



Desert Fathers and Mothers

If you thought these were social outcasts who just couldn't make it in this world, think again. They found a way to be faithful when the way was being distorted by the new institutional church.

The Retreat to the Desert

Approximately one-third of the earth's land surface is desert: arid ground with meager rainfall, sparse vegetation, and a limited animal population.¹ The terrain of the desert is rugged, the climate brutal. A blazing sun and extreme daytime heat, coupled with strong winds and cold nights, punctuate unrelenting stretches of sand and rocky surfaces. In the desert, humans have little access to the basic necessities of life.

Yet this is also the realm of the spiritual. The desert is as hostile to the ego as it is to our physical well-being—the perfect place to stretch to the edges of our humanness and open ourselves to the possibilities of transformation by the Spirit. Here in the endless expanse of nothingness—in the emptiness, solitude, and silence of this dry and barren land—we come face to face with our innermost selves and with God.

Into these hazardous environs of the Middle East, Christian men and women went to live, starting in the third century and continuing for another 350 years. Those who stayed and cultivated wisdom from life on the edge became known as the desert fathers and mothers, or *abbas* and *ammas*.

These daring Christians came to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Syria, and modern-day Turkey seeking an unobstructed closeness to God. They came in the hope of finding their own true self in Christ, wrestling with evil and their own personal demons while exploring the inner life and serving Christ by serving others. Most important, they came to the desert yearning for union with God: to become citizens of heaven in



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this life and after death by uniting their will with God's desires.

Their reasons for leaving home and heading to the desert were many. The young church was seething with religious controversies focused on the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God. Dangers lurked for those who dared to disagree with the prevailing theological argument; heresies were summarily eliminated.

Other debates revolved around which sacraments the church should recognize and how they were to be practiced, which texts would become the official canon of the Bible, whether women could be church leaders, when holy days were to be celebrated, and what was the authority of the official church leadership. As the church became institutionalized, many wondered if Christianity was becoming compromised.

In addition, daily living in the late Roman Empire was at odds with Christian ethics. Materialism, slavery, heavy taxation, political corruption, and crime all contributed to an inhumane lifestyle.

As Thomas Merton, the renowned twentieth-century contemplative and Cistercian monk, noted, "[Those who went to live in the desert] seemed to have doubted

JESUS IN THE DESERT

[After Jesus' baptism] the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12–13)

that Christianity and politics could ever be mixed to such an extent as to produce a fully Christian society. . . . For them, the only Christian society was spiritual and extramundane: the Mystical Body of Christ."²

Making a clean break with a conventional social context and church order, those who came to the desert were in search of *quies*, "rest," or *hesychia*, "solitude, tranquility and the practice of continual remembrance of God."³

At first glance, it might appear that their reasons for leaving home and family were primarily individualistic and negative. A closer look offers a more complete understanding: those who came to the desert sought to create a society where all humans were equal and the only authority was God's. While some did indeed choose to live alone as hermits, most lived informally in groups gathered around a single wise teacher or in formally organized communities, each guided by its own rule of life.

Inspired!

As they imagined a different way of life, the earliest desert elders drew inspiration from their own Judeo-Christian tradition. They took courage from Elijah, who had heard God speak in "the sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs. 19:12). They remembered Moses and how he had led the Israelites through the desert to the promised land. They were heartened by Abraham and Sarah's nomadic life. They drew inspiration from John the Baptist and his life in the wilderness.

Most important, they took seriously how Jesus had begun his public ministry with forty days in the desert.⁴ They recalled that he had needed this time alone with God for prayer and fasting in order to endure temptation and emerge strengthened for public ministry. They also embraced Jesus' Jewish heritage, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Psalms, and the spiritual life in which Jesus had been formed.

The *ammās* and *abbas* were further influenced by the traditions and literature of the earliest Christian faith communities of the first and second centuries and by texts about Jesus that circulated at the time but were ultimately not included in the New Testament.

Who Were They?

The desert elders were men and women of great faith, with names like Basil the Great, John the Dwarf, Theodora, Arsenius, Syncletica, and Poemen. Some were sophisticated urbanites, scholars, lawyers, or widows. Others were farmers, seamstresses, camel drivers, soldiers, released slaves, or former criminals. They came from wealthy, middle-class, and poor families.

THE ASCETIC LIFESTYLE

As the desert elders sought to imitate Jesus and follow his teachings, particularly the Great Commandment, there emerged a lifestyle marked by solitude and asceticism.

Theirs was a dualistic worldview. The *abbas* and *ammās* understood body and spirit to be totally separate substances, with the body "bad" and the spirit "good." Thus their lifestyle was intended to train the body—to overcome the physical aspects of their humanness in order to privilege the soul and prepare it for union with God.

The desert elders sought to control all their physical desires. Not only were they celibate, but they also sought to control their eating and sleeping. *Abbas* and *ammās* ate one simple vegetarian meal a day and fasted two to four days at a time in conjunction with Sundays, holy days, and preparation for Eucharist. Their nighttime pattern was to pray most of the night and sleep as few hours as possible.

Their austere existence was further designed to encourage humility before God. They lived separately in cells—caves in rock cliffs, handmade huts, or tombs carved into natural rock formations—furnished with a coarse mat, sheepskin, lamp, and vessels for water and oil, plus some books. Their clothing was equally simple: an undyed linen tunic with short sleeves or no sleeves, linen belt, and goatskin coat or hooded cape.

As diverse as their backgrounds were, however, they shared a propensity for innovation, the ability to make the complicated simple and the theoretical practical. They also shared a common purpose: love of God and neighbor through a disciplined life of labor, prayer, and charity.

The Primacy of Love

The beginning and end of the spiritual life for the *abbas* and *ammās* was love. But this was no sentimental feeling or friendly affection. They understood love to be the ultimate force that binds everything together. Their fundamental theological conviction was that reality is grounded in God, whose basic being is love.

The result of their conviction was a practical, lived experience of love. The desert elders believed love is as much a verb as it is a noun. For them, the Great Commandment said it all: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–40). Jesus’ teaching became the way to orient their lives toward God, neighbor, and self.

Loving God was about authentic respect and esteem, as well as recognition of God as the Supreme Being and gratitude for the ways God acts in the world. It was also about being present to God and taking God seriously enough to engage God in conversation, that is, prayer. For the *abbas* and *ammās*, loving God meant seeking to know God’s will and aligning themselves with it, that they might truly be able to love their neighbor.

Caring for the poor and marginalized of society was certainly a manifestation of loving one’s neighbor. But the desert elders believed there was more to it than that:

A SAYING FROM AMMA SYNCLETICA

My children, all of us—male and female—know about being saved, but through our own negligence we stray away from salvation. First of all we must observe the precepts known through the grace of the Lord, and these are “You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself.” Whatever people say by the grace of the Spirit, therefore, that is useful springs from love and ends in it. Salvation, then, is exactly this—the two-fold love of God and of our neighbor.⁷



The way the elders prayed during work was called *meletē*, a disciplined practice of memorizing and reciting Scripture. They believed the Psalms were a microcosm of the entire Bible.

they wanted to love the ordinary people around them. According to Merton, love of others required “an interior and spiritual identification with one’s brother [or sister] so that he [or she] is not regarded as an ‘object’ to ‘which’ one ‘does good.’ . . . Love takes one’s neighbor as one’s other self, and loves him [or her] with . . . immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence.”⁵

Striving for such love demanded complete inner transformation, and the desert elders were committed to the challenge. Whether it was struggling to overcome anger, offering forgiveness to one who did not deserve it, or fighting the urge to control others, they submitted themselves to humility before God and one another, as well as to the possibilities for personal and spiritual growth.

Such inner transformation, of course, assumed a self—a self to be loved. The desert elders learned that they could not love others, much less God, if there was no self to do the loving. They believed that our self, which is made in the image of God, is given by God. As such, it is worthy of love. Self-contempt and false humility had no place in the desert. Abba Anthony (251–356), considered the father of all elders, said it well: “The one who can love himself or herself, loves all.”⁶

Labor of Love

In the desert, the practice of love began with labor, as work and as prayer. *Abbas* and *ammās* spent their days raising crops, tending animals, baking, preparing meals, tailoring, and woodworking. Many were weavers, making baskets, mats, and rope out of palm leaves and reeds. Their work was intended to provide the basics for living in the desert. Overages were traded in nearby villages for supplies and to acquire alms for charity.

More important, the desert elders considered their labor a spiritual activity: a venue for the flow of God’s energy for the life of the world and an opportunity to “pray

without ceasing,” as Paul had admonished the early church (1 Thess. 5:17).

The way the elders prayed during work was called *meletē*, a disciplined practice of memorizing and reciting Scripture. They believed the Psalms were a microcosm of the entire Bible. Rather than engage in discursive thought or rational analysis of the sacred text, they sought to distill the wisdom of Scripture while working. So they memorized all 150 psalms, recited them in order, and, when they had finished, started all over again.

This practice of praying the Psalms while working became the foundation of the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Daily Office. Over time, the *abbas* and *ammas* in south Egypt changed the practice of psalm-praying such that the community came together to pray the psalms at seven or eight set times of the day and night. In the course of a week, they prayed all 150 psalms.

To Pray Is to Love

While labor and *meletē* were fundamental to daily living, much of the desert elder’s time was spent at worship. Standard elements included psalmody, other Scriptures, and Eucharist (also known as Communion or the Lord’s Supper) on Saturdays and Sundays. Their habit of prayer during worship included intercessions and prayers for the world, the community, and individuals. Prayer vigils were common as well.

Still, each elder was assured plenty of time for personal prayer. Practices of private prayer in an elder’s cell were as varied as the *abbas* and *ammas* themselves. Sometimes prayer took the form of intense conversation with God. Sometimes the elder received visions, or waking dreams. Other times, he or she offered intercessions or continued the practice of *meletē*.

During these times of solitude, the elders also practiced meditation, or contemplative prayer. These were the prayers where the one praying turned inward and focused on God through stillness and silence to prepare himself or herself for contemplation, that is, union with God.

As the desert elders mastered the art and science of meditation, they created the foundation for such contemplative prayer styles known today as *lectio divina*, or “divine word.” Drawing inspiration from *meletē*, *lectio divina* features four levels of Scripture-based prayer:

THE LEGACY OF THE DESERT ELDERS

- Monasticism
- Liturgy of the Hours, or the Daily Office
- Foundations of contemplative prayer, that is, meditative prayer where the supplicant is silent, turns inward, and listens for God
- Insight into Christian spirituality, mysticism, and religious experience
- Spiritual disciplines
- Foundations for spiritual direction: guidance, study, and mentoring with someone more advanced on the spiritual path
- The Sayings: collected parables, tales, and words of wisdom

reading Scripture (*lectio*), thinking about what it means (*meditatio*), and then moving from the head into the heart by praying (*oratio*), thereby readying oneself for the gift of contemplation (*contemplatio*).

Similarly, centering prayer has its roots in the highly disciplined “imageless prayer” or “pure prayer” taught by Evagrius Ponticus (345–399). The prayer of another elder, Macarius the Great (300–391)—“Lord, help!”—grew into the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The final goals of prayer in the desert were twofold: contemplation and the love of God and neighbor espoused in the Great Commandment.

Love Overflowing

While guided by the mandate to love their neighbor as themselves, the desert fathers and mothers—through the power of prayer—found themselves so filled with love that they could not help but tend to the welfare of the people around them. That is, they did not need the mandate as much as they needed the practice of prayer to actively love God and neighbor.

Whether providing food and shelter to weary travelers, advising bishops, or coaching thieves on right living, the desert fathers and mothers offered compassion, forgiveness, healing, charity, advice, and other help to people from all walks of life. They came to be known for

the tender love and practical care they showed for the poor and dispossessed and for their wisdom and advice about the complexities of life.

As word spread about these unusual men and women of faith living lives totally devoted to God, villagers and townspeople began to travel to the desert to seek guidance. The custom was to approach an elder and ask for a word of salvation. Rather than give an abstract principle, the *abbas* and *ammas* preferred a concrete story. The word they gave was intended as a plain answer to a plain question, but an answer the disciple had to unravel. Eventually, these parables, tales, and commonsense answers to life's questions became known as the Sayings.

Certainly the elders personally would have preferred to follow their ascetic lifestyle and daily routine of labor, worship, and prayer. But their hearts were afire, and they could do no less than let love, charity, hospitality, and guidance take precedence.

The implications of love overflowing were clear. Love had to be shared, to connect and bind God's people to one another. For the desert fathers and mothers, there was no greater vocation than this: to love—completely and unabashedly.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. What Is a Desert? <http://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/deserts/what/>.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 4.
3. Mary Forman, *Praying with the Desert Mothers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 38.
4. Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13.
5. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 18.
6. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 3.
7. Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life of Blessed and Holy Syncletica*, trans. Elizabeth Bryson Bongie (Toronto: Peregrina, 1999), vv. 22, 29.