) into a course on “ascetical theology” and another on “mystical theology”. This division of labor finds expression in the titles of two classic works by the Sulpician Albert Farges: *The Ordinary Ways of the Spiritual Life* (ascetical theology) and *Mystical Phenomena Compared with their Human and Diabolical Counterfeits* (as the title indicates, mystical theology). In looking at the sayings of the desert fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum* in Greek, *Verba Seniorum* in Latin) one may be forcefully struck by the externals of their

lives, by the ascetical extremes that come to light. It is necessary not to overlook the spirit that animates these practices (here the relation between law and covenant in ancient Israel comes to mind—without the animating relationship with God signified by covenant, law becomes formalistic and even corrosive of true religion). Also, ascetical practices, at their best, were understood as means, not as ends in themselves. Thus it is important not to overlook the spirit they can help engender, the goal toward which they are but means.

We'll try to accomplish this in 3 parts:

1. Context: what catalyzed men and women to seek such an austere lifestyle in inhospitable places? (Here it is important to emphasize not only the style, but the *life*: living in a contemporary Trappist monastery for a few weeks is not actually that difficult (unless you are addicted to e-mail, cell phones, etc. in which case withdrawal pains are likely to be severe!). There is a great deal of discipline required, yes. But three weeks can be an adventure. Now, when we are talking a lifetime) So the real question is, what motivated these men and women to spend their lives in this way?

2. That question brings us to an examination of what their lives consisted. Beneath practices there are values. What did they value? And how did they understand their practices to be related to those values? What did they hope to accomplish by adopting such a life? And what did they in fact accomplish in doing so? Here it will be a matter of trying to appreciate the link between ascetical practice and a deepened relationship with God, with a life of austerity as an avenue to mystical prayer.

3. Karl Barth observed that questioning the Scriptures has an odd way of turning about and questioning the questioner. To the one seeking answers to historical questions, it will yield historical answers. To the one seeking religious answers, it will yield religious responses. To the one seeking nothing, it will yield—nothing. But it does have a way of questioning the questioner: and who are you, pray, who come to ask? *Mutatis mutandis* with regard to the desert monks. If we come seeking to understand them, to perhaps even challenge how people could subject themselves to such hardship, such austerity—their sayings have a way of challenging us, to ask us what we truly value in deed.

Context: To understand something of the “push” and the “pull” that drew people in such numbers into the desert one must go beyond the standard explanation that they were seeking a “white martyrdom” after the persecutions of Christians had ceased with the peace of the church (this is of course true, as far as it goes). However, the movement into the desert began while persecutions were still underway. And it had both secular and non-christian religious antecedents.

Anachoresis (from the Gk “departure”) was in the air in 3rd century Egypt. At that time men—sometimes whole communities—withdraw into deserts or swamps to

escape from the intolerable burden of taxation. So there were political motives that drove some into isolated places. There were also recluses known as *katochoi* (from the Gk meaning both “withdrawn” and “inspired”), priests in the service of the god Serapis, who shut themselves up in darkness for long periods, in silence and meditation as a form of initiation or trial practiced in the course of certain mysteries. While there was not likely any direct dependence of the desert monks on the *katochoi*, they do show ascetical practices characteristic of the Egyptian psyche.

So, withdrawal into the desert or a repertoire of austere practices did not have to be invented by Christians. There did, of course, need to be Christians extant in order to adopt and adapt such. In the third century the gospel, originally preached in Greek and therefore largely limited to upper classes in Alexandria, found its Coptic voice and penetrated the common population: craftsmen, administrative officials, and especially peasants. It was from the ranks of the peasantry that the majority of the monks were drawn, a peasantry already used to hard living, an austere diet—and thus much closer to the *ascesis* of the anchorite than moderns.

Thus already in the 3rd century there was a pool of potential recruits, as it were. (By mid-fourth century Adolf von Harnack estimated that Egypt already had almost a million Christians and a hundred bishops and seemed almost won over to Christianity.) What motivated numbers of these Christians to move into the desert?

It was under the great revolt by Egypt against the demands of Diocletian, and the Great Persecution that ensued, that Anthony left his village by the Nile to retreat farther into the desert. It was also as a conscript that Pachomius encountered Christians for the first time and, after his release from military service, sought baptism and eventual adoption of an ascetical life. Set in a cultural context of belief that society was irremediably corrupt, and an eschatological atmosphere that had some seeing in contemporary events signs of the collapse of the world, flight into the desert could be seen as “the last chance offered to humanity to break with a reality to be henceforth unlivable” (Lecarrière 45). This is the way Thomas Merton expresses it:

In those days men had become keenly conscious of the strictly individual character of ‘salvation.’ Society—which meant pagan society, limited by the horizons and prospects of life ‘in this world’—was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single man had to swim for his life. We need not stop here to discuss the fairness of this view: what matters is to remember that it was a fact. (*The Wisdom of the Desert*, 3)

Withdrawal into the desert could represent flight from political and economic oppression, a sense of social apocalypse, escape from persecution and martyrdom—or even a regime of training and discipline to meet martyrdom. With

the peace of the church martyrdom would still figure, but, as mentioned earlier, as a kind of “white martyrdom”. Owen Chadwick has drawn some interesting parallels between the virtues held to be those of the ideal martyr and those held up as the ideals of the monk:

In what does sanctity, perfection, holiness consist? What fruits are expected of the holy man? In the fourth century the Christian reply to these questions was governed by the memory of the martyrs.

. . . In conditions of persecution, the virtues to which the Christians looked as supreme, were the virtues demanded of the martyr—faith; capacity to bear suffering for Christ’s sake; other-worldliness, and contempt for the goods of this world; longing for heaven. How near are these qualities to the qualities demanded of the monk two hundred years later, may be seen from such a document as Tertullian’s *Exhortation to the Martyrs*. Tertullian was trying to encourage an imprisoned group in their expectation of death. And the prison cell in Tertullian’s eyes is extremely like the desert cell of the Egyptian monk two hundred years later. It is the place to which the martyr goes to trample the demons underfoot: it is the place where the martyr can sever himself from the clutching ties of the world, from his family and his friends: the world, rather than the cell, is the true prison: and out of it the martyr passes into the liberty of his confinement. . . . It was . . . natural, with this memory of persecution stamped on the mind of the Church, that Christians looked to find the especial virtues of the martyr in the man who obeyed the command to be perfect. (*Western Asceticism*, 20-21)

This represents something of an individualizing of the ideal of holiness. In 1 Cor., in pronouncing on the case of the man who had married his stepmother (at variance with both Jewish and pagan moral practice) Paul can appeal to a community ideal of holiness. (Recall that expulsion from the community for “conduct unbecoming” was the sanction for behavior incompatible with the standard of holiness that ought to characterize the community.) With the peace of the church and a consequent lowering of standards, the Christian ideal became less corporate and more individualistic. When congregations included members whose conduct was lax, it was less natural to think of the inspiration of the Spirit among all the members of the body and more so to think of the inspiration of certain individuals.

The factors which gave rise to monasticism in Egypt thus were multiform, and developed over time. We may now proceed to discern what these men and women embraced.

2. The Anchoritic Life

The two paradigmatic figures of early Egyptian monasticism are St. Anthony (credited as the Father of the eremetical form of monasticism) and St. Pachomius

(credited as founder of the cenobitic form—from the Latin *coenobium*, community). This is not intended to be a history of monasticism, so these two figures will be engaged with a view toward appreciating how they reflect the anchoritic life.

One may well ask how a recluse becomes famous. Just as it is necessary for a world-class athlete to have the right parents, so it is necessary for a world-class anchorite to have the right biographer. In Anthony's case, it was Athanasius bishop of Alexandria, whose *Life of Anthony* put both Egyptian monasticism and its biographical subject "on the map". This famous text, which played so decisive a role in the expansion of monasticism, was, until the 19th century, regarded as a biography of Anthony. It is better thought of as belonging to the genre of aretology (from the Gk *aretos*, virtue), popular in pagan antiquity whose aim was to provide an edifying picture of an ideal life rather than historical and objective testimony. It was a genre employed for the lives of pagan sages as well as of Christian saints. Thus, while it does provide insight into the events and circumstances of Anthony's life, it sets up an edifying and vivid picture of life in the desert rather than a detailed report of the saint's activities.

That said, it does indicate that, even before Anthony embraced an ascetical life, there were practicing ascetics in Egyptian Christianity. The account of Anthony's conversion became well known. One day, while in church, he heard the voice of Jesus say, "If you will be perfect, go and sell all that you have and follow me." At that time Anthony was around 20 and was of a well-to-do family. So it was precisely as a rich young man that he heard this admonition of the gospel and responded to it. His parents having died shortly before, he sold all his possessions and, keeping back a small sum for his young sister, gave the rest to the poor. Then he turned his back upon the world, settling in a place close to his native village, living there with an old man who had practiced asceticism for many years. In this he followed established custom of a beginner placing himself under the guidance of an older experienced ascetic. One had to obey others before claiming obedience to God alone.

After a period of time, unable to rid himself of temptations regarding the possessions and sister (family ties were particularly strong among Egyptians at this time) he had left behind, and the immense difficulties and hardships in the life he had embraced, he decided to retreat further into the desert to better resist these temptations.

Lacarrière differentiates Anthony's experience from the pagan analog noted earlier:

Where, however, his experience differed from that of the pagan recluses was in the fact that his purpose was not 'the revelation of magical secrets' or the acquisition of esoteric knowledge. On the contrary, he sought to forget all secular knowledge and abolish personality (59).

This last may perhaps require some commentary. Thomas Merton has put it in more conventional terminology when he writes

What the Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in 'the world.' . . . [The hermit] had to die to the values of transient existence as Christ had died to them on the Cross, and rise from the dead with Him in light of an entirely new wisdom. Hence the life of sacrifice, which started out from a clean break, separating the monk from the world. a life continued in 'compunction' which taught him to lament the madness of attachment to unreal values. A life of solitude and labour, poverty and fasting, charity and prayer which enabled the old superficial self to be purged away and permitted the gradual emergence of the true, secret self in which the believer and Christ were 'one Spirit.'

Finally, the proximate end of all this striving was 'purity of heart'—a clear unobstructed vision of affairs, an intuitive grasp of one's own inner reality as anchored, or rather lost, in God through Christ. The fruit of this was *quies*: 'rest.' (*The Wisdom of the Desert*, 5-8)

In the less intellectualized tradition, represented by Anthony, virtue was perfection, and faithful prayer was part of the content of the virtuous life. As we shall see in considering Evagrius and Cassian, the understanding of contemplation later undergoes more articulate development.

Lacarrière has recourse to Byzantine art to make the point:

What the men of the desert lost in humanity they gained in angelic properties and it is understandable that the Byzantine painters who depicted these men of Egypt on the frescoes of monasteries in Cappadocia or Greece should have represented them as beings half savage and half angel: they were given emaciated faces, tattered clothing, hair hanging down to their feet, but also the look of people lost in contemplation of another reality and flesh which was hardly substantial. All conventional Byzantine art aimed at making the great Ascetics, not impassive creatures, phantoms or illusions, but beings already belonging to a sort of humanity different from that of ordinary mortals and half-way to the other world (57).

Early on, others were attracted to Anthony, and a loose community grew up around him. This took the form of a loose group of anchorites, not yet a monastery in the terms we tend to think of that. They lived apart, but gathered for common prayer. Eventually, Anthony retreated even deeper into the desert, seeking a more profound experience of solitude.

Thus already we see two forms of the anchoritic life: the solitary, far removed from others; hermits, each in his own cell, coming together for eucharist and a common meal on a weekly basis.

The third form returns us to the figure of Pachomius. Unlike Anthony's, his was a pagan childhood. (Pachomius's Life, following aretological conventions, affirms that he only appeared to worship idols in his younger years, vomiting every time he took the sacrificial wine, his stomach rejecting any sustenance offered to idols. Also, in his presence the pagan idols stopped speaking and prophesying—a sort of inversion of Anthony's call from hearing the words of Scripture.)

Impressed during his experience in the Roman army by the devoted service of Christians to others, after completing his military service he sought baptism and apprenticed himself to an elder much as Anthony had. To fasting and obedience was added the discipline of keeping vigil, of foregoing sleep. Every hour of sleep hindered spiritual liberation and so sleep was reduced to a minimum. Even when sleeping, one did not lie down; one slept in a sitting position, or squatting, or standing with one's back against a wall. (In later Pachomian monasteries, the monks slept seated on low seats, instead of lying down. It also influenced the position of prayer: standing, motionless, with arms folded across one's breast or arms raised. Practically speaking, it constituted a counter to sleep. Symbolically, the ascetic assumed the stillness and silence of the dead, and so lost awareness of the outside world.)

Pachomius's innovation was to gather men into communal living, going against the grain of the conventional wisdom that solitude was the royal road to God. Anthony's life was paradigmatic in this regard: one first apprenticed oneself to an elder until having attained a degree of self-mastery to become an elder in one's own turn. If his reputation for sanctity attracted people to him in growing numbers, then withdrawal further into the desert was not uncommon. The sense is that permanent contact with others constituted a hindrance to asceticism and to salvation. Now Pachomius was gathering men under a common rule and in so doing leaving the beaten tracks of asceticism. No wonder he experienced a great deal of anxiety in doing so. And no wonder that his contemporaries thought his rule to have been revealed to him by an angel! The very originality of his enterprise seemed to require a superhuman inspiration.

So: the basic ingredients of Egyptian monasticism in this early period have been laid out. Details of their clothing, diet, living spaces, daily routine, relationships between elders and disciples, hospitality to visitors, communal gatherings may be found in Lucien Regnault's *La vie quotidienne des pères du désert en Égypte au IVe siècle*.

Here I want, instead of lingering over external aspects of their existence, to retrieve some of the sayings that provide insight into their interior lives, to make the connection between asceticism and virtue, between virtue and prayer,

between the monk and God. Derwas Chitty in his *The Desert a City* characterizes the sayings of the desert fathers as “a corpus of ‘case law’ of the deserts. Additions were constantly being made to it: but it is timeless in its concern with our common humanity. It is difficult to open it without quickly finding something poignant for ourselves” (67). Regarding these sayings, Andrew Louth has observed:

They are not intended to be read systematically, rather their pithy, gnomic form are intended to provide many points of contact with the very varied experience of humankind. Some sayings will strike home to one person, some to another; some will seem directed to my condition now, some will only seem relevant later on. (*The Wilderness of God*, 64)

The temptations of asceticism:

Sociologists speak of the Weber-Michels Iron Law of Oligarchy. Put into more prosaic language, it concerns the tendency to turn means into ends. [Elaborate] In a religious context, one thinks of Israel’s tendency to turn the Ark of the Covenant to a sort of religious talisman, whose possession guaranteed them victory over all enemies—and the shock of their defeat at the hands of the Philistines. In a later context one may recall the prophet Jeremiah’s admonitions that the Temple will not guarantee Israel’s security, still less the military alliances Israel had forged. Jesus will make much the same point about that temple’s successor at the time of his ministry. It must be said that there emerged a certain competitive asceticism among some anchorites. [Example of stylites]

There are a number of sayings that speak to the necessity of keeping asceticism in service of the ascent to God, and not as a kind of spiritual athleticism cultivated for its own sake.

First, we may remark that the proximate goal of ascetical labor is the cultivation of virtue:

READ Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 34: **XXVI**.

What, then, is this labor?

READ Merton, pp. 28-29: **IX**

And there is the awareness not to confuse the means with the end:

READ Merton, p. 51: **LXXV** [Retrieve Thanksgiving story regarding dinner and ascetical practice]

Discipline means discipline not only of the body (food, sleep) but that of speech:

READ Merton, p. 47: **LXIV** and **LXI** and p. 32: **XIX** (this last indicates true asceticism)

And discipline of thoughts:

READ Merton, p. 43: **L**

While prayer is important, the desert fathers remain firmly grounded in the concrete realities of life:

READ Merton, pp. 42-43: **XLVII**; also pp. 41-42: **XLV** and pp. 36-37: **XXXIII**

A test of ascetical practice is its fruit. One such is humility. Interestingly, Merton collects a number of sayings about this virtue. Two may stand for many:

READ Merton, p. 54: **LXXXVII** and **LXXXVI**

Allied to humility is the virtue of discretion in this story:

READ Merton, p. 70: **CXVIII**

Finally, there is a measured appreciation of asceticism (in contrast to a certain stereotyping of the desert monks as “fanatics”)

READ Merton, p. 63: **CVI**

With the possibility of an occasional flash of wry humor:

READ Merton, pp. 27-28: **VIII**

Critics of the ascetic life, especially that of the early Egyptian anchorites, have frequently concentrated on the externals of that life: in their case, lack of sleep, filth, poor food, excessive fasting, loneliness, denial of intellectual pursuits and suspicion of learning. This fails to acknowledge the illuminatory experience that flows from such practices. While such ascetical practice has been regarded as reducing its practitioners to a state that is subhuman, it can be counterargued that that a new understanding is reached of what it means to be human.

This circles us back to Merton’s language of “superficial self” and “true, secret self” referenced earlier. James Cowan journeyed into the desert world of these early monks, encountered their successors, and put his own experience of lived contact with these men into some helpful formulations.

Fasting, going without sleep, engaging in prayer were weapons in a spiritual warfare waged not out of defiance of bodily demands, but in defense of the soul’s

intensity. Cowan quotes an account of Anthony's experiences from Athanasius's Life:

Once when he was about to eat, rising to pray about the ninth hour, he felt himself carried off in thought, and the wonder was that while standing there he saw himself, *as if he were outside himself*, and as if he were being led through the air by certain beings. Next he saw some foul and terrible figures standing in the air, intent on holding him back so that he could not pass by. When his guides [protective spirits] accosted them, they [the demonic spirits] demanded to know the reason why he was not answerable to them. And when they asked for an account of his life from the time of his birth, Anthony's guides prevented it, saying, 'The Lord has wiped clean the items dating from his birth, but from the time he became a monk, and devoted himself to God, you can take account.' Then as they [the demons] levelled accusations and failed to prove them, a passage opened before him free and unobstructed. Just then he saw himself *appear to come and stand with himself*, and once more he was Anthony, as before.

and then comments: "I have italicized certain phrases in this remarkable passage because they suggest a psychological dimension that we do not often grant to antiquity." (Cowan, *Desert Father*, p. 28)

Another way to express this is to say that the desert monks adopted a lifestyle that made God unavoidable. At the same time it made their own selves unavoidable. (Anthony Bloom suggests the experiment of going into a room with no distractions: no radio, TV, books or magazines—just ourselves. And then to see how long it takes us to get bored. He says that this is an index of how boring we are. Put another way, an index of what depth there is to our lives.) In a very real sense the desert, and the very dullness of the anchorite's routine were designed to bring a confrontation with the self, and in that process, a confrontation with God. Put another way, the question of God is radicalized in such circumstances. We can't hedge our bets, seek refuge in entertainments and like distractions, relate to God as one facet of our lives in the midst of many other facets. The presence—indeed the very existence—of God becomes a pressing and radically significant issue. (I recall a documentary on the Trappist abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts that address that very reality.)

So the desert functioned as a school, a place to learn, to discover, to be tested. It enabled those who inhabited it to live the gospel in radical form. It mandated trust in God in radical form. It mandated dependence on God in radical form.

Before moving on to the third part of this session, I want to address the presence of "desert mothers" among the anchorites. I've referred with some regularity to sayings of the "desert fathers"—for so indeed they have come down to us. But there were women who embraced lives of ascetical discipline. For the most part

in cenobitic settings, but there are cases of female hermits. I want to touch on one, Mary of Egypt, to highlight again the importance of conversion in the spirituality of the desert and also because parts of her story became commingled with the biblical Mary Magdalene and have contributed to the portrait of her that has come down through tradition.

Benedicta Ward summarizes her story as follows:

READ Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, p. 27.

First, ward is careful to point out the symbolical nature of the story, elements that would be appreciated by Christian audiences for whom the world still functioned as a vast symbol system of the divine. In the detailed story Mary takes with her into the desert 3 loaves of bread which, like the loaves of the prophet Elijah, do not diminish. She passes over the waters of the Jordan, the symbol of baptism. She is seen walking on the waters and is at peace with all creation. At her burial a lion comes out of the desert, a symbol of the prince of peace (even in our own day think Narnia's Aslan!).

But the abiding significance for the monastic tradition is the need of mercy. It is a paradox of the Christian tradition (but an understandable one) that the closer one draws to God, the more one's sinfulness becomes consciously apparent. (Think of Teresa of Avila's autobiography in this connection.) As one most in need of God's mercy the monk is consoled that even deep seated and blinding habits like lust (what we might term addictive behavior) can be broken, and the person can be set free by accepting God's grace. The necessity is awareness of need and acceptance of grace based on that awareness.

Behind the story of Mary are the experiences of real women and men who, in one way or another, had sinned publicly and undertaken lives of penance in the desert. It spoke closely to the circumstances of their lives and more broadly to those who chose to follow the anchoritic life.