

EVAGRIUS THE SOLITARY AMONG THE ABBAS OF KELLIA

A Fourth-Century Life of Prayer and Hospitality in the Trinity

Carol McDonough

Abba Antony once went to visit Abba Amoun on Mount Nitria. When they met, Abba Amoun said, 'By your prayers, the number of the brethren increases, and some of them want to build more cells where they may live in peace. How far away from here do you think we should build the cells?' Abba Antony said, 'Let us eat at the ninth hour and then let us go out for a walk in the desert and explore the country'. So they went out into the desert and they walked until sunset and then Abba Antony said, 'Let us pray and plant the cross here, so that those who wish to do so may build here. Then when those who remain there [Nitria] want to visit those who have come here [Kellia], they can take a little food at the ninth hour and then come. If they do this, they will be able to keep in touch with each other without distraction of mind.' The distance is twelve miles.¹

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, copyist and scribe, known as Evagrius the Solitary, lived from AD 344/5 until his early death in 399 in the eremitic community at Kellia in the Western Desert of Egypt. The abbas—fathers—of Kellia, Nitria and Sketis were among the first eremitic mystical practical theologians. Their personal and communal reflections arose out of a life of 'prayer without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17), lived mostly in silence, with weekly gatherings in community. Their schemata—outlines of the practice of the spiritual life—were brought together and extended by

With thanks to Ineke Langhams Cornet, Meredith Secomb and Mark Slattery.

¹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward (London: A. B. Mowbray, 1975), Amoun, n. 34.

Evagrius, and some of these survive to the present, known as the Evagrian corpus.²

The historical theologian William Harmless writes:

These early monks ... forged techniques of prayer and asceticism, of discipleship and spiritual direction, that have remained central to Christianity ever since. Intellectuals helped record and systematize this early mystical spirituality. The most important—but still little known or appreciated—is Evagrius Ponticus.³

Evagrius was at the centre of a ‘remarkable circle of intellectual monks’, who discerned that for most hermits in their individual journeys there were recognisable stages of prayer, each one leading to the next.⁴ These stages began with inner practice or ascesis (in Greek, *praktike*), fostering the virtues and love of God. That love (*agape*) grew into mystical contemplation and knowledge of God (Greek *gnostike*; Latin *theoria*). The struggles involved in growth towards contemplation were sufficiently common for descriptions and remedies to be articulated and handed on. The monks’ weekly reflections were generative. This eremitic spirituality passed on by memory and the oral tradition was enhanced—and saved—by the transition to writing in the Evagrian corpus.⁵

One reason for the relative neglect of Evagrius’ contribution is his association with the complex doctrinal and theological disputes of the First Origenist Controversy, which in fact broke out after his death, but with which his name was associated. Their consequences continue to influence the contemporary reception of that distillation of experience and theologizing of shared learning from the practice of the desert abbas which have come to us under the name ‘Evagrius’.

But now, through new archaeological and primary-text research, scholars are piecing together revised understandings of the times and circumstances in which eremitic abbas lived and wrote. They are extending and modifying the interpretations found in earlier hagiographies and commentaries on the collected sayings of the abbas and ammas. Together,

² For contemporary accounts of Evagrius and the Evagrian corpus, see William Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, in *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 311–343; and Augustine M. Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).

³ William Harmless, ‘Mystic as Desert Calligrapher: Evagrius Ponticus’, in *Mystics* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), preface, xii.

⁴ Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 316.

⁵ Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 322.

these offer fragments of a bigger picture of all early desert eremitic colonies and coenobitic monasticism, in Egypt and beyond.⁶

The Abbas of Nitria and Kellia

The story is told that in 328, the chaste Amoun, ‘reported to have been of noble and wealthy descent’,⁷ chose to live separately from his wife. Visited by him twice a year, she formed a women’s religious community at their home, while Amoun became a solitary, building two round cells at Nitria in the Western Desert.⁸ Other men seeking Christ, many leaving behind social responsibilities, came to live and pray near Amoun. A new eremitic colony was born. They lived according to the form of life pioneered by St Antony the Great (c.250/1–356), ‘the ultimate authority and the father of the monks’.⁹ Each man built his own cell, working in silence with his hands. For communal participation in the Sunday liturgies, they built a church; a guest lodge for seekers was also erected. The eremitic colony of Nitria grew to hundreds, then thousands. Around 338, Amoun and Antony founded a new colony at Kellia for those seeking greater silence.

The cells at Kellia, however, were rarely completely solitary, and the monks were seldom fully reclusive. More often cells housed two to six: an abba with his disciples. (This way of life persists in the Oriental and Eastern communions to the present in Egypt, the Middle East



St Amoun, fresco, Monastery of St Neophytes, Cyprus, 1197

⁶ Seminal sources and studies consulted about the colonies of the desert include: *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, translated by Sebastian Brock (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1987); Lucien Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Petersham: St Bede’s, 1999); Maggie Ross, *The Fountain and the Furnace: The Way of Tears and Fire* (New York: Paulist, 1987); Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2011).

⁷ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund: Lund UP, 1990), 118.

⁸ Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, translated by Robert T. Meyer (Westminster: Newman, 1965), 8. 5.

⁹ Rubenson, *Letters of St Antony*, 43.



Archaeological remains of cells at Kellia

and Mount Athos in Greece. It is also occasionally found in the west.)¹⁰ Every Saturday after None (the sixth hour), the Kellia eremitic monks walked in from their cells for liturgy and met nearer to the central church to take part in fellowship circles.¹¹ Some communed about their way of life all night, sharing and gaining insights. On Sunday they joined together in the Eucharist and *agape* meal at the settlement church, returning to the solitude of their cells for the week, ‘a mighty silence and a great quiet among them’.¹²

Each abba perceived, practised and reflected on his own life of prayer within its one purpose in God. He also gave *praktike* to his disciples: guidance in ascetic practice, adapted by the abba to the circumstances of the inner life of each monk, involving a rhythm of prayer, prayerful work and maybe spiritual reading. As Benedicta Ward explains:

... the monks found that they needed the assistance of others, not only in the practical matters of life in the desert, though that was of

¹⁰ One contemporary Catholic association of diocesan right modelled on this pattern of spirituality is the Hermits of Bethlehem, New Jersey, USA, founded in 1974. See <http://www.bethlehemhermits.org/>, accessed 20 February 2017.

¹¹ For commentary on fellowship circles, see Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 75–79.

¹² Rufinus, *Historia monachorum*, 22, quoted in Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church* (London: SPCK, 1964), 21.

great importance to them, but in the inner ways of the heart. It would be an anachronism to talk about ‘spiritual direction’ among the desert fathers; they were very clear that the process of turning towards God was a matter of the spirit and the body together, and that this was given in direction only by Christ. Any help they asked or received from one another was with this in mind¹³

The ‘basic unit’ of the community was this relationship of the abba and his disciple, the disciple choosing the abba and each abba deciding as to whether to accept a disciple.¹⁴

The Life of Evagrius

Evagrius Ponticus was born at Ibora in Roman Pontus (İverönü in modern Turkey), at a time when the Roman Empire was already officially Christian, though the memory of persecutions and martyrdoms must have been strong.¹⁵ He was the son of a country bishop and landholder. The siblings who would become St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Macrina the Younger were close family friends.¹⁶

Evagrius’ life formation was deeply permeated by Christianity—familial, parish and, increasingly, monastic. He was tutored by Christians, notably St Gregory of Nazianzus, whom he described as ‘Gregory the Just, the one who planted me’.¹⁷ Evagrius was taught biblical exegesis and theology, including that of St Clement and his student Origen. Both Clement and Origen had reshaped Platonic philosophy into a tool for formulating and debating Christian biblical commentary. All Evagrius’ mentors were either taught directly by Origen or steeped in his writings. Following Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus formed the young Evagrius for an ascetic life in which prayer, liturgical and personal, based on biblical immersion, was as essential as breathing.¹⁸

¹³ Benedicta Ward, ‘Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers’, *The Way*, 24/1 (January 1984), 61.

¹⁴ Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 80. By contrast the contemporaneous monasteries of Pachomius, on which Western monasteries are largely modelled (John Cassian was a prime disseminator), are structured around a superior and community of monks. See, for example, James E. Goehring, ‘Pachomius and the White Monastery’, in *Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt*, volume 1, *Akhmim and Sohag*, edited by Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla (Cairo: American U. in Cairo P, 2010), 47; William Harmless, ‘John Cassian’, in *Desert Christians*, 373. Cassian was a disciple of both Evagrius and Pachomius.

¹⁵ Constantine the Great had adopted Christianity in 312. See Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (London; Penguin, 1985), 380–414.

¹⁶ Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 9–27.

¹⁷ Evagrius, *Praktikos*, quoted in Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 314 n. 7.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 242.

Evagrius lived in Roman-occupied cultures, the first two of which were Hellenic Christian (Cappadocia, then Constantinople). Tonsured as a reader by the monastic Bishop Basil (St Basil the Great), he was ordained deacon by Gregory of Nazianzus, who was by then archbishop of Constantinople. Evagrius joined the archbishop's negotiating staff and became 'skilled in argument against all heresies', advocating their successful Nicaean credal theology at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.¹⁹

After an infatuation with a noblewoman in Constantinople, Evagrius fled to Palestine, to the Jerusalem monastic community of Amma Melania (St Melania the Elder) and Abba Rufinus. By this time he was about forty, and he became chronically ill. Amma Melania, who had experienced losses and was 'informed by tremendous theological literacy', recognised that 'this disease of yours has something divine about it'.²⁰ To recover his physical and spiritual health, she prescribed that he should go to Nitria, where she herself had lived and received formation from Abba Macarius of Alexandria. Sending Evagrius to him, Amma Melania acted decisively for Evagrius' good, reshaping his life.

Evagrius brought the person he had become, his memories, his faith, his knowledge and skilfulness, to his final home, the Western Desert of Egypt, around 384. He lived in the semi-eremitic and eremitic colonies of Nitria and subsequently Kellia, and visited Sketis. Of this last Rufinus wrote:

Sketis is in a vast wilderness, a day and a night's journey from the monasteries of Nitria, and the way to it is not found or shown by any track or landmarks on the ground, but one journeys by the signs and courses of the stars. Water is hard to find, and when it is found it has a bad smell, bituminous, yet inoffensive to the taste. Here men are made perfect in holiness, but none but those of austere resolution and supreme constancy can endure such a terrible spot, yet their chief concern is the love which they show one another and towards such as by chance reach that spot.²¹

Rarely, Evagrius also trekked the eighteen days—on foot and by boat, following the stars—to Alexandria where he continued to advocate the authority of the credal theology and determinations of the Ecumenical

¹⁹ Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 38.2, quoted in Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 83; Anson, *Call of the Desert*, 22.

²⁰ Palladius, *Lausiac History*, quoted in Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 21.

²¹ Rufinus, *Historia monachorum*, 29, quoted in William Harmless, 'The *Apophthegmata Patrum*: Text and Context', in *Desert Christians*, 174; Anson, *Call of the Desert*, 23.

Council of Nicaea.²² ‘Withdrawing from civic space does not mean withdrawing from the public arena.’²³

The abbas handed on St Antony’s teachings to Evagrius during the two years he spent living in Nitria, earning his keep as a copyist. Through the abba–disciple relationship, Evagrius became immersed in a culture of eucharistic and solitary spiritual practice.²⁴ Yearning to be incorporated into the very life of the Holy Trinity, he discovered that this gift led to a desire to focus on God for God, to live wholly in God.²⁵ The process was not simple or easy or quick. For the life of silence in solitude first preoccupies the mind with the self, not with God. The fruits of contemplation required perseverance and practice, and are a gift of God.

***A desire to
focus on God
for God***

To learn this prayer-as-life-in-God, this prayer without ceasing, Evagrius apprenticed himself to Macarius of Alexandria at Kellia, and to Macarius the Egyptian, founder of the community at Sketis.²⁶ For the last fourteen years of his life, 385–399, continuing to buy his bread and oil through his work as a copyist, Evagrius lived humbly in the weekday silence at Kellia, amongst experienced abbas who encouraged him in his eremitic formation. Over years, Evagrius’ motivation, reflection and practice started to bring him the personal depth and orientation towards God that he desired, not without struggle. He discovered that his scholarship and ecclesial knowledge were as nothing. He asked another great abba, Arsenius, a disciple of Antony,

‘How is it that we, with all our education and our wide knowledge get no-where, while these Egyptian peasants acquire so many virtues?’ Abba Arsenius said to him, ‘We indeed get nothing from our secular education, but these Egyptian peasants acquire the virtues by hard work’.²⁷

In time, through obedience to experienced guidance, and hard inner and outer work, Evagrius became an abba himself. Men, and women,

²² See Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 82.

²³ Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 83.

²⁴ Unless otherwise stated the paragraphs in this section draw primarily on Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 22–27 (in turn drawing on Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 7.10), corroborated by Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 313–315.

²⁵ Harmless, ‘Mystic as Desert Calligrapher’, 150.

²⁶ Harmless, ‘*Apophthegmata Patrum*: Text and Context’, in *Desert Christians*, 175 n. 33.

²⁷ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Arsenius, n. 5, also quoted in Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 311–312.



Evagrius Ponticus, by Johannes Sadeler, c.1586

sought to become his disciples and learn from him about prayer-as-life.²⁸ Now known as a wise man, Evagrius died after being carried to Eucharist, ill, on the feast of Epiphany, 6 January 399.²⁹

After Evagrius Died

Immediately after Evagrius' death rapid and major disruption occurred in the ordered, peaceful existence of the desert.³⁰ This disruption came from both inside and outside the Church, in the form of ecclesial-political-theological controversies around aspects of Evagrian and Origenist thought, and of the sacking of Sketis.

In late 399, Pope Theophilus of Alexandria launched an attack on Origen,³¹ which weakened the eremitic communities' leadership because,

²⁸ Anson, *Call of the Desert*, 22. Anson paraphrases the observation of Palladius about women visiting Evagrius' Abba, Macarius the Egyptian. Amma Melania's visit to Nitria suggest women also visited there and Kellia.

²⁹ Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 38.1, quoted in Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 9 n. 2.

³⁰ See Otto F. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (Cairo: American U. of Cairo P, 1999), 28–42.

³¹ The see of Alexandria was founded in AD 68 on the death of the apostle Mark. See Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, 28–29.

according to William Harmless, 'The real theological target ... was not so much Origen *per se*, but rather desert Origenism, the bold speculative Origenism of Evagrius and his friends'.³² Scholars continue to untangle the very complex contexts that surround the anathematization of Evagrius and Origen. According to Elizabeth Clark, 'many non-theological issues loomed large in the debate', including 'questions of episcopal jurisdiction' and also authorship and translation disputes.³³ But the strategies of Theophilus, who had formerly read Origen every day, have been interpreted as the quickest way of destroying the international influence of the intellectual desert hermits.

In 407 the first Mazices (Berber) invasion sacked Sketis.³⁴ As Abba Arsenius mourned, 'The world has lost Rome [sacked by the Visigoths in 410] and the monks have lost Scetis'.³⁵ A new semi-eremitic monasticism was born from the necessity of closer settlement and high defensive walls. But Evagrius, and the abbas, had provided literary handbooks of prayer-as-life that were equally effective for living as a solitary, or in very small groups, or closer together in a walled community. The abba-disciple system of organization remained—and does to this day.³⁶

The Evagrian Corpus

The traditionally known, newly found and reattributed works of the Evagrian corpus were written in Greek and Latin, but are often known through translations into other languages of the patristic period.³⁷

³² William Harmless, 'Evagrius Ponticus: Mystical Theology', in *Desert Christians*, 363. And see Harmless, 'Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory', 316. One interpretation is that by discrediting the reputation and power of the intellectual hermits, Theophilus was trying to gain allies, such as St Jerome, in the wider Christian world.

³³ Elizabeth A. Clark, 'New Perspectives on the Origenist Controversy: Human Embodiment and Ascetic Strategies', in *Forms of Devotion: Conversion, Worship, Spirituality, and Asceticism*, edited by Everett Ferguson (London: Taylor and Francis, 1999), 253, 255–256.

³⁴ William Harmless, 'Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory', *Church History*, 69/3 (2000), 483–518, at 483.

³⁵ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Arsenius, n. 21, also quoted in Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 206.

³⁶ See Carol McDonough, 'Christian Hermits and Solitaries: Tracing the Antonian Hermit Traditions', *The Way*, 54/1 (January 2015), 84–85.

³⁷ For the Evagrian corpus, sources include the summation at Joel Kalvesmaki, *Guide to Evagrius Ponticus*, at www.evagriusponticus.net, accessed 20 June 2016 (this is a constantly updated manuscript tradition collation); annotated bibliography of the Evagrian manuscript tradition, Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 335–337; Jeremy Driscoll, *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (New York and Mahwah: Newman, 2005), 11–37; Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, xxi–xl, 29–45; Andrew Cain, *The Greek Historia monachorum in Aegyptus: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2016); Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), xxiii; William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, 'The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The Skemmata of Evagrius Ponticus', *Theological Studies*, 62/3 (September 2001), 498–530, at 348.

With the condemnations of Origenism, those works of Evagrius considered most ‘tainted’ dropped out of the Greek transmission history and were preserved primarily in the Syriac and Armenian versions. The Byzantine monasteries continued to copy and read the ascetic works of Evagrius, sometimes passing them on under his own name and sometimes under the name of Nilus of Ancyra.³⁸

Manuscripts were separated from one another, and random distribution by copyists and monkish travellers led to major misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Between the fourth and seventh centuries, and up until the present, manuscripts have continued to be scattered.

Interpretations of Evagrius and the Evagrian corpus have remained prey to the negative received perceptions resulting from the anathemas pronounced against him in the sixth century. Nevertheless, the insights of the Western desert abbas enshrined in the Evagrian corpus have had a wide and enduring reception history. Jean Gribomont lists transmission trails which lead to the present ‘through Cassian for the Latin world; through Palladius for John Climacus; through Maximus the Confessor for the Byzantines; and through Philoxenus and others for Isaac of Nineveh and numerous Syrians’.³⁹

Of Evagrius’ style William Harmless writes:

Evagrius cultivated an artful brevity. All his best-known and most influential writings are collections of terse, proverb-like sentences, clustered in brief, seemingly disconnected paragraphs called *kephalaia* (‘chapters’) Evagrius’ writings are an elegant polyphony, a fuguelike weave of motifs, built from self-contained morsels.⁴⁰

The Evagrian corpus presents difficulties in its patristic, cultural and linguistic contexts and textual obscurities. However, fresh evidence has accumulated and transformed scholarship about Evagrius and the ‘real spiritual mutation’ that occurred in the context of eremitic practice.⁴¹

Evagrius’ central ‘trilogy’—*Praktikos*, *Gnostikos* and *Kephalaia gnostika*—was meant as a kind of handbook detailing the successive stages of the

³⁸ Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, vii.

³⁹ Jean Gribomont, ‘Monasticism and Asceticism: Eastern Christianity’, in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq (London: SCM, 1986), 105.

⁴⁰ Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 317.

⁴¹ Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, 381, quoted in Harmless, ‘Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory’, 312.

hermit-monk's growth and common issues encountered in the process. Grounded in daily scripture and liturgy, the high purpose, principles and practice of the life of prayer were formed into a widely accepted and disseminated tradition. Through yearning years of God-focused, prayerful living into endless mystical love, the 'Evagrian' stages of prayer were taught as an encouragement and guide for all those persevering with the compassion and help of the essential abba-disciple praxis. According to Harmless,

Evagrius was an astute psychologist of the spirit, and his analyses of what ails the soul form but one thread within a subtle and intricate theology of the spiritual life. Evagrius helped pioneer Christian mysticism, advocating unceasing prayer, and was among the first to plot milestones in the soul's journey to God.⁴²

For beginners, in the *Praktikos*, Evagrius 'took care to disclose only the very first elements of his doctrine', but he writes in a more complex way for experienced seekers.⁴³ He acknowledges his indebtedness to his own teachers: Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, his desert abbas and Amma Melania. He speaks of learning 'the upright ways of the monks who have gone before us' from the ten 'sayings of the holy monks' (*apophthegms*) with which the *Praktikos* concludes. These are the very first sayings written down from the eremitic oral tradition.⁴⁴

The *catenae*, the connected series of short texts of *De oratione* (On Prayer), were probably written for the monks of the monastery of Rufinus on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. They express gratitude for Evagrius' months of renewal in Jerusalem around 383, but were written many years later.

I have often been restored to health by your letters, as I used to be by the counsel of our great guide and teacher [Macarius of Alexandria] I am delighted to find you so eager for texts on prayer—eager not simply for those written on paper with ink, but also for those fixed in the intellect through love and generosity.⁴⁵

⁴² Harmless, 'Mystic as Desert Calligrapher', 136.

⁴³ Gribomont, 'Monasticism and Asceticism', 105.

⁴⁴ Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 92–93; Harmless, 'Apothegmata Patrum: Text and Context', 244–245.

⁴⁵ Evagrius, 'On Prayer', prologue, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber, 1983), volume 1, 55.

The intention of Evagrius is to illuminate the growing yearning for God of the ascetic hermit-monk who was becoming experienced in *praktike*. The *catenae* culminate with this aspiration: 'If when praying, no other joy can attract you, then truly you have found prayer'.⁴⁶

Evagrius teaches that we come to prayer as the passions, the 'eight thoughts' (*logismoi*)—precursors of the seven deadly sins—are cleansed and fall away.

When your intellect in its great longing for God gradually withdraws from the flesh and turns away from all thoughts that have their source in your sense-perception, memory or soul-body temperament, and when it becomes full of reverence and joy, then you may conclude that you are close to the frontiers of prayer.⁴⁷

The abbas insisted that thoughts are inevitable; that is how the human mind works. The monk—literally 'one alone' (Greek *monachos*)—gets to choose, moment by moment, whether his thought leads away from or towards growth into God. Leading towards God produces *apatheia*—calm, tranquillity; the spirit begins to see its own God-given light, and this leads to *agape*, Love.

We recognise the indications of *apatheia* by our thoughts during the day, but we recognise it by our dreams during the night. We call *apatheia* the health of the soul. The food of the soul can be said to be contemplative knowledge since it alone is able to unite us with the holy powers.⁴⁸

The eremitic monk and the holy woman practised unceasing prayer, liturgy and regular communion between abba and disciple. Slowly each was freed of *logismoi*. By cultivating the virtues, each was enabled to give over a purified mind to the Trinity and to grow endlessly into the knowledge and love of God, love of neighbour and love of the creation and its care.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Evagrius, 'On Prayer', n. 153, in *Philokalia*, volume 1, 71.

⁴⁷ Evagrius, 'On Prayer', n. 62, in *Philokalia*, volume 6, 62–63. And see Harmless, 'Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory', 346–347.

⁴⁸ Evagrius, *Praktikos*, translated by J. E. Bamberger (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1916), n. 56; Harmless, 'Evagrius Ponticus', 348.

⁴⁹ Gabriel Bunge, 'The "Spiritual Prayer": On the Trinitarian Mysticism of Evagrius of Pontus', *Monastic Studies*, 17 (1987), 191–208; Harmless, 'Evagrius Ponticus: Ascetical Theory', 324.



Illumination from a manuscript of John Cassian, De institutis coenobiorum, fifteenth century

The abbas learnt and passed on, in desert silence, solitude, stillness and communion, humankind's often unarticulated but true desire: life in God for all. Through their hard work, their listening interiorly, communing and reflecting with each other, they uncovered a way to bring to fruition the counsel of St Antony: 'He who knows himself, knows all men But he who can love himself, loves all men.'⁵⁰

In the intimate, supported environment of the abba/amma–disciple relationship all that deadens a self-love held in God was uncovered through *praktike*. The abbas cared for one another in body, mind, heart and soul—in welcome. Gradually, through the virtues of prudence, understanding, wisdom, patience, courage, continence, charity and temperance, they grew into loving themselves as they loved their neighbour. These virtues are the virtues of inner and outer hospitality: 'If any one by chance should

⁵⁰ *The Letters of St Antony the Great*, translated by Derwas Chitty (Oxford: Fairacres, 1975), letter 6.

wish to dwell with them, as soon as they hear of this, each man offers his own cell'.⁵¹ They open up the capacity to welcome the One who comes as the Creator in the creation, helping Love to grow within the creature, enabling each of us to welcome ourselves, to welcome the stranger within and without, with open arms, open mind and open heart, 'that they all may be one' (John 17:21).

Carol McDonough has previously published in *The Way* on the Antonian hermit traditions. These are one impetus for an ecumenical national discernment retreat about the emergence and forms of the Antonian vocation in Australia. A student at the Jesuit College of Spirituality, University of Divinity, Australia, she is also completing her book on the history and contemporary traditions of practice of Christian hermits, eastern and western.

⁵¹ Rufinus, *Historia monachorum*, 22, quoted in Anson, *Call of the Desert*, 21.