

*The Desert Fathers on Radical Self–Honesty*¹

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It is obvious that the sayings of the desert fathers touch modern people in ways that other ancient Christian writings do not. This is not because they are pithy, humorous, or bizarre, although they are sometimes all of those things. What sets the apophthegmata apart from so much of patristic literature is that they speak from and to experience rather than text or theory; they are practical rather than intellectual. The sayings and the stories in which they are set do not try to pursue a topic as far as may be done, to run a concept to ground and examine it, or to construct an argument. The sayings open up rather than exhaust, suggest rather than describe. Like parables, they are explosive, and where the bits land after the explosion is different each time the stories are told or read. The significance of this quality runs deeper than matters of literary genre: it was not a studied preference for gnomic statements rather than treatises which gave rise to these sayings. The very form of the apophthegmata arose from and leads back into the heart of the desert quest. These monks staked everything on the effort to destroy illusion and deception. Their various disciplines were intended to help them cut through the noise of lives hooked on the deceptions, materialisms, and games which have characterised human beings since the Fall. The desert itself gave them a landscape which mirrored what they sought for their own hearts: an uncluttered view through clear air. (1)

The very nature of the apophthegmata frustrates any effort to systematise them or to reduce their wisdom to formulae. They have to be worked through again and again, heard fresh every time. A valuable exercise is to choose a theme and to follow it through the desert literature, a procedure which allows one to catch glimpses of many other themes while keeping to some sort of path through vast quantities of material. The theme proposed here is the desert fathers' radical honesty about the self, and the means by which they worked towards this

honesty. The principal element of that process was offering the secrets of one's heart to another person for discernment. This was typically done by a young, or at any rate novice, monk to his abba, his monastic elder. This practice of self-revelation was both the means and the fruit of the monk's growth in singleness of heart. This theme is one which is particularly interesting for modern people, presumably because it is something we would like to do ourselves but find very difficult. (1-2)

This article will deal mainly with the apophthegmata themselves, that is to say, the classic collections of sayings rooted in the fourth and fifth centuries. There will also be reference to later texts, especially the correspondence from Gaza associated with Barsanuphius and John in the early sixth century and the writings of John Climacus, abbot of Sinai, in the seventh century.

A word about terminology and language. Because these are monastic texts, "monks" will be referred to throughout. This does not suggest that the apophthegmata are of interest only to monks, nor that the teaching of the desert is something reserved for monks. The other point which must be made is that virtually all of the surviving stories are about monastic men. The desert was full of monastic women as well, but as so often in our history, their experiences went almost completely unrecorded or were suppressed. Everything described here would have been occurring among ammas and the women who came to them to undertake the monastic life. Therefore reference will generally be made to "elders" and "disciples" rather than "abbas" and "brothers" as a reminder of this point. Where terms like "spiritual father" occur, it is because they are found in the texts, with their restricted focus.

The Practice and Its Ascetical Context

The practice of manifesting the thoughts of the heart was simple. A monk would go to a trustworthy, usually older, monk and say, for example, "I am bothered by thoughts of envy towards someone. I wish I could see my parents. I think a lot about the happiness of the saints in heaven. I get distracted from my prayers. I wonder if I'll ever be a real monk." Sometimes the issue might be a particular sinful act, sometimes it might be something which wasn't sinful at all, but which was preoccupying. For young monks this would have been a fairly regular

practice, even daily or more frequent, as they began to learn about the topography and inhabitants of their hearts.

The power of this simple, but difficult, practice lay in the fact that the monk was confident enough in God's mercy, working through the elder, to turn the soul inside out without cleaning it all up beforehand. This was spontaneous, not calculated, trust. Some of the matter so revealed may have been sinful, some confusing, some neutral, some hopeful. The idea was that by putting these things out in the light of day rather than keeping them in the stuffy confines of one's heart, they could be seen for what they are. The insight underlying the practice is one described in the Life of Antony: the mastery of the demons over the human soul is an illusory power, based on deception. The demons are robbed of their power when they are exposed as demons, when the monk confronts them and calls on the name of God.² And so here: when the heart is opened to the light of truth, when there are no secrets, catches, or barriers, the demons have nowhere to lodge and hide, and they cannot begin their crafting of obsessions and illusions. Things are brought into the arena of truth before they have a chance to lodge themselves in a chamber of the inner self and grow twisted, perverse, and stunted from lack of light and air.(2-3)

Note that this is not obsessive introspection, or scrupulous self-analysis. The whole point was to prevent obsession. It is self-awareness rather than modern self-consciousness: no alienation, no wallowing in the self, rather a spontaneous freedom to lay it all out. And all of it had to be laid out, because one cannot see in the dark to tell what is good, what is evil, what is indifferent. (3)

Too often the interplay of disciple and elder is considered from the perspective of "spiritual direction," of what the old man does for the young monk, placing the focus on the elder who receives the thoughts of the disciple's heart. This emphasis on the role of the elder is understandable in the light of later developments, but what is noteworthy in the apophthegmata is that the weight of the narrative more often than not falls on the disciple, for he is the one doing the hard work. The elder is the witness and encourager, but not the controller, of the process. This reminds us that the abba or amma is not the centre of the desert life, nor is the elder/ disciple relationship itself the point of it all. The whole life was about opening up: of self to another and of self to God, with no obsessive

concentration on the self or on the relationship with one's abba. The point at issue will be immediately clear to people who have sought spiritual direction or been in a position to provide it: there can be many things that go on in spiritual direction that have little to do with discernment and prayer. We seek a director because we want someone to sort us out; we offer direction because it makes us feel validated as spiritual persons. These are ways to untruth, and the desert fathers saw these dangers clearly. (3-4)

Perhaps another way to get at this is to remember that it was the commitment to truth, to seeing things as they are, which disposed the monk for contemplation of God. The classic hierarchies of contemplation described by Evagrius and others moved from disciplined work on the self to contemplation of the created world, to contemplation of the spiritual world, to contemplation of God. The commitment to truth is initially expressed and realised in the ascetical labour of self-knowledge. To see things as they are, and to see God as God can be seen, without masks of fantasy, projections, pious wishes, depends in the first place upon stripping away the masks of fantasies and projections about ourselves. We find that the masks we place on our selves and the masks we see on the face of God are, in the end, the same, and are of our own making. (4)

The goal of the desert was utter transparence to divine light. The elder, far from being a center of power and a "director," served in his or her transparence to divine light as a lens which could focus the light of truth on the dark places in the disciple's heart. (4)

The Practice

One must remember that the practice is best described as manifestation of thoughts and not just confession of sins. The dominant values here are humility and obedience, rather than penitence and pardon. Everything was matter for manifestation to the elder, not just sins. Indeed, Poemen said that there was no need to consult one's abba about the avoidance of sin: visible faults were to be cut off at once, whereas the elusive ways of the thoughts required the discernment of another.³ This practice was intended to be preventive rather than remedial, dealing with issues early on, before they had time to become manifest in action. Abba Isaias of Scetis and Gaza wrote that the monk should ask about

his thoughts before he carries them on into action.⁴ John Climacus compared unrevealed thoughts in the heart to eggs placed in warm dung: the thoughts are bound to hatch evil deeds unless revealed.⁵ The range of matter was broader than is usually the case in confession as known today: here the monks were usually more concerned with thoughts or attitudes than with deeds. The other practices of the monastic life, the exterior disciplines of prayer, fasting, vigils, would have more to do with restraining sinful or inappropriate actions.⁽⁵⁾

The origins of this practice are mysterious. There is nothing in the New Testament which would have led directly to it; a text in the Letter of James refers to confessing one's sins to a fellow Christian, but then that really was not what the desert monks were up to (the text from James appears only once in the indexed collections of the apophthegmata). A look at the Life of Antony shows that Antony consulted with wise old men in his early days, but his hardest work in coming to self-knowledge was done alone. The first of the apophthegmata about Antony tries to explain this unusual, virtually unique, exception to the general rule of working with an older monk:

When the holy Abba Antony lived in the desert he was beset by accidie, and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, "Lord, I want to be saved but those thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?" A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, "Do this and you will be saved." At these words, Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved.⁶⁽⁵⁾

Antony's interior struggle, undertaken in solitude, is here externalised so that he, too, has an abba: but it is an angel who is a sort of mirror-image of himself. The desert tradition is universally insistent upon the young monk's need for a discerning elder; even Antony's life had to be brought into line with the norm. Another story, attributed to Macarius the Great, tells of two young men who came and lived near him in Scetis. Macarius taught them the basic disciplines of the life, and they set to it. For three years they lived as he had showed them, but without consulting him about their progress. Macarius, telling the story, said,

I wrestled with my thoughts, thinking, “What is their way of life? Why do they not come to ask me about their thoughts? Those who live far off come to see me, but those who live quite close do not come. They do not go to anyone else either; they only go to church, in silence, to receive the Eucharist.”

Macarius, overcome with curiosity, goes to visit them and receives a revelation about their way of life, seeing that although one of them was still troubled by demons, the two of them kept up their prayer and soon died, presumably with every expectation of paradise. Macarius would show their cell to visitors, and say, “Come and see the place of martyrdom of the young strangers.”⁷ Like Antony, these young monks were a great exception, so unusual in their heroic isolation from the abba that they baffled and then amazed one of the greatest of the desert fathers. But note that they did have each other.

The basic insight of the desert, evident even in those stories I have just told, was that one cannot grow towards perfection through isolated, solitary effort: grace is mediated through one’s neighbour, especially one’s abba.⁸ (6) A common exhortation, attributed to many different monks, was that the Enemy, the devil, rejoices in nothing so much as unmanifested thoughts.⁹ If the devil was delighted by a monk’s self-imposed isolation, surely this was because the opposite of isolation, encounter with another, was the way to salvation. (6) The necessity of this encounter, urged in more positive ways throughout the tradition, rested on two points. First, there is breaking from the illusion of self-sufficiency, a pose which encourages self-absorption, and can lead to a “devouring conscience” in the words of Abba Poemen.¹⁰ (6) A sin which is hidden begins to multiply:¹¹ one becomes trapped in obsessive and compulsive patterns. Abba Isaias wrote, “As the creeping plant which surrounds a tree chokes its fruit, as a worm eats wood, the moth devours clothing, and rust eats away iron, so sin consumes and withers the one who doesn’t confess it.”¹² Second, there is a connection with humility. The ability of a monk freely to open his heart to his abba indicated growth in humility.¹³ Humility and its companion, obedience, are the key monastic virtues, the foundation for everything else. The link between manifestation of thoughts and humility helps one to understand better what monastic humility is all about: it is the quality of someone who has begun to see as God sees, and who has started with the self. (6-7) A limpid heart allows for a clear eye, and humility becomes the basis for contemplating the rest of Creation and then the Creator.

This very practical approach was complemented by stories which spoke of the act of opening the heart as being in and of itself a good thing, a means of grace:¹⁴ “Reveal your thoughts to your fathers so that the grace of God dwell in you.”¹⁵ Dorotheus of Gaza summed it up pithily: “Nothing is more burdensome than directing oneself; nothing is more fatal.” (7)¹⁶

It was not the verdict of the elder which was so important, as the stories will show, but rather the act itself of manifesting the soul: the revelation breaks the hold of unreality.¹⁷ The desert fathers were absolutely committed to breaking the cycle of deception which began with Adam and Eve. One might say that the great tragedy of the Fall lay not so much in that they disobeyed; God could handle that. The tragedy of Adam and Eve was that they hid: far from thinking of themselves as like God, they thought of God like themselves, and thinking God could not bear their failure, they hid. (7) The desert fathers knew that one of the fundamental characteristics of fallen humanity is that we think we can keep things going by hiding and pretending. They saw that Christ hides nothing, and promises that all will be made known: they took him at his word and got on with making it all known.

For these people, then, humility, that key virtue, could be reduced in practice to this one indicator: the ability to speak honestly, overcoming embarrassment and shame, about the deepest stirrings of the heart. Abba Poemen said: “Teach your mouth to say that which you have in your heart.”¹⁸ And they knew that this is the hardest thing anyone can ever do. (7)

Issues in Practice

The best way to raise practical issues is by way of one of the apophthegmata from the Greek Anonymous Series; the speaker as a young monk had known Abba Zeno:

“When I was young,” he said, “I had this experience. I had a passion in my soul which mastered me. Having heard it said that Abba Zeno had healed many, I wanted to go find him and open myself to him. But the devil prevented me from

doing so, saying, "Since you know what you must do, conduct yourself according to what you have read. Why go and scandalise the old man?" Each time that I was ready to go to him, the warfare in me abated a little, and I didn't go. And when I had given up the idea of going to see the old man, once more the passion would assail me. I would begin to fight in order to leave, and the enemy would deceive me by the same trick and wouldn't let me open myself to the old man. Often I would actually go to the old man in order to tell him everything, but the enemy would not let me speak by putting shame in my heart and saying to me, "Since you know how to heal yourself, what is the point of speaking about it? You're not giving yourself enough credit: you know what the fathers have taught." Such is what the adversary suggested to me so that I wouldn't reveal my sickness to the physician and be healed.

The old man knew very well that I was having these thoughts, but he didn't intervene, waiting for me to make them known to him myself. He taught me about the right path and sent me on my way.

Finally, afflicted and in tears, I said to my soul, "How long, unhappy soul, will you persist in not wanting to be healed? People who live far away come to the old man and are healed; aren't you ashamed, when you live so close to the healer, of not making the effort yourself?" My heart on fire, I got up and said to myself, "I'm going to see the old man, and if I don't find any visitors there, I'll know that it is the will of God that I make my thought known to him."

I went and found no other person there. The old man, as was his custom, gave me some teaching about the salvation of the soul and the ways of cleansing oneself of impure thoughts. But once more I was ashamed, and I didn't open up. I asked him for his blessing.

The old man got up, said a prayer, and led me to the door. He walked ahead of me, and meanwhile I was tormented by my thoughts. Would I speak to the old man, or wouldn't I? I walked a little behind him without his paying me any attention. He put his hand to the door to open it for me, but when he saw me tormented by my thoughts, he turned towards me, tapped me on the chest, and said: "What is the matter with you? Am I not a man, too?" (Acts 10:26).

When the old man said this to me, I thought that he had uncovered my heart. I prostrated myself at his feet begging him with tears, saying, "Have pity on me." He said to me: "What is the matter with you?" I told him, "You know what it is,

what is the use of saying it?" He said to me, "It is you who must say what is the matter with you."

Covered with shame, I made known to him my passion, and he said to me: "Am I not a man too? Do you want me to tell you what I know? That you've been coming here for three years with these thoughts and you haven't let them out." I prostrated myself, begged him and said, "For the Lord's sake, have pity on me." He said to me, "Go, do not neglect your prayer, and do not speak ill of anyone." I returned to my cell, and did not neglect my prayer; and by the grace of Christ and by the prayers of the old man, I was bothered no longer by that passion.¹⁹

This story touches on many key themes: the illusion of self-sufficiency and self-discernment; the power of embarrassment and shame; the patience and humility of the abba; the need to take the hard step of saying aloud the secrets of the heart; the pastoral sensitivity of the abba shown more in his overall strategy than in the actual advice he gave after the manifestation of conscience. These themes must be considered in turn.

Self-Direction and Self-Deception

The greatest flaw in self-direction lay in the simple inability of the beginner to see anything, much less the self, without the distorting influence of sin and self-deception. The whole battery of the "passions" or *locismoi* stood by, ready to twist any perception or insight. We know that someone caught in an unhealthy situation may not be able to see any way out and might need help finding one. The desert monks, intent on casting out all hindrances to sight and insight, would have maintained that anyone seriously undertaking the Christian life (and the evidence is that some of them took on lay clients!) began this work still trapped in the inevitable confusion of sinful humanity. Part of this confusion was an instinctive resistance to openness, a resistance to making real progress, owing to the human tendency to prefer familiar sickness to unfamiliar health. Monks in the desert, like modern people, fought to keep change at bay even while claiming to desire progress. This resistance appeared in many guises, and was often labelled self-will, about which there are hundreds of sayings, one the most well-known being, "If you see a young man climbing toward heaven by his own will, grab his foot and pull him down, for it will be for his own good."²⁰

An aspect of self-will which bears directly on this theme was the tendency to think that one's self-discernment, based on experience and knowledge, could substitute for the elder's discernment and wisdom. Some of the most interesting pieces of desert literature concern this illusion. In some cases the temptation to self-reliance was so strong that it prevented a monk from approaching the elder (as in the story above); in other cases, it ran interference across the process, and had to be recognised for what it was.²¹

The temptation to self-reliance was an issue for the elders just as for the young: many of the apophthegmata concern older monks who have lost their way and slipped into kinds of behaviour which prevent their seeing clearly. In the *Historia monachorum* there is a story of an abba who gets caught in a downward spiral of temptation and slackened discipline. Some brothers invite him to come and speak to them, and afterwards he realises that although he was advising (noudetvn) them, he remained without advice (anoudethtoV) himself, and he remembers the verse from Proverbs, "a brother helped by a brother is like a strong city" (Prov. 18:19).²² And so one finds that often an abba would admit to his own failures or tell the story of his own struggles as a way to help a younger monk open up: quoting Paul's "am I not a man, too?" as in the story above or admitting that the thoughts never cease.²³

The Role of the Elder

This solidarity in experience between elder and disciple serves as a reminder of what the elder's role was in all of this. The desert abba or amma was not a guru: disciples did not just sit and listen to words of wisdom. Often there were no words to listen to. Nor was the elder a magician: there was real work to be done, and most of it was to be done by the disciple. The religious, medical, legal, and other sorts of images which began to accumulate around the figure of the desert elder can obscure the actual means by which desert father or mother worked with desert child. The elder was not a source of power. The elder was not a distributor of self-help guidelines. The elder was sometimes called "healer," but was really more a sort of witness or midwife than an omniscient, self-assured professional. The desert elder was certified by experience rather than by vows or by an academic degree or by ordination. This experience lay in having had the shock of seeing oneself as a sinner, accepting that only God's mercy

could bring hope of forgiveness, and setting about the hard work of making one's own the story not only of fall but of redemption as well. This experience continued to play itself out in recognising oneself in other sinners, and working with them to tease out the thousand secrets of the heart. Barsanuphius wrote to one of the monks who consulted him (in Derwas Chitty's archaizing but here charming translation), "It is by thee [God] saves pitiful me."²⁴

The role of the elder as encourager and witness rather than as judge is evident in the sort of advice they often gave: none or very little. Cassian quotes Theonas as having said to a brother after he revealed his thoughts, "Without any words of mine, your confession frees you from this slavery."²⁵ (11) Paphnutius would walk twelve miles twice a month to see the old men to whom he told thoughts, and remarked that he was always told the same thing: "Wherever you go, do not judge yourself, and you will be at peace."²⁶ Remember that the brother who struggled for three years before he could name his trouble was told only 'Go, do not neglect your prayer, and speak ill of no one.'" These were hardly cases where there was no time for the elder to go into what the monk had brought to him, as if it were five minutes before Midnight Mass with a queue of people waiting to make their confession. One might justify the scantiness of the advice by saying that these stories point to the hard work required to follow even this apparently simple advice. But there is something else here: the recognition that it is often the very experience of opening the heart which brings healing and insight, and not the elder's subsequent commentary. This brings to mind the many stories about the desert fathers' insistence that they teach primarily by example rather than by words, and their refusal to make rules or to prescribe. Barsanuphius, the great solitary of Gaza in the early sixth century, often refused to lay down a rule when asked to do so: he recognised that laws and obligations could short-circuit the growth he was there to encourage, pointing out that Jesus preached the Good News but did not compel anyone to believe it.²⁷ Elsewhere he notes that a rule sets a limit, and he does not wish to restrict what the Lord empowers.²⁸ (11)

The elder's qualities of availability and patience are further indicators that the role is not one of controlled "directing" but of "being present to or accompanying." Often the brothers would be hesitant to bother the old man with their thoughts; the way such reluctance can play into resistance strategies is obvious. One brother was hesitant to bother Poemen during Lent; Poemen

reminds him, "We are to bar the door of our lips, not of our cell."²⁹ John Colobos worked with a brother who kept forgetting what John advised him, and who was embarrassed to keep coming back for a reminder; John told him not to hesitate to come to him, "For even if all Scetis came, it would not exhaust the grace of Christ."³⁰ (12) [KEY: Firestone idea that people can only take so much intimacy, my theory is that intimacy requires grace and so people get tired of the humility it takes to be in continual relationship]Macarius of Alexandria kept to a balanced programme of life which made time for the needs of the brothers.³¹ This is not to say that they suffered fools gladly; Antony the Great screened visitors by using a monastic receptionist who would announce callers as "from Egypt" (those who were politely refused admission) or as "from Jerusalem" (those who were welcomed as being serious about spiritual matters).³² The same brother who struggled for three years before confessing to Abba Zeno later went back and confessed the same thing again as a test of Zeno's discernment, even though the thought no longer troubled him: his confession was met with silence followed by the comment, "Don't be ridiculous."³³ Barsanuphius finally tells Euthymius not to bother him with any more questions or letters.³⁴

Nonetheless, one of the most impressive qualities of the old men when dealing with the young was their great patience. Poemen, the "Shepherd," was particularly famous for taking people as they were, and for being willing to wait until they were ready to change. One story is told of a monk who moved in with a woman who then gave birth to their child. Other monks were scandalised and wouldn't have anything to do with them. Poemen sent over a gift of wine when the woman gave birth; through this kindness, the brother came to see how he had been unfaithful to his true vocation.³⁵ In another case, Poemen saw repentance growing in a woman who was living as a prostitute (she gave her earnings as alms); he was willing to wait for her repentance to bear fruit despite the scandal (or fascination) her life was causing others as she started to take on more customers so as to be able to give more in alms to the poor.³⁶ Poemen would even put up with outright denial by a brother, saying that in such cases one should not reprimand, but stir the soul to repentance by saying "Do not lose heart, be on guard."³⁷ Isidore the Priest was famous for taking on difficult monks who had exhausted the patience of their own abbats.³⁸

The old men recognized themselves in the monks who were troubled, and the source of their sometimes astonishing patience was their experience that compassion in solidarity was the only way forward. (13) They could not force a brother to open his heart; they might invite, encourage, and give an example themselves, but sometimes all they could do was wait. Again, it was not their own diagnosis of the problem that was central to the process. Climacus wrote that even if a spiritual father had clairvoyant awareness of a brother's sins, he was not to reveal that knowledge to the brother, but was to urge him to open his heart, for it is that admission of troubles that brings forgiveness and comfort.³⁹(13)

One issue addressed in some of the apophthegmata was the very practical one of finding an abba whom one could trust to be discerning and compassionate. One of the abbats in Cassian's Conferences admits that not all of the old men are equally perfect and tested.⁴⁰ Poemen told monks to go only to someone whom their heart trusted.⁴¹ He also noted, "Many of our fathers have become very courageous in asceticism, but in fineness of perception there are very few."⁴² One of the anonymous sayings warns against confusing trust with covert manipulation: it cautions against finding an abba who was according to one's own tastes, to whom one would go "not so you would obey his will, but so that he would obey yours."⁴³ Such a scenario, of course, would subvert the whole process, which rested on the assumption that one's own will was too warped by the Fall to be trusted. Irénée Hausherr summarised this danger: "The wondrous transformation of someone [from slave to faithful servant to child of God] took place by the total substitution of the divine will for the human one. Someone who does not consent to this abnegation fools himself if he thinks he has or seeks a spiritual father. What he is looking for is a complicity."⁴⁴

When It Did Not Work Out

But sometimes things would not work out through no fault of the trusting disciple. Two kinds of cases appear in the apophthegmata. The first, more benign, situation arose when someone's abba could not make sense of something offered to him for discernment. This was especially the case with dreams or visions, which could be bewildering. In some cases, the brother seeks specialist advice and is then sent back to his original abba.⁴⁵ In another and quite famous case, Palladius, author of the Lausiac History, went from the Cells to Scetis to see

someone about his concupiscence: he felt that in Scetis he would find the real experts.⁴⁶

The more dangerous cases concerned abbas who were overly harsh with their disciples, or who responded to a brother's opening of heart with indignation or condemnation; typically, these stories are about the intervention of another abba who saves the young monk from despair.⁴⁷ One example is a salutary lesson for anyone engaged in pastoral or counselling work; a brother comes to his abba to reveal a problem, but rather than admitting straightaway what he has been struggling with, he says, "If a thought of this kind came upon someone, could he still be saved?" The old man replies, "He would already have lost his soul." The brother draws the obvious conclusion and heads off for town, stopping on the way to have another go with the same question, this time with Abba Sylvanus, who sees through the subterfuge and works with him.⁴⁸ Such stories are closely akin to the many stories which condemn the harsh treatment of disciples by their elders; the desert fathers seemed to have an acute awareness of how easily discipline could tip over into sadism.⁴⁹

The other side of the contract, of course, was the disciple's unreserved trust in the abba. It was this total giving over of the self to the elder that made the betrayals of trust described above so devastating. But there could be abuses on the side of the disciples, too. It has been noted above that the inability to trust another person can show itself in a temptation to self-discernment. It can also show in the opposite extreme, a tendency to shop around for a congenial opinion. In places like Nitria and Scetis, where there were many abbas nearby, it was common for monks to visit one after the other in search of wisdom. So far so good: but sometimes monks would (perhaps unconscious of what they were doing) play off one abba against another by comparing their advice on specific points. Abba Arsenius encountered a case like this when a young monk came to him, bothered by the thought that he should move from the desert into a monastery. He had been to Paphnutius, who had given him some basic advice, and then to Abba John, who modified Paphnutius' advice, and when he came to Arsenius, Arsenius heard the saga and said, "Do as the others have told you. I have nothing to say but that."⁵⁰ Barsanuphius and John dealt with this issue, especially when both of them were serving as spiritual fathers and thus could be consulted by the same person. John's basic line was that a monk should always

consult the same father, for as the situation of the monk's life would change, so would the father's counsel. To consult someone else would be to distort this interplay.⁵¹ As for getting a second opinion, John was blunt: to do so was to test God, for God had already spoken through his saint.⁵² Similar to this was John's wonderful reply to a monk who consulted both John and Barsanuphius without telling them that he had hedged his bets. John's comment was: "The God of Barsanuphius and of John is one," and so too would be their advice.⁵³ The disciple's fidelity to one abba was also a means of preventing a monk from spilling his thoughts and problems to everyone within earshot, a practice the old men knew was unhelpful for all concerned: the monk telling everything to everyone would lose the focus provided by the discernment of his own elder, would not receive due attention from those he pestered, and might actually upset other monks who were not able to bear what he had to say.⁵⁴ The result would be sadness for the blabbermouth and scandal among the victims of his indiscretion.

This review raises several questions. First, there is the issue of developments within the monastic world after the time of the apophthegmata. Secondly, there is the question of how the practice of manifestation of thoughts relates to confession of sins, and to the ecclesiastical structures of penance which are still a part of Christian life and practice. Third, one might wonder what has come of this practice today.

Manifestation of Thoughts in Later Monastic Tradition

There were developments within the desert tradition as the practice of the manifestation of thoughts, and the role of the spiritual elder, evolved over time. For these developments one must turn to the texts subsequent to the apophthegmata themselves, particularly the correspondence associated with Barsanuphius and John, from Gaza in the early to mid-sixth century, and the writings of John Climacus, abbot at Sinai in the seventh century. One cannot argue for some line of strict evolution over the two hundred years covered by these sources; neither the topic nor the texts lend themselves to such analysis. What one does note are shifts in perspective, developments in terminology, evolving roles.

These developments were of various kinds. First, there is an increasing tendency in monastic literature after the apophthegmata to talk about the role of the spiritual elder, and one detects the emergence of a sort of specialist “spiritual father.” (16) [COMMENT: WE LIVE IN AN ELDERLESS SOCIETY, COMPARE ROHR’S WORK]Several factors contributed to this development. First of all, as coenobitic monastic communities developed, a new dynamic of spiritual authority necessarily developed. Rules, institutions, structures began to develop for the sake of communal organisation and discipline, and the qualities required of a coenobitic abbot were not identical to those possessed by a desert elder. Some of the burden of formation of younger monks was shifted on to the community and its life, and new tasks were required of the senior in charge: so arose the demon of administration. One should not draw too sharp a distinction between the desert abba labouring with his disciple and the coenobitic abbot guiding a community, but inevitably the one-on-one, or abba-and-small group, teaching-by-example model of the desert must be modified in community. Jerome describes the practice in Pachomian monasteries of having the deans visit the cells of the brothers before the ninth hour, “so that if someone is troubled by thoughts, he may be consoled by conversation.”⁵⁵

The tensions are well illustrated in the Pachomian texts, where the two ways are neatly compared in Pachomius’ own biography, and the demands of coenobitic leadership illustrated in the failures and successes of those who followed him: sanctity and charity were not enough to qualify someone for the role of spiritual head of a monastery.⁵⁶ Stewardship, a certain holy shrewdness, vision, and other qualities we think of when appraising church leaders, came to be necessary in the monastic life. What this allowed was a certain division of roles, where it might happen that a monk’s spiritual father was not necessarily his abbot; or, in another scenario, an abbot might be called on to exercise a ministry of spiritual guidance for which he felt unprepared. Both possibilities are illustrated in the texts, the first in the letters of Barsanuphius and John, the second in the writings of Climacus. The result was an increasing definition of the role of the “spiritual father” (note this term) alongside other roles such as hegumen or abbot, priest, and so on. These roles could be combined in one person, but this was not necessarily the case.

Barsanuphius and John, although having a relationship with a coenobitic community, lived in solitude and communicated with monks by letter. They served as spiritual fathers to certain monks of the *cœnobium* with the abbot's knowledge and permission. There were exceptions to this: sometimes a monk might prefer to communicate with one of the solitaries because he was too embarrassed to speak directly to the abbot. Barsanuphius takes the line that such a brother should be received and allowed to make his confession rather than carry around the burden of his troubles.⁵⁷ Some monks consulted the abbot about their thoughts, but John notes that not everyone should speak with the abbot about such things, and Dorotheus complains that some of the brothers are upset by his manifesting his conscience to the abbot:⁵⁸ how different from the context of the apophthegmata! As the spiritual father became a recognised figure in his own right, sometimes quite apart from the monastic authority structures, the sort of "spiritual direction" familiar to modern Christians began to appear. Non-monastic Christians had always sought out holy monks like Antony for advice, but in the letters of Barsanuphius and John it is obvious that secular Christians received regular, on-going guidance from them just as monks did.

A second development came with the writing down of traditional monastic wisdom. This took one stage further the process already sighed about in one of the apophthegmata:

An old man said, "The prophets wrote books, then came our Fathers who put them into practice. Those who came after them learnt them by heart. Then came the present generation, who have written them out and put them into their window seats without using them."⁵⁹

The original, charismatic approach of the desert was not sure enough for later monks, who wanted written guidelines on how to deal with problematic issues. This began as early as the end of the fourth century, when the practical psychology of the desert fathers began to be systematised and labelled. The *logismoi* or passions came to be listed, discussed, and arranged in various orders, most notably by Evagrius at the end of the fourth century and then in the west by John Cassian in the early fifth century. Evagrius' eight principal *logismoi* were presented as the agenda for the "practical" life (*praktike*), that initial though really lifelong work of spiritual progress, and his list was offered and used as a diagnostic tool in that work.⁶⁰ Already, by focusing on areas of potential difficulty,

Evagrius helped to prepare the way for the shift in emphasis from “thought” to “sin,” a shift in perspective obscured in modern translations where the word “passion” is used to translate *logismoií*, a regrettable convention which restricts the scope of the Greek original. Evagrius’ work was carried forward by Cassian and by John Climacus, a man of amazing psychological insight who was intent on organising his insights and presenting them in an easy-to-use format.

In the letters of Barsanuphius and John, references are made to the Lives and Sayings of the Fathers, the collections of writings about the old men of the desert.⁶¹ This is itself an important development. The difficulties with the charismatic model operative in the desert, apparent even there when monks could not find a good abba or had difficulties communicating with their abba, began to be addressed as a library of material began to form which could help disciples and abbots stay in touch with the original inspiration of their way of life. The inescapable truth remained that insight and discernment lie in the gift of God rather than in books, but criteria begin to appear for how a spiritual father might be known. In the letters of Barsanuphius and John, this is part of the dynamic of formation revealed by the correspondence as Barsanuphius helps John prepare for his vocation as a spiritual guide and then, as in his turn, John helps to prepare Dorotheus. Criteria are outlined for the spiritual father, advice given about how to serve as one, and encouragement provided. Doubtless this sort of practical wisdom was handed on in the desert before this time, but once it is written down in such a form (i.e., not stories about Abba X and brother Y, but: “this is what you do when brother Y comes to you . . .”), there was no going back to the “pre-professional” world of the earlier period. One remembers the warning about not trusting in how-to books.⁶²

In the writings of John Climacus one finds an actual treatise addressed to those who are given the task of being “Shepherd” to a flock. Despite Climacus’ warning that the true teacher works through the “energy of illumination” rather than from notes on various writers,⁶³ he provides a text which has been quarried for centuries by those who have undertaken this task either by chance or necessity.

Along with the specialised vocabulary and manuals of practice came an increasingly standard range of titles applied to the spiritual elder, such as

Shepherd, Pilot, Healer, Teacher, Bearer, Counsellor, Intercessor, Mediator. Many of these can be found in the apophthegmata, but not routinely and not as formal terms for the spiritual elder. Climacus uses them all, often in ways which suggest encouragement for those hesitant to assume authority, or correction for those tempted to misuse it. To complement the familiar eight-fold system of logismoi, Climacus provides three degrees of discernment,⁶⁴ five kinds of apadeia,⁶⁵ three ways to deal with thoughts,⁶⁶ four ways to discover the will of God,⁶⁷ four degrees of the bearing of another's sins,⁶⁸ and a description of the stages of confession,⁶⁹ much of this in a work (The Ladder of Divine Ascent) itself divided into thirty "steps."

Not surprisingly, in these later texts the advice given by the elder receives more and more emphasis. In the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John this was inevitable since the very medium of encounter relied on the written word. Even there, however, one sees the wisdom of monks who knew when to speak and when to keep silent, and who knew when to challenge a disciple's demands for precise guidance and rules. Barsanuphius tells John that he should continually meditate upon what he has written to him,⁷⁰ and tells Dorotheus that he can resist the passions by meditating always upon Barsanuphius' letter.⁷¹ The father is said to speak by the spirit of God;⁷² it is God speaking through the mouth of the father;⁷³ simply the memory of Barsanuphius' name will induce God to sow in the disciple's heart what he must do or say.⁷⁴ These letters are imbued throughout with prudence and with a hesitation to employ the spiritual authority so obviously possessed by the spiritual father. Humility and humour characterise both Barsanuphius and John throughout: in no way are the letters indicative of a fossilised, authoritarian, decadent form of spiritual guidance. Nonetheless they speak of a monastic world which has moved on from that of the apophthegmata.

One sees that the relationship between elder and disciple has taken on a more formal, structured quality. In the Gaza correspondence, the bond between spiritual father and spiritual son is described as a "covenant," with solemn obligations on both sides. This is not to suggest that such an idea was not to be found among the abbas of the apophthegmata; indeed, the notion was pervasive, but it was not something which was itself the object of discussion. Commitment was assumed. In the letters of Barsanuphius and John, the binding aspect of this covenant lies in the disciple's obligation to carry out the father's commands. In

this context, it is not a matter of obedience offered to an abba with whom a young monk was living, an obedience which would be manifested in many different, usually tacit, ways in a shared life; this is now a very specific sort of obedience, operating in a relationship which was based exclusively on the communication of thoughts for prayerful discernment. The whole weight of the relationship has come to rest on this communication, and some ground rules are established. Along with the traditional sort of advice about doing everything with counsel, both Barsanuphius and John tell correspondents that they need write to them only about thoughts which persist.⁷⁵ There are discussions in the letters about the difference between a father's opinion (gnwmh), counsel (oumboulh), and command (entolh), which demand different degrees of obedience.⁷⁶ Disciples were anxious about endangering the covenant by failing to carry out the father's advice.⁷⁷ These anxieties would have been present back in Scetis, too, but here they emerge on the level of policy.

Along with the establishment of these protocols came more developed explanations of what the elder's side of the covenant entailed. For example, a particular theme found in the apophthegmata comes to the fore in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John and also in Climacus' works: the idea that the spiritual elder "bears the burdens" of the disciple, taking on his sins and struggles, assuming responsibility for him at the judgment before God. In the apophthegmata this theme often appears in the form of solidarity with the temptations of the younger monk; the abba tells the disciple that they will fight the temptation together, and sometimes admits to the same struggle (though occasionally in a pastoral dissimulation).⁷⁸ Generally these are seen as short-term undertakings, focusing on a particular struggle for a limited period. In later literature, as the idea of a "spiritual father" rises out of the broader complex of the abba-disciple relationship, the bearing of the disciple's burdens becomes explicit, longer-term, and a part of the "contract" established between elder and disciple. Euthymius gives his struggles to Barsanuphius, who has "ascribed" (upergrayaV) them to himself.⁷⁹ This commitment is not something undertaken lightly, but once accepted is operative now and into the next life. A monk can say, "Pardon me, Lord, I am in the charge of the Abba, having cast my burden on to him."⁸⁰ Barsanuphius tells Dorotheus, in response to a request for prayers, that once someone has said, "I will bear your concern," he cannot then

be unconcerned, but likewise the one whose concern has been taken on is obligated to try and keep the father's command.⁸¹ Thus the contract.

A word about the writings of John Climacus. Climacus' works contain the best and the worst of the early monastic traditions. One minute the reader is horrified at his harshness and his praise for crude and even dishonest techniques of monastic management; the next minute he describes a scene of breathtaking gentleness. The same man who describes the monastic prison and warns monastic superiors that they must on no account show too much of their own humility, also portrays the spiritual father taking the hand of those "oppressed by the crowd of thoughts" and helping them enter the Holy of Holies, there to see Christ resting upon the mystical and hidden Table. And those who are ill, or who are like little children, are to be borne upon the elder's shoulders and carried through the door: for all must find their way to the Lord.⁸² When one reads Climacus' *The Shepherd*, a work entirely devoted to the qualities a monastic and spiritual father should have, one senses that he is responding to a very insecure public. Along with the expected remarks about charisma and discernment, responsibility, and so on, he addresses some anxieties. He takes aside abbots who are afraid to speak to those in their charge, and who refrain from saying even profitable things: Climacus tells them to WRITE IT DOWN if they can't bring themselves to speak.⁸³ He realises that they will feel like very unwilling physicians confronted by people begging for painful but necessary surgery, but they must respond.⁸⁴ He cautions that monks will have expectations of their superiors, and will regard their abbot as a model, so he must take care not to show them his faults.⁸⁵ He says it is potentially disastrous for someone still bothered by the passions to be a shepherd to others, but notes that there have been cases where such a person has ruled over a community of more perfect monks and himself been healed.⁸⁶ One of the scholia to the treatise notes that there are some shepherds who will not receive the thoughts of monks in their care, but work by issuing commands on all sides and keeping things on that level, refusing to engage in the real labour of spiritual progress;⁸⁷ Climacus himself writes, in a marvellous phrase, "Do not teach the simpler monks complex things about thoughts, but strive to convert the complex monks to simplicity."⁸⁸ Climacus' *Shepherd* was the perfect gift for the reluctant abbot: a summary of the tradition, some advice to the unsure, a further sign that the desert spirit had

become the conventional and official method, even where the spirit seemed not yet to have visited.

Manifestation of Thoughts and Confession of Sins

The ascetical practice of the manifestation of thoughts was not the same thing as the later practice of confession of sins to a priest, followed by absolution and communion. The opening of the heart was not restricted to matters of sin, nor was it seen in the first place as a means of receiving assurance of forgiveness. And, of course, few of the desert fathers were priests. In general one might observe that people today require much more precise understandings of such matters than early Christians did.

In the first place, as far as sin and forgiveness are concerned, one needs to remember that all of monastic life had a penitential quality. All of it was directed towards acknowledging the fallen human condition, and seeking God's forgiveness and salvation. The foundational work of the monastic life was the *praktikh*, the "practical life," of seeking to follow the commandments perfectly. To follow the commandments required discovering and digging out the obstacles in the way. Thus the emphasis on the "passions" or *logismoi*: the clues to the inner world of the heart, that landscape full of obstacles but known to be the territory on which lay the path to the City of God. The way to get a look at the *logismoi* was by opening the heart in the practice of manifestation of thoughts.

Even within the *apophthegmata*, there is some ambiguity about what was spoken of in this revelation of one's inner life. Many sayings and stories are about the confession of a sinful obsession or shameful thought. Few are about Brother X's bringing to the elder his thoughts about weeding the turnip patch that day. But both aspects were considered part of the process, and the emphasis on shameful thoughts in the surviving stories probably has a good deal to do with dramatic effect and the difficulties attendant upon facing up to embarrassing aspects of one's life. It was the whole of the monk's life, not just the untidy bits, which was to be brought out into light of day. Choosing just the "sins" or "sinful thoughts" would mean that the monk was deciding what to tell and what not, a decision he was not yet ready to make. Because the elder could see so much more than the young disciple could, the disciple could not pre-empt

the process by screening his thoughts and selecting just the “sinful ones.” In time this is what tended to happen, but in its original practice, the manifestation of thoughts covered everything.

There are some other reminders to us not to interpret the stories anachronistically as being about the confession of sins. The classic scriptural texts used by the church to support its claim to absolve sins and assure pardon do not appear in the apophthegmata. Matthew 18:18 on binding and loosing, Matthew 16:19 on seventy times seven, John 20:23 on the gift of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins: none of these texts appear in the index to the Solesmes edition of the apophthegmata, the most thorough index available. James 5:16a, “Confess your sins to one another,” appears in one story, but there the emphasis falls on prayer and forgiveness rather than on confession. In the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, John tells a layman that he can absolve his own sin by doing good for someone: “It is not to the apostles alone that it was said, ‘Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven:’ it was said also to sinners.”⁸⁹ On two occasions when correspondents ascribe to Barsanuphius the power to bind and to loose, and ask him to use it for them, he refuses to take up the point.⁹⁰ Even in this early period, these scriptural texts were understood to refer to ecclesiastical authority over sin and reconciliation. They do not figure in the monastic milieu examined here, for the work between disciple and abba was something of a different order.

One should remember that except in great centres like Nitria, the desert was not a markedly “ecclesiastical” environment. The monks were in communion with their churches, and some were priests, but they were not living their asceticism with a primarily institutional frame of reference. The elder was not assessing transgressions, determining penances, and granting absolution as he looked into a monk’s heart. Sometimes he said nothing at all. The practice of manifesting thoughts turned on issues of humility and obedience, not of penitence and pardon. One must remember, it was primarily a question of thoughts, of inner processes, and not in the first place of exterior “sins.” (23)

When monks did sin, they would have sought the means of forgiveness available to all Christians at this time: asking pardon of someone they had wronged, relying on the prayers of others, attending the Eucharist. Their deed would

certainly have been confessed to their abba as part of their general accountability to him, but they would not have participated in a formal, ecclesiastically determined ritual of penance and absolution. Ecclesiastical penance was still developing, and in the fourth and fifth centuries was still primarily concerned with the major, public sins such as apostasy, adultery, and murder, and was administered by bishops. The state of the question in the desert can be illustrated by one of the letters from the Gaza correspondence. John is asked by a monk how he should ask for forgiveness of his sins: should he say to his spiritual father, "Forgive me," or should he say, "Ask forgiveness for me [from God]"? John's answer is that those who have died and gone to the Lord should be asked, "Forgive me," presumably since they are in a privileged position to be dealing with such matters. But a father still among the living was to be asked, "Pray for me that I may receive forgiveness."⁹¹

Monks were concerned about their sins, and about their future prospects. The Pachomian materials contain many stories about assurance of forgiveness, often by way of revelation from God. The Pachomian Letter of Ammon describes a revelation of Theodore, the early Pachomian leader, that although many Christians had sinned after their baptism, they had kept the faith and the Lord had accepted their repentance. On the basis of this revelation, Theodore gathers the monks and proclaims forgiveness for those who have truly wept over the sins they have committed since baptism. Even more assuring, continues the story, the great Antony received a similar revelation and sent a letter to Theodore backing up the assurance of pardon. Theodore proclaims to the monks, "God has indeed received our prayer and has wiped out the sins of some of us monks who are presently so bitterly weeping here. It is with foreknowledge of them that he has spoken as I have said and our father Antony has written."⁹² In other texts about Pachomius himself, there is a story (in three versions) about a monk who pours a libation to an idol and confesses to Pachomius, who assigns him a life of penance until death, with the assurance of forgiveness from God.⁹³ These are unusual stories, and are more illustrative of efforts to proclaim the spiritual power and authority of Pachomius and his successors than they are of ordinary means of confession and forgiveness.

The development of rites of penance and the emergence of private confession of sins followed by private conferral of absolution has an extremely complicated

history which is by no means clear despite major studies over the past few decades. What can be said is that the monastic practice of manifestation of thoughts was one of the elements which merged with ecclesiastical systems of penance to produce the forms familiar today. This happened in both east and west during the period from about 800 to 1000, although the evolution was somewhat different in the various churches.⁹⁴ What originated as the practice described above became increasingly restricted to confession of sins for which canonical forgiveness was sought, and this canonical assurance was given by priests and bishops. The exclusively monastic and often lay practice of spiritual consultation took other forms or died out as private confession became a key element of “spiritual direction.”

From the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Centuries to the Twentieth

The desert fathers were rarely intellectuals. They did not communicate with their disciples by way of syllogism and analogy. Nor do they speak to modern people on the level of scientific training. Somehow these sayings and stories undercut knowledge amassed and poses struck, reminding the reader of something occasionally glimpsed, and secretly longed for: the world as it was meant to be, and human beings as they were created to be. One key to understanding the ascetical work of the desert monks is to be found in their commitment to radical honesty. This honesty touched everything they did, beginning with their own hearts opened to the light of truth, and served as the basis for the relationships they enjoyed with one another and with the societies around them, freeing them to see God. When these texts are read again and again, one begins to realise that the stunning simplicity and apparent naïveté of their wisdom has all the naïveté of Paul’s stunningly simple definition of wisdom in 1 Corinthians 2: Christ crucified, bared to the world, and free for new life. Where does one find this sort of wisdom today?

Monasticism began to produce a differentiation of roles when the anti-structure of the desert was complemented, and then supplanted, by the communal monastic life. This tendency, persistent to the present day, affected the church as a whole and the effects are very much still evident. A study of the desert approach can be extremely helpful for understanding what sacramental confession is about. Simply a shift in perspective such as that from “sin” to “secret” can be a

useful complement to usual ways of thinking about sin and forgiveness. In churches which have a regular use of sacramental confession, there have been significant adjustments in practice and understanding in recent years—in both east and west, for various reasons—and as scholars trace liturgical and theological roots of modern practice, it would be well to include in ongoing reflection the experience of the desert fathers.

For Christians and for churches which do not have a tradition of sacramental confession, the desert fathers may offer a challenge to individualistic conceptions of sin and forgiveness which normally rely on private prayer and communal but non-specific confessions in worship: is there something about sharing the secrets of one's heart with another person, lay or clerical, which liberates in a way that solitary confession in prayer does not? Should the option of recourse to the pastor or some other Christian in times of trial or confusion become normative rather than exceptional?

Another way in which the desert tradition continues to have some influence is in what has come to be known as "spiritual direction." There has been a trend lately away from using that term, and an avoidance of the accompanying title "spiritual director." Some of that hesitation is due to awareness that "direction" can mean manipulation, and manipulation can be thoroughly enjoyed by director and directee without either having a clue what is going on, and somewhere in the process genuine honesty has been squeezed out. This is not to say that simply changing terminology also changes what occurs in the process, but a shift in nomenclature can heighten awareness. It is not easy to find language to describe the sort of process the desert monks undertook; some people talk about "soul friends" while some people find the term to be a bit cloying; "spiritual midwifery" probably gets closer to what actually goes on, but sounds a bit clinical. In the desert there were not special titles: "Abba" or "Amma" was all-inclusive, saying all that needed to be said. Later one reads of "spiritual fathers," "shepherds," and the array of monastic officials. It is just a few steps from there to courses offered on how to give "spiritual direction," beginning, intermediate, and advanced. The benefit, however, of the growth in this area is that it has helped to break the identification of spiritual guidance with ordained ministry: a priest may (and should be) a spiritual guide, but a spiritual guide need not be a

priest. There are many people who would open their hearts to anyone but a priest.

The closest thing that modern people have to the full disclosure of the secrets of the heart, good, bad, indifferent, is probably the sort of work that goes on with sponsors and in group meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups. Part of the therapy is to tell one's story to someone else who has "been there," and to go to that sponsor whenever the temptation to have a drink may arise. Among the twelve steps of A.A., an agenda of growth which would fit very well among the lists in Evagrius, Cassian, or Climacus, is an explicit acknowledgment of one's utter dependence on the help of a "higher power." But for all the good work that such groups do, this still is not the solution for everyone. Psychotherapy can cover the broad range of topics relevant to a manifestation of thoughts, but is often wary of the religious side. Where then, can one go?

The answer surely lies in gathering up the strands which have managed to become unravelled over the centuries and knitting them into a form that provides trust, spontaneity, freedom from game-playing, and a way to speak and to hear the truth. Some will find that in sacramental confession, but it will be a rather different sort of confession than the one many people have grown up with. Some will find it in a structured dialogue with a wise Christian elder. Some will find it in covenanted groups which are "safe" but challenging. In each case, Christian faith, sound psychological insight, and an awareness of the ease with which anyone can slip into unreality will be necessary. Although the stream which flowed from the desert has gone underground and has divided many times, it still flows.

Notes

¹ Reprinted, with kind permission, from Sobornost/ECR 12 (1990): 25-39; 143-156. A version of this paper was given at a "Peregrination" held at Gyrovague House, Toronto, Ontario, April 1990.

² Vita Antonii 28-29, 34, 41-42; Greek in PG 26.884888, 893, 904-905 and English translation by R. C. Gregg, The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York, 1980), pp. 52-54, 57, 62-64.

³ Poemen suppl. 2 as in J.-C. Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata patrum*, 2nd ed., *Subsidia hagiographica* 36 (Brussels, 1984), pp. 29–30 and in Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the Alphabetical Collection* (London and Kalamazoo, 1975), pp. 162–163 (reckoned as Poemen 189).

⁴ Logion 5.30. The writings of Isaias are most accessible in the French translation by H. de Broc, *Abba Isaïe: Recueil ascétique, Spiritualité orientale* 7 bis (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1976); see page 81 for this text.

⁵ Greek in PG 88.1085C and English translation by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Classics of Western Spirituality Series* (New York, 1982), p. 257.

⁶ Antony 1, PG 65.76 and Ward, *Sayings*, p. 1.

⁷ Macarius 33, PG 65.273–277 and Ward, *Sayings*, pp. 113–115.

⁸ Cf. the apophthegm in the Syriac *Paradise of the Fathers*: “Abba Poemen said that Abba Athanasius had said: ‘if someone possesses good deeds, before God will give him a gift on his own behalf (for it is known that one cannot perfect himself by labour or through property), if he opens himself to his neighbour, then he receives the gift by virtue of his neighbour, and finds rest.’” Syriac as in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. VII (Leipzig, 1897; rpt Hildesheim, 1968), p. 826, no. 356. An English translation of the same saying, but from a different manuscript, is in E.A.W. Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (London, 1907; rpt Seattle, 1978) II, p. 225, no. 362. The text is also contained in one of the volumes of the Solesmes translation of the sayings, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Nouveau recueil* (abbreviated henceforth as SPN) (Solesmes, 1977), p. 240.

⁹ The saying is variously attributed: Poemen 101, attributed to John Kolobos, PG 65.345 and Ward, *Sayings*, p. 152; *Vitae patrum* III.177, attr. to Poemen, PL 73.798; Cassian, *Conference* 2.11 and *Vitae patrum* V.4.25, attr. by Moses to Sarapion quoting Theonas; and finally, in an anonymous version in the series edited by F. Nau, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 13 (1908), pp. 53–54, no. 164 (English translation by B. Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, rev. ed. [Fairacres, Oxford, 1986], pp. 7–8, no. 32).

¹⁰ Poemen 99, PG 65.345 and Ward, *Sayings*, p. 152.

¹¹ Nau 592/50 as in the Solesmes volume, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Série des anonymes* (abbreviated henceforth SPA) (Solesmes/Bellefontaine, 1985), p. 227. This collection is unpublished in Greek, but cf. Paul Euergetinos, *Sunacxcß* (Athens, 1983), I 20.3.8, p. 268.

¹² Greek text published by R. Draguet in *Byzantion* 35 (1965), p. 48 and translated in Regnault’s *Abbé Isaias*, p. 297, no. 6.

¹³ Nau 592/50, as above.

- ¹⁴ Apophthegm from the Ethiopian Collection 14.67, French translation in SPN, p. 331.
- ¹⁵ Logion 9.11 in Abbé Isaiās, p. 106 (also found in the Solesmes volume *Les sentences des pères du désert: Troisième recueil et tables* [Solesmes, 1976], pp. 74–75); cf. the Greek Systematic Collection saying XI.50, unpublished in Greek but translated in the same volume, p. 87.
- ¹⁶ Discourse 5.66.9–10, Greek text in *Dorothee de Gaza: Oeuvres spirituelles, Sources chrétiennes* 92 (Paris, 1963), p. 258 and English translation by Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheus of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series* 33 (Kalamazoo, 1977), p. 126. Dorotheus devotes this entire chapter of the Discourses to the topic, “That One Must Not Follow One’s Own Judgment.”
- ¹⁷ Conferences 2.11; Latin in E. Pichery, *Jean Cassien: Conférences, Sources chrétiennes* 42, p. 122 and English translation by E.C.S. Gibson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* 11, p. 312.
- ¹⁸ Poemen 63.
- ¹⁹ Apophthegm 509 from MS. Paris Coislin 126. The Greek is unpublished; this translation is from SPA, pp. 184–186.
- ²⁰ Nau 111, Greek in ROC 12 (1907), 402 and English translation by C. Stewart, *World of the Desert Fathers* (Fairacres, Oxford, 1986), p. 37. The text is virtually identical to Nau 244, ROC 14 (1909), p. 364 with translation in Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 34, no. 112.
- ²¹ Nau 510 as in SPA, pp. 186–187; Dorotheus, Discourse V.66.11–27, SC 92, p. 260 and Wheeler, pp. 126–127.
- ²² H.M. I.56–57, Greek in A.–J. Festugière, *Historia monachorum in Aegypto, Subsidia Hagiographica* 53 (Brussels, 1961, 1971), pp. 31–32 and English translation by Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (London and Kalamazoo, 1981), p. 61.
- ²³ Macarius 3, PG 65.261–264 and Ward, *Sayings*, pp. 106–108.
- ²⁴ The Greek text of the letters of Barsanuphius and John is available in a partial (124 of 850 letters) critical edition by Derwas Chitty, *Patrologia orientalis* 31:3 (Paris, 1966) and in a complete but uncritical form in the edition by Nicodemus the Hagiorite (Venice, 1816) reprinted by S.N. Schoinas (Volos, 1960). The letters are most readily accessible in the French translation by L. Regnault et al., *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza, Correspondance* (Solesmes, 1972). The difficulty is that the numbering differs from edition to edition. In this article, C will indicate Chitty’s number, V will indicate numbers from the 1960 Volos edition, and R will indicate numbers from the 1972 Solesmes translation. The text quoted here is C 64/V 159/R 63.
- ²⁵ Conferences 2.11, as cited above.
- ²⁶ Paphnutius 3, PG 65.380 and Ward, *Sayings*, p. 170.

- ²⁷ C/V/R 35.
- ²⁸ C 86/V 181/R 85.
- ²⁹ Poemen 58, PG 65.336 and Ward, Sayings, p. 147.
- ³⁰ John Colobos 18, PG 65.209–212 and Ward, Sayings, pp. 76–77.
- ³¹ *Historia Lausiaca* 20.3, Greek in C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius, Texts and Studies* 6, 2 vols, (Cambridge, 1898, 1904), II.63 and English translation by R.T. Meyer, *Ancient Christian Writers* 34 (New York, 1964), p. 71.
- ³² *Historia Lausiaca* 21.8, Butler, II.66 and Meyer, pp. 73–74.
- ³³ Nau 510, cited above.
- ³⁴ C 72/V 140/R 71.
- ³⁵ Greek in Evergetinos, *Sunaxcē* III.2.8.22, p. 46 and French in SPN, p. 182.
- ³⁶ Timothy 1, PG 65.429 and Ward, Sayings, pp. 198–199.
- ³⁷ Poemen 23, PG 65.328 and in Ward, Sayings, p. 143.
- ³⁸ Isidore the Priest 1, PG 65.220 and in Ward, Sayings, p. 82.
- ³⁹ The Shepherd, Greek in PG 88.1196B and English translation in the revised edition of Lazarus Moore's translation of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston, 1978), p. 243, no. 84. The Shepherd is not included in Luibheid's translation, nor in the earlier edition of Moore's.
- ⁴⁰ Conferences 2.13, Latin in SC 42, p. 124 and English in Gibson, p. 313.
- ⁴¹ Poemen as in Guy, *Recherches*, p. 30, no. 14 in Ward, Sayings, p. 163, no. 201.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ⁴³ Nau 245, Greek in ROC 14 (1909), p. 364 and English in Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 34, no. 113.
- ⁴⁴ *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois, Orientalia christiana analecta* 144 (Rome, 1955), p. 165.
- ⁴⁵ Zachary 4, PG 65.180 and in Ward, Sayings, p. 58; Ethiopian Collection 13.39 as in SPN, pp. 296–298.
- ⁴⁶ *Historia Lausiaca* 23.1–6, Greek in Butler, p. II.74–77 and English in Meyer, pp. 81–83.
- ⁴⁷ N 217, Greek in ROC 14 (1909), pp. 357–358 and English in Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 28, no. 85; Cassian, Conferences 2:12–13, Latin in SC 42, pp. 124–130 and English in Gibson, pp. 313–315; Poemen 6, 11, 23 [cf. 90], PG 65.320–321, 324–325, 328 [344] and Ward, Sayings, pp. 139, 141–142, 143 [150–151].
- ⁴⁸ Nau 217, as cited above.
- ⁴⁹ See Macarius 21, PG 65.269–272 and Ward, Sayings, p. 111.

- ⁵⁰ Paphnutius 5, PG 65.380 and Ward, Sayings, p. 171.
- ⁵¹ V/R 364.
- ⁵² V/R 361.
- ⁵³ V/R 224.
- ⁵⁴ Isaias, Logia 6.2 and 9.1, French in Regnault and Broc, pp. 87 and 105.
- ⁵⁵ Ep. 22 35.2, Latin text edited by I. Hilberg in CSEL 54 (Vienna, 1910), p. 198 and English translation by C. C. Mierow, Ancient Christian Writers 33 (Westminster, MD, 1963), p. 70.
- ⁵⁶ For an account of Horsiesios' unhappy tenure as Father of the Koinonia, see the Bohairic Life of Pachomius 130–139, PK I, pp. 187–140 and First Greek Life 127–130, PK I, pp. 387–390.
- ⁵⁷ C/V/R 54.
- ⁵⁸ V/R 286.
- ⁵⁹ Nau 228, Greek in ROC 14 (1909), p. 361 and English in Ward, Wisdom, p. 31, no. 96.»
- ⁶⁰ See Evagrius' Praktikos for an introduction to his schema; Greek text edited by A. and C. Guillaumont, Evagre le Pontique: Traité pratique ou le moine, Sources chrétiennes 170–171 (Paris, 1971) and English translation by J. E. Bamberger, The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer, Cistercian Studies Series 4 (1972; rpt. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981).
- ⁶¹ R/V 386, 469, 547 etc.
- ⁶² In Nau 509, cited above.
- ⁶³ The Shepherd, PG. 88.1165C and English in the Boston translation, p. 231, no. 5.
- ⁶⁴ The Ladder, Step 26, PG 88.1013A and Luibheid, p. 229.
- ⁶⁵ PG 88.1025C–1028A and Luibheid, p. 238.
- ⁶⁶ PG 88.1029B and Luibheid, p. 240.
- ⁶⁷ PG 88.1057B and Luibheid, p. 244.
- ⁶⁸ The Shepherd, PG 88.1189B and in the Boston translation, p. 239, no. 57.
- ⁶⁹ The Ladder, Step 4, PG 88.708D–709A and Luibheid, pp. 108–109.
- ⁷⁰ C/V/R 10.
- ⁷¹ V/R 256.
- ⁷² C/V/R 13.
- ⁷³ V/R 382.
- ⁷⁴ V/R 263.

⁷⁵ V 90/R 165, V 143/R 215.

⁷⁶ C 65/V 160/R 64.

⁷⁷ V/R 273, 371.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Nau 179 (ROC 13 [1908], pp. 269–270 and Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 15, no. 47), 346 (ROC 17 [1912], pp. 297–298 and Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 58, no. 215), 354 (ROC 17 [1912], p. 300 and Ward, *Wisdom*, p. 61, no. 223). etc.

⁷⁹ C 69/V 165/R 68.

⁸⁰ V/R 243.

⁸¹ V/R 268.

⁸² The Shepherd, PG 88.1197C–1200A; English in the Boston translation, p. 244, no. 93.

⁸³ PG 88.1180A; English in the Boston translation, p. 235, no. 28.

⁸⁴ PG 88.1181C; English in the Boston translation, p. 235, no. 31.

⁸⁵ PG 88.1177B and 1184C; English in the Boston translation, pp. 234 and 237, nos. 23 and 39.

⁸⁶ PG 88.1185D–1188A and 1184C; English in the Boston translation, pp. 238 and 237, nos 47–48 and 41.

⁸⁷ Scholion B to Chapter 12, PG 88.1192B–C.

⁸⁸ PG 88.1200D–1201A; English in the Boston translation, p. 246, no. 95.

⁸⁹ R 849 (the Volos edition does not contain this letter).

⁹⁰ C 91/V 185/R 90, V/R 353.

⁹¹ V 706A/R 705.

⁹² Letter of Ammon 28–29; Greek in F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae, Subsidia hagiographica* 19 (Brussels, 1932), pp. 115–117 and English translation by Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia II: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, Cistercian Studies Series 46 (Kalamazoo, 1981), pp. 97–99.

⁹³ Paralipomena 10–11; Greek in Halkin, pp. 134–135 and English in Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia II*, pp. 31–33]; First Greek Life 85, Greek in Halkin, pp. 57–58 and English in Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia I: The Lives of Saint Pachomius*, pp. 355–356; Tenth Sahidic Life 7, in Veilleux, pp. 456–457.

⁹⁴ For the East see the Oxford D. Phil. thesis of Robert Barringer, *Ecclesiastical Penance in the Church of Constantinople: A Study of the Hagiographical Evidence to 983 AD* (1979), and for the West see, e.g., the survey by James Dallen in *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance, Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church* 3 (New York,