

9am Christian Learning

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Choosing Isolation for Spiritual Growth in the 4th Century

Thomas Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings of the Desert Fathers* of the Fourth Century says it best: "In the fourth century AD, the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia were peopled by a race of men and women who have left behind a strange reputation. They were the first Christian hermits, who abandoned the cities of the pagan world to live in solitude. Why did they do this? The reasons were many and various, but they can be summed up in one word as a quest for "salvation." And what was "salvation" to them? ...Society, which meant pagan society, limited by the horizons and prospects of life "in the world", was regarded by them as a shipwreck from which each single man had to swim for his life... The fact the Emperor was now Christian and that the "world" was coming to know the cross as a sign of temporal power only strengthened them in their resolve." (Introduction, p.3)

In 313, Constantine declares Christianity to be the new state religion of Rome. Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, reaffirming the tolerance of Christians and returning previously confiscated property to the churches. However, many scholars believe that only 10% of the Roman Empire were Christians by 300AD. By 380 AD, the Roman Empire officially declares that Christianity is the new state religion.

In the early church of the 4th century, a movement into the desert was begun. Abbas and Ammas of the desert became key people, respected for their discipline, devotion, and purity of heart. When people had a question that bothered them, they would go out into the desert, seeking a desert father or mother to guide them. In the most basic sense, these hermits became the primary sources for what would become monastic communities in later centuries. They were seekers after isolation, solitude, and silence.

Pachomius and Anthony the Great: individual founders of desert Monasticism. (Their stories will be shared briefly in class.)

Sayings of the Desert Fathers that offer us hints about what they found in the solitude and isolation they craved:

Abbot Pastor said: Do not dwell in a place where you see that others are envious of you, for you will not grow there.

One of the Fathers said: Just as it is impossible for a man to see his face in troubled water, so too, the soul, unless it be cleansed of alien thoughts, cannot pray to God.

A certain monk went to Abbot Moses in Scete and asked him for a good word. And the elder said to him: “Go sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

Modern Isolation in the Pandemic: We are reluctant Recruits

In our modern pandemic, we are reluctant recruits of isolation. What can the desert fathers teach us? What are the possible gifts/practices of isolation?

Here are some possibilities:

Solitude and loneliness are not the same

An opportunity to experience the fullness of our own characters: self-awareness

An openness to contemplation

A chance to gain discipline and focus

A gaining of compassion for ourselves and humanity

A stillness then enables us to encounter grace and seek communion with God in new ways

An elevated appreciation for the companionship which is possible; a greater commitment to hospitality.

The Legacy of the Desert Fathers

The legacy of the desert fathers lives on in *The Rules of St. Benedict*, which we study later this term, in Pope Francis and his Jesuit brotherhood, and even in some surprising secular places. I will share a selection from a modern writer’s article called *How to be Indistractable* by Nir Eyal. (August 2020, psych.com.) He offers insights into how we can limit our own distractions and gain deeper connection to people and experiences that are meaningful to us by facing uncomfortable feelings of boredom, loneliness, insecurity, fatigue, and uncertainty. He asserts deepening focus and resisting distraction can “change our lives for the better, and also help us to experience life more fully.” (A Desert Father and Mother conviction, if ever there was one.)

Does the witness and wisdom of the dessert fathers and mothers continue in the 21st century? Does it continue to engage and challenge you to a fullness of life?