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INTRODUCTION

Models of the Spiritual Way

There is a fourth century[1] Eucharistic prayer of Sarapion of Thmuis that expresses the center of the experience for the early Christians and of what their faith meant for them. The prayer addresses God:

> We entreat you, make us truly alive.[2]

All of us know about the deeper longing to be truly alive. We have all felt the need to be more than "mere survivors" or "mere observers" in our world. Through the centuries people have had the same hope, the same dream. Sometimes these hopes and dreams were and are preserved inwardly, silently. At other times, they are proclaimed outwardly, publicly. Mostly, they are conveyed in stories and sayings, handed down over generations, allowing each of us to connect with their truths in personal, sometimes paradoxical ways. So, the more noble aspirations of human beings may be discerned everywhere; almost anywhere, at least, where people have lived and searched honestly.

If we are ready to search for such authentic human beings throughout history, then we shall sometimes discover them in unexpected places and in unconventional persons. One place, where men and women sought aggressively to understand the deeper meaning and the fuller measure of human existence, was the desert of early Christian Egypt. That dry desert, from the third century until around the end of the fourth century, became the laboratory for exploring hidden truths about Heaven and earth and a forging ground for drawing connections between the two. The hermits who lived in that desert tested and studied what it means to be human—

1. All dates referred to in this book are C.E. (in the Christian Era).

2. See J. Wordsworth, *Bishop Sarapion's Prayer-Book* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1964), p. 61. [My translation]

with all the tensions and temptations, all of the struggle beyond survival, all of the contacts with good and the conflicts with evil. And in the process, some of them made many mistakes; others made fewer mistakes. Whoever said that there is a clear and simple answer to the questions of life? Yet, these men and women dared to push the limits, to challenge the norms. Their questions and responses are to be found in collections of aphorisms—or "sayings," *Apophthegmata* (Ἀποφθέγματα), as they are called in the original Greek.

There is something else, moreover, that these "sayings" bring to light. The Fathers and Mothers who lived in the desert of Egypt remind us of the importance of story-telling, which we have for the most part forgotten in our age. Listening to their stories and sayings, meditating on them in silence and subsequently telling them to others, helped our ancestors to live humanely, to be more human, to remain truly alive. These stories and sayings were ways in which the desert elders themselves maintained a sense of continuity with their own past, while also fostering a sense of connection with future generations. Stories are a critical form of communication for people of all ages and all places. They were formative in ages of literacy and of illiteracy alike, transcending as they do barriers of age, education, social status and culture. Somewhere along the line, we lost our interest in, and our ability to hear, understand, and tell stories. Somewhere along the line, life became faster, and people grew less tolerant for that which comes only with time and with pain, with listening and with patience. The stories from the Egyptian desert are more than just a part of the Christian past. They are a part of our human heritage: they communicate eternal values, spiritual truths. Theirs is a silence of the deep heart and of intense prayer, a silence that cuts through centuries and cultures. We should stop to hear that heartbeat.

Sometimes, in fact, we shall need to stoop low in order to hear the sounds of their past. For, while they present us with models of the spiritual way, they do so in peculiar ways and with strange examples. In fact, these stories and sayings offer not simply models for imitation, but witnesses of a fullness and freedom to which we all aspire. These stories will indeed appear extreme in some ways, eccentric in other ways. The lifestyle of these desert dwellers was radical and in every way iconoclastic, smashing every understanding that we may have been brought up to imagine about finding our-

selves and finding God. Nonetheless, they are at the same time, and for this very same reason, quite refreshing, entirely liberating.

For, although it may not be immediately evident to everyone how to connect with the words and ways of the desert, yet anyone who has experienced some aspect of deserted-ness, that is to say some form of loneliness, or else some form of brokenness, break-down or break-up—whether emotionally, physically, or socially—will be able to make the necessary connections. Each of us has known times of drought; dry and arid moments when we await refreshment and rain, when we wait for hope and life. Indeed, such experiences may comprise the very framework within which we are called to read and appreciate their words. It may not be true to desert spirituality or even fair to the desert elders themselves for us to consider their radical retreat and refreshing worldview through the lenses of suffering and woundedness. If this appears to diminish their uniqueness, then we would do well to remember that the Desert Fathers and Mothers might not at all have been surprised by this perspective. First, they expected people to approach them spontaneously—just as they *were*. And, second, they demanded that people open up to them sincerely—just as they *lived*. Our suffering and wounds have a remarkable way of unlocking the door to authenticity.

What is called for, then, is not a dry imitation of the behavior and ideals of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Rather, an invitation is here extended to find the proper wavelength, that frequency where we are touched and transformed by their sayings. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*[3] is neither a biographical account of the lives of these hermits nor an historical record of their teachings. The notion of "objectivity" was not the primary concern of those who entered the Egyptian desert. Instead, the words of these Egyptian hermits resemble flashes of light; they are sparks of fire. And the reader should neither be overly impressed nor even be greatly dis-

3. Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975). This book, the most accessible edition in the English language, serves almost exclusively as the basis for my remarks. I refer in the footnotes simply to the name of the elder and the number of the saying in this collection. I have, however, also frequently and significantly modified the translation from my own interpretation of the Greek original. See the bibliography (below) for further references and other collections.

tressed by their comments. Instead, the reader is supposed to catch alight, to catch afire. It is critical to remain open enough, to be sufficiently vulnerable to their austere yet suggestive counsel.

When visitors, whether hermits or lay persons, came to Egypt in order to meet one of these desert dwellers, invariably they would ask: "Give me a word, *abba*," or: "Speak a word, *amma*, how can I be saved," or again: "*Abba*, give me a way of life."[4] *Abba* is the Coptic word for father or elder; the Greek word was *geron* (γέρων). Alternatively, a visitor could seek the advice of an *amma* or spiritual mother. The fundamental context within which the words of the *abbas* and *ammas* were recorded in the past, and are perhaps also to be received in the present, is the relationship between the spiritual father or mother and the spiritual child or disciple. More will be said later on this relationship. However, for now we should think of these sayings as myth. Read them as powerful stories, each with an inner meaning or secret, a message or mask.

The aim is not imitation, but inspiration. We should resist the temptation to dismiss these elders as anachronistic; as well as the temptation to accept their words and world with a rosy romanticism. Behind these stories lies much more than certain historical figures who lived many centuries ago. Behind these sayings and stories is concealed the very face of God, Who speaks to each of us in the present and for all eternity. In a sense, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is not a book of the past, of the fourth or fifth centuries. It may be described as a book of the age to come, or of a new age. They speak to our present age: of an experience of a new life, of a fullness of life, or of renewed life.

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The Sayings of the Desert Fathers present us with the personal profiles of one hundred and twenty-seven *abbas* and three *ammas*. In all, there are 1202 sayings attributed to these elders. In the pages that follow, I shall be quoting generously from this text. The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the world and thought of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers by allowing for informal conver-

4. *Sayings*, Sisoes 35; Antony 19; and Elias 8.

sations with some of their key representatives on the fundamental principles of their thought and lifestyle. I shall neither color nor endeavor to cover their statements in order to render them either more palatable or digestible. That would be unfair to them and untrue to their world, which was never intended to be generally entertaining or merely interesting. Rather, I shall allow these wise elders to speak for themselves, simply organizing their words in categories that might be more familiar to us today. This is why there will be an abundance of direct citations from the *Sayings* themselves. To understand the phenomenon of the desert, it is important to listen to those who lived their lives there; or rather, who renounced their lives in order to be present to that experience.

Although the content of this book is not intended to be narrowly academic, nonetheless its context is clearly scholarly, inviting the reader to pursue further references on the particular subjects raised. Substantial recent literary research, as well as increasing regional archaeological evidence, has been able to reconstruct numerous aspects of this phenomenon, providing scholars with religious, social, political, cultural, and artistic dimensions of this period in Christian history. We are, then, in a way perhaps not possible earlier, in a position to explore these sayings and encounter these elders quite vividly and personally.

This volume also presents, for the first time in the English language, a translation of a fifth-century text, the *Reflections* (*Dialogismoi,* Διαλογισμοί) of Abba Zosimas, which has played an important part in the development of the *Sayings* themselves, as we shall see below. The reflections are part and parcel of the same desert tradition, and so I have also incorporated them in my commentary on the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

If the background of this book (its flesh and bones) is scholarly, the intention (its heart) is unashamedly spiritual. For, if there are a number of profiles in the *Sayings*, they nevertheless essentially present us with one profile: the profile of what it means to be human. This picture will on occasion appear frightening to some readers. On other occasions, the same picture may appear comforting. It will, nevertheless, almost always be recognizable to each one of us. For this to happen, we need to sit silently with these *Sayings*. We must enter our own desert of stillness and retreat and pay close attention to the words and to the meanings behind these

words. My purpose will not be to make the *Sayings* relevant to our time and ways; that often proves a futile exercise, which only distorts the original text and is an injustice both to it and to us. Rather, it will be to make our time and ways relate to the *Sayings*.

In so doing, I am reminded of the words of Abba Poemen:

> Experience is a good thing; for, that is what tests a person.[5]

> Abba Zosimas would say: "What power is contained in the words of the elders! Truly, whatever they said, they spoke out of experience and truth, as the sacred Antony also says.[6] Their words were powerful because they spoke of what they practiced, as one of the sages put it: 'May your life confirm your words!'"[7]

> Abba Poemen also said: "Someone who teaches without doing what one teaches resembles a spring, which cleanses and gives drink to everyone else, but is not able to purify itself."[8]

The largest number of sayings is, in fact, attributed to this Abba Poemen. There are some two hundred and nine sayings under his name. The name "Poemen" is derived from the Greek word Ποιμήν meaning "shepherd," implying that most of the sayings may at first have been collected around this generic name.

Poemen further believes that teaching without doing, preaching without practicing, is an indication of hypocrisy.

> A brother asked Abba Poemen: "What is a hypocrite?" The old man said to him: "A hypocrite is one who teaches one's neighbor something without making any effort to do it oneself."[9]

I am, however, at the same time comforted by yet another saying of this compassionate elder:

> A brother said to Abba Poemen: "If I give my brother a little bread or something else, what happens when the demons spoil these gifts by telling me that it was only done in order to please people?" The old man said to him: "Even if it is done to please people, we are still

5. Poemen 24.

6. Abba Zosimas, *Reflections* XIV, a. See also Athanasius, *Life of Antony* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), ch. 39.

7. *Reflections* XIV, a. See also John Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow*, ch. 219, pp. 194-195 (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 87: 3109-3112).

8. Poemen 25.

9. Poemen 117.

> obliged to offer what we can." He told him the following parable. "Two farmers lived in the same town. One of them sowed and reaped only a small and poor crop, while the other did not even trouble to sow and reaped absolutely nothing. If a famine comes upon them, which of the two will find something to live on?" The brother replied: "The one who reaped the small poor crop." The old man said to him: "So it is with us: we sow a little poor grain, so that we will not die of hunger."[10]

This book is written in an effort to sow even a little poor crop!

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10. Poemen 51.