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Foreword to the Original Edition

The first Christian monks lived nearly two thousand years ago but the accounts of their lives and the records of their words are still being read today. They were originally written down in Greek and Coptic but were soon translated into Latin, so that they could be read widely in all parts of Christendom.

It is perhaps surprising to find that such ancient texts are, like the Gospels, so fresh and available in this third millennium. It was a strange way of life, strange both to contemporary secular society in the fourth century and to other Christians at the time. These were men and women who chose to live outside the towns and villages of the ancient world, as far as possible from civilized life, often entirely alone. They had also chosen to be sexually alone for life; there were no children or lovers in the desert. They had very few possessions, and wanted to have as little as possible, choosing to do without them in order to be free for God. They lived in handmade huts or in caves, eating and drinking a sparse diet of bread and herbs with water. Their clothing was that of the poorest people, a simple garment, with a sheepskin that could be used as a blanket or rug. They were neither scholars nor preachers, neither teachers nor clerics, they came from all kinds of backgrounds but mainly from that of poverty and need. They learned how to be still and silent, to know themselves before God, waiting on the Lord, not helping others or interfering in their lives, but becoming themselves part of the redeeming work of Christ for the world.

Their behavior seemed as remarkable to their contemporaries then as it does now, whether the comments were favorable or hostile. These monks were people living on the edges, at the limits of both society and the church, and it seemed to some regrettable

that as well as living without comfort and wealth, they had abandoned the duties and delights of ordered society to live apart from the treasures of a cultivated world, with no concern for education, literature, and the arts of the civilized man, with no involvement in corporate liturgical prayer, and no responsibility for the service of others in either the state or the church. On the other hand, many recognized in their lives a continuation of the eschatological attitudes of the early church, where Christians were aware of themselves as living in the last days, with no concern for the future on earth, eagerly awaiting the consummation of all things and therefore celibate and without children because the Child had been born and the orientation of the whole of life had changed. Many regarded the monks as heroes, seeing them as the successors of the martyrs, as those who followed most closely after the Savior. For these reasons, especially after the peace of the church under the Emperor Constantine, they attracted many tourists as well as serious seekers after God. Both of these approaches say more about contemporary society than about the monks.

Many read about or heard about this way of life and wanted to learn from it. They came to Egypt and to Palestine, and though many were moved and helped by the silence and solitude they found there, many of the assumptions and hopes of less perceptive contemporaries were contradicted by the actual approach to life of the monks and this could cause bewilderment and disappointment, until they realized what was at stake. Archbishop Theophilus of blessed memory once came with a certain judge to see Arsenius. The archbishop questioned Arsenius, wanting to hear some wisdom from him. For a while the hermit was silent, and then he replied, "If I tell you something, will you do it?" They promised that they would do it. So he said to them: "Wherever you hear Arsenius is, do not go there." Another time the archbishop wanted to see him, and sent a message first to ask if he would open the door to him. He sent a message back saying: "If you come here, I will open the door to you. But if I have opened the door to you, I must open it to all, and then I shall no longer be able to live here." When he heard this, the archbishop said: "Since my visit upsets him, I will not go to see to the holy man again" (Arsenius 7).

The visitors to the desert wanted to help the monks and their instinctive action was to offer them presents which would alleviate

the severity of their life; but for the monks gifts were most unwelcome, being destructive of their choice of austerity and non-possession and again and again they refused what was offered. But the far more subtle assumption that they were there to give advice and counsel was for them a more dangerous trap which could have destroyed their whole way of life, making them not only no longer solitary and unknown but proud of themselves, the last temptation. They refused gifts, they abstained from either giving advice or working miracles, yet still people read about them and wanted to visit them. What continued to attract the attention of their contemporaries more than anything else was the sincerity of their lifestyle. They were genuinely doing what they claimed mattered to them. It is this strand of total self-commitment in practice to what is most deeply believed which accounts for their continued attraction through the centuries. They avoided teaching others, living their lives in the conviction that the only director of souls is God Himself.

Many of the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers are unfinished, partial records of what was said, and all were subject to change. The later sources in Palestine laid greater stress, for instance, on giving teaching and advice; the monks who lived in communities spoke more about fraternal love within a group; the monks of the cities were more involved in works of charity, in learning and in corporate liturgical prayer. But the basic theme of implementing Christian baptism by total self-commitment for life in these hidden ways is found in them all and established a continuing tradition of solitary hermit life as well as creating the great monastic communities of East and West. In addition to the widespread monastic interest in this material from the desert, these sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers continue to give spiritual nourishment far beyond the cloister. They are a source which provides a foundation for praying and living, which is not limited by theological or national disputes and is not for a special kind of people, but for all.

In this volume, in addition to presenting the way of life and the chief concerns of the monks themselves (silence, humility, tears, the demons, charity and solitude), Dr. Chryssavgis has taken subjects of concern to contemporaries, such as ecology, gender and sexuality, and provided access to those sections of the ancient texts

which will be of relevance for modern readers. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the area, he has chosen to present them in a way which shows his spiritual and pastoral concern, using the first person plural to involve the reader throughout. This book provides an accessible introduction to the sources themselves, with copious translations, a map, a time-line and bibliography. It also includes a translation into English of some material (The *Reflections* of Abba Zosimas), which has not been translated before.

This is material which has in it an air of eternity. As a later writer in this tradition put it:

> God is the life of all free beings. He is the salvation of all, of believers or unbelievers, of the just or the unjust, of the pious or the impious, of those freed from passions or those caught up in them, of monks or those living in the world, of the educated or the illiterate, of the healthy or the sick, of the young or of the very old. He is like the outpouring of the light, the glimpses of the sun, or the changes of the weather, which are the same for everyone without exception.

For almost two millennia these simple texts have continued to inspire people to follow the way of total commitment to God and this has often resulted in a life-style built on the same base as that of the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, with realistic changes in detail caused by climate and education, as well as social and economic situation. Elsewhere these texts have been used by all sorts of people, from princes to paupers, for help towards their lives of prayer within society. As well as such strengthening of prayer for everyone, they have become part of the perennial search of humankind for beauty, by inspiring works of poetry, drama, music, opera and art. It is this perhaps that makes them so universally attractive and available today. What matters about them, in the long perspective of prayer, is not the details of their way of life but the fact that each day they lived out what they believed, convinced that "God was in Christ redeeming the world to Himself" and that no more was needed for salvation than the readiness to receive that truth. They are therefore still an encouragement and assurance for all in the present day. As Antony the Great said:

> Fear not goodness as something impossible nor the pursuit of it as something alien, set a great way off; it hangs only on our own

choice. For the sake of Greek learning, men go overseas, but the City of God has its foundations in every place of human habitation. The kingdom of God is within. Goodness is within us and it needs only the human heart.

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"*Foreword to In the Heart of the Desert*" by Benedicta Ward SLG

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