

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Spiritual direction in the Desert Fathers

Do not be afraid to hear about virtue and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies within us and the task is easy if only we will it. Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of Heaven nor to cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, 'The Kingdom of God is within you'. The only thing goodness needs, then, is that which is within the human mind.¹

IT'S REALIZATION lies within us': this conviction that the kingdom of God is to be discovered within the heart of man lies at the centre of the spiritual teaching of the desert. The fourth century in Egypt saw the invention of christian monasticism and it produced some of the finest texts ever written about conversion of the heart, that is to say, of the whole person, within the tradition of the gospel. The whole life of the monks was a training, not a search for 'illumination', but a training, an *ascesis*, both for and in the life of the kingdom of God. The perspective of things has subtly changed in the clear air of the desert, the 'huge quiet' of Nitria, Scetis and the Cells. They said:

There is no labour greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies the demons want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. . . . Prayer is warfare to the last breath (Agathon 9 in *Sayings*).

And when Abba Sisoës was dying, even though his face 'shone like the sun', he said, 'I do not think I have even made a beginning yet' (Sisoës 14 in *Sayings*).

In this life-time of conversions, 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 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 mind: 'we ought to live as having to give account

to God for our way of life every day' (*Systematic Series* 4). They are like the dogs who hunt hares, the one who has seen the hare:

pursues it until he catches it, without being concerned with anything else . . . so it is with him who seeks Christ as master: ever mindful of the cross, he cares for none of the scandals that occur, till he reaches the Crucified (*Systematic Series*, 71).

Their 'training' is a process of turning from the bonds and limitations of the self into the freedom of the sons of God, and any words spoken between them are for this end, the attainment of that stillness in which the Spirit of God alone guides the monk. For this reason they are very sparing with their words, and one should not be misled by the fact that the records of the desert come to us primarily in the form of conversations. They stand together on the page and we have the illusion that they were said one after another in a busy kind of dialogue, but in fact they are sentences remembered over many years and finally grouped together from several periods and areas. Some are so changed that their context and much of their meaning is lost. It is these fragmentary words which lead into the atmosphere of the desert more than the literary constructions created later by John Cassian in his *Institutes* and *Conferences*. More truly of the desert than those elegant reminiscences is, for instance, the story of Abba Macarius and the two young strangers who came to him for guidance: he showed them where to live and left them alone for three years before he inquired any further about them; or of Abba Sisoës who decided that his own part of the desert was becoming crowded and went to live on the mountain of Antony; there, he said to a brother, he lived peacefully for 'a little time', and when the brother asked how long this 'little time' of total silence and solitude was, he replied 'seventy-two years' (Sisoës 28 in *Sayings*).

Against this background of the 'ages of quiet without end', the timelessness and silence of the desert, is it possible to say anything about their assistance of each other in their lives of conversion? It would be wrong to look for a coherent programme of spiritual direction in such texts but it is possible to see something of their expectations and experiences through some of the *Sayings*. It is important to remember when looking at these texts, however, that they are in no sense a treatise on a theme, but fragments of stories glimpsed through many layers of transmission; sometimes they seem contradictory, sometimes inconclusive, and they should not be given a coherence they do not have. However, some practical ways of learning *metanoia* seem to emerge from the texts, and seem, moreover, to be virtually the same for both the hermits and the cenobites. I will therefore suggest certain 'sayings' as revealing the basic understanding of training in the monastic life in the desert. It is also perhaps worth recalling before I do so

the conviction of the desert fathers that the life of salvation is for all, and is not the exclusive preserve of monks, a theme sometimes forgotten among themselves, but which was always there and is best expressed perhaps in the words of a later writer:

God is for all those who chose him, life for all, salvation for all, faithful, unfaithful; just, unjust; religious, irreligious; passionate, passionless; monks, seculars; healthy, sick; young, advanced in age; even as the outpouring of the light and the sight of the sun, and the winds of heaven, so and not otherwise; for there is no respect of persons with God.²

While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, 'Lord, lead me in the way of salvation', and a voice came saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved'. Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness' (Arsenius 1 and 2 in *Sayings*).

These sayings, attributed to Arsenius, one of the most famous of the fathers of Scetis at the beginning of the fourth century, contain several things that are of the essence of the spirituality of the desert. There is the desire for one thing only, salvation; there is the immediate practical action of doing, not only thinking; there is the command to flee, to go away from what is familiar; then the idea of silence, solitude, aloneness, which is the desert; and the ideal of constant prayer for the whole of life. But there is also the 'voice', the direction which comes from God at the very beginning of this conversion and this is the first and perhaps the most vital of the ways of spiritual understanding in this tradition. There are many accounts of the way in which the monks decided to undertake their lives of asceticism, and always there is in some form this 'voice' this command from God. In the case of Arsenius, it is a direct answer to him when he prays. In the case of others, it is mediated through one or other of the many ways in which a Christian can expect to hear the will of God. For instance, Antony the Great, the father of hermits, heard the gospel read in church, 'if you will be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven'. This time a word from the scriptures pierced his heart. It was followed by the same reaction as with Arsenius: 'Antony immediately left the church and gave to the townsfolk the property he had . . . then he devoted all his time to the ascetic living' and after a while, he went deeper and deeper into the desert (*Life of Antony*, 2,3 and 8). A practical action, and then flight, exile, a going away from the familiar world of the village, as Arsenius had fled from the palace of the Emperor. For Pachomius, the father of cenobites, it was the charity of

Christians that moved him, and caused him to leave his life as a soldier and go away into the solitude of the desert. For Apollo, a rough coptic peasant, it was horror at his own sin that caused him to flee, followed by a further piercing of his heart when he came near to Scetis and heard the monks repeating a psalm: 'So he passed all his time in prayer, saying "I as man have sinned, do thou as God forgive"' (Apollo 2 in *Sayings*).

This pattern of being moved by the action of God first, of leaving the familiar place, going away and giving oneself over to the action of God in silence and solitude is the gateway in the desert to prayer and conversion of heart. What follows until death is the hard work of becoming the new man in Christ: 'one of the Fathers asked Abba John the Dwarf, "What is a monk?" And he said, "He is toil. The monk toils at all he does. That is what a monk is"' (John the Dwarf 36 in *Sayings*). This 'toil', this 'hard work' lasted a lifetime. And the direction had to be constantly followed and kept clear. In this task, the monk had three assets: one was the cell; the second was the scriptures and the third was an old man, a father, as a point of reference in all he did.

The *Sayings* are full of references to the cell of the monk as the place which in itself directed the monk's life. The flight into the desert leads to a place of stability: 'Just as a tree cannot bring forth fruit if it is always being transplanted, so the monk who is always going from one place to another is not able to bring forth virtue' (*Systematic Series* 72). The first action of the newcomer to the desert was either to build a cell for himself, a simple one-roomed hut, or to join an established monk in his cell. The idea of staying in the cell is stressed again and again. 'Go, sit in your cell, and give your body in pledge to the walls of your cell, and do not come out of it' (*Systematic Series* 73). 'A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, "Go, sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything"' (Moses 6 in *Sayings*). Why is it that they saw this stability in the cell as vital in their training? It was because they could learn there and there only that God exists, because if God is not here and now in this moment and in this place, he is nowhere. To remain in the cell was to stay at the centre of human suffering and discover that God is there, that at the centre there is life and not death, salvation not damnation, light and not darkness. They said, 'the cell of a monk is the furnace of Babylon, but it also is where the three children found the Son of God; it is like the pillar of cloud, and it is where God spoke to Moses' (*Systematic Series* 74). The cell was the place of hard work: Abba Sarapion once visited a celebrated recluse who lived always in one small room and he asked her, 'Why are you sitting here?' And she replied, 'I am not sitting. I am on a journey'.

The first teacher of the monk was God; the second was his cell. Within the cell, the monk had one sure guide and often it was the same guide that began his conversion — the scriptures. The language of the writings of the desert was so formed by the meditation of the scriptures that it is almost

impossible to say where quotation ends and comments begin. The thought of the monks was shaped by constant reading and learning by heart of the text of the bible, and in particular by the constant repetition of the psalms in the cell. Later generations used also the constant prayer of the name of Jesus, and while this particular form of words ('Lord Jesus Christ Son of the Living God have mercy upon me a sinner') is not found in the *Apophthegmata*, the idea of continual prayer by using a set form of words in the psalms was central to it. The combination of attention to God, the stability of the cell and the meditation of the scriptures is found in a saying of Abba Antony:

Always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved (Antony 3 in *Sayings*).

Epiphanius of Cyprus urged the reading of the scriptures for the monk, 'Reading the scriptures is a great safeguard against sin. . . . Ignorance of the scriptures is a precipice and a deep abyss' (Epiphanius 9 and 11 in *Sayings*). But for the more simple coptic monks the scriptures were more than this. They were the bread of heaven on which they fed as often as they could and as literally as possible. The breaking of the bread of the scriptures was to them the bread of life, and there are stories of monks going for many days without food because they were fed by this bread of heaven. Abba Patermuthius, a robber, went after his conversion into the desert for three years, having learnt only the first psalm; he spent his time there 'praying and weeping, and wild plants were sufficient for his food'; when he returned to the church, he said that God had given him the power to recite all the scriptures by heart. The fathers were astonished at 'this high degree of asceticism' and baptized him as a Christian (*Lives*, ch X). The meditation of the scriptures, the main guide to the monk, is here presented as a sacrament; not as an intellectual study but as a free gift of God and, moreover, as the bread of life in the wilderness, even for one not yet baptized.

This consideration of the scriptures as sacrament leads to the next channel by which the monk learned the lessons of the desert, that is, the words of a father. The most frequent request of one monk to another was 'speak a word to me', and by this request the monk was not asking for either information or instruction. He was asking, as with the scriptures, for a sacrament. The 'word' was not to be discussed or analyzed or disputed in any way; at times, it was not even understood; but it was to be memorized and absorbed into life, as a sure way towards God. Pachomius even said that if someone asked for a 'word' and you could think of nothing to say, you should tell him a parable of some sort and God would still use it for his salvation. Again and again, there are stories of monks who would go to live

with an old man, and find that he would never give them instructions or orders; they could imitate him if they wished; and if he spoke, the words were for them to use, not debate. A brother asked a monk what he should do because he always forgot whatever was said to him and the old man used the image of a jug which is frequently filled with oil and then emptied out: 'So it is with the soul; for even if it retains nothing of what it has been told, yet it is . . . purified' (*Systematic Series* 91). It was not the words of the father that mattered in themselves. Nor were his personality and treatment of the disciple central, a point made very clearly in a story of Abba Ammoes:

At first Abba Ammoes said to Abba Isaiah (his disciple), 'What do you think of me?' And he said to him, 'You are an angel, father'. Later on he said to him, 'And now, what do you think of me?' He replied, 'You are like Satan. Even when you say a good word to me, it is like steel' (Ammoës 2 in *Sayings*).

The father of a monk in the desert was not a guru nor was he a master; he was a father and several things followed from this. The abba did not give 'spiritual direction'; if asked, he would give 'a word' which would become a sacrament to the hearer. The action of God was paramount and the only point of such 'words' was to free the disciple to be led by the Spirit of God, just as the abba himself would. In the desert there could only be one father to a disciple and even when he died, he was still the father of his sons. There was no need to change fathers, or to find a new one if one died. It was a lasting and permanent relationship. In such a relationship, tradition was passed on by life as well as by word; those who had already been a certain way into the experience of the monastic life must be able to become this channel of grace to others. But the aim was always for the abba to disappear. The real guide was the Holy Spirit, who would be given to those who learned to receive him. Moreover, in this relationship, it was almost always the disciple who asked for a word, not the abba who offered one. The lesson to be learnt, and the *Sayings* are full of stories of puzzled newcomers who found it incomprehensible not to be instructed, was that each one had to learn to receive the gift of God for himself; and it was precisely in learning this that the disciple began to pray. There was no set of instructions, no pattern, for the monk; just some simple external ways of living, the word of the scriptures and, if requested, the sacrament of the words of a fellow monk.

It was and remains a hard way, and in order to use it properly, the disciple needed to see it as a crucifixion with Christ, wound against wound, so that the life of the Spirit might be truly given.

A brother asked an old man, 'How can I be saved?' The latter took off his habit, girded his loins, and raised his hands to heaven,

saying, 'So should the monk be: denuded of all things in this world and crucified. In the contest, the athlete fights with his fists; in his thoughts, the monk stands, his arms stretched out in the form of a cross towards heaven, calling on God. The athlete stands naked when fighting in a contest; the monk stands naked and stripped of all things, anointed with oil and taught by his master how to fight. So God leads us to victory' (*Systematic Series* 11).

The necessary abdication of the selfish centre of a man, which John of Lycopolis saw as a serpent deeply coiled round the heart of men, so deeply embedded that it was impossible to remove it for oneself, demanded the full attention, daily and in minute detail, of the monk for his whole life. The literature of the desert is not about visions and spiritual experiences; it is about the long process of the breaking of hearts. The monks defined themselves as sinners, as penitents, as those who needed and would always need mercy.

There are, in this tradition, many things that resulted from this approach. One of them was that suppleness of the spirit which breaks through the stiff lines of determination and self-righteousness, and makes the soul supple and pliable to receive, as they would say, the impress of the Spirit as upon wax. One of the ways of discovering if this process was continuing lay in the acceptance of the abba by the disciple as the one who discerned reality, against the evidence of the senses; as the one who knew what should be done, against the limited understanding of family obligations; as one who knew what was possible, against the dictates of common sense. The well-known story of the disciple who was commanded to plant a dry stick and water it should be seen in this context; it is told in several versions, in some of which the story has gained picturesque imagery, with the dry stick flowering; but in its more primitive form it was simply an illustration of how supple and obedient the disciple had become to do such a thing. The words, the actions, the opinions, did not matter in themselves; what concerned the monk was his ability to listen and obey. So, when an old man said to his disciple, 'Look, there is a buffalo', the disciple looked and said, 'Yes, abba' even when his eyes told him that it was a wild boar (Mark 2 in *Sayings*).

This life of discovery of the power of the cross in a human life, lived practically and realistically, without notions and theories, produced three 'signs'. First, there was the sign of tears: it was said of Abba Arsenius that he wept so much that 'he had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears that fell from his eyes all his life' (Arsenius 41 in *Sayings*); and the young monk Theodore, the favourite disciple of Abba Pachomius, wept so much that his eyesight was endangered. Tears signified the baptism of repentance rather than superficial emotional disturbance in this tradition and were often associated with meditation on the passion of Christ. One old

man asked another, 'Tell me where you were . . .' and he said, 'My thoughts were with St Mary the Mother of God as she wept by the cross of the Saviour. I would that I could always weep like that' (Poemen 144 in *Sayings*). These tears were valued, not ignored or explored; in this theme of weeping and allowing others to weep there is a vital element in the 'spiritual direction' in the desert. It is this: the monk undertook a life of ascetic prayer and it was held that this was what he most desired; so that when he wept or groaned or had to fight against temptations, in fact, whenever he suffered profoundly and continually, he was allowed to do so, indeed, he was encouraged by others, and especially by his abba, to stay at this point of pain in order to enter into the only true healing which is God. When Moses the Black, one of the most attractive of the monks of Scetis, was tempted to fornication, he came to Abba Isidore and told him he could not bear the temptation. Isidore urged him to return to his cell and continue the battle, but he said, 'Abba, I cannot'; Isidore then showed him the 'multitudes of angels shining with glory' who were fighting within the monks against the demons, and with this assurance, but with no alleviation of the suffering to be endured, he returned to his cell (Moses 1 in *Sayings*). The women of the desert seem to have been as clear about this as the men: 'It was said of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged war against the demon of fornication. She never prayed that the warfare should cease but she said, "O God give me strength for the fight"' (Sarah 1 in *Sayings*).

This concentration upon the value of suffering in the light of the cross of Christ leads to the second sign which was seen as a mark of authenticity in the lives of the monks: charity. In so far as the monk truly found himself 'crucified with Christ', so far did he receive the Holy Spirit, and display in his life the gifts of the Spirit of God. The charity of the monks, their warmth, their unaffected welcome of each other and of strangers, their practical care of one another were as famous as their asceticism; the other side of their pain was their joy. This was not the kind of pleasure which is an alternative to and an escape from suffering nor is it an exploitation of others, but a realization of that 'Christ between us' that gives deep and true relationship. It is the life of the kingdom, of the Second Adam, of man restored to paradise, and though at no moment did they forget that this was only so through the cross at the centre of their lives, the result was not gloom but radiance. The most striking result of this spirituality is closely connected with the reserve of the elder fathers about giving orders or rebukes to the newcomers: they did not judge one another in any way. It was said of Abba Macarius that he 'became as it is written a god upon earth, because just as God protects the world, so Abba Macarius would cover the faults that he saw as if he did not see them, and those which he heard as though he did not hear them' (Macarius 32 in *Sayings*).

This freedom to live increasingly in the power of the Spirit points to the third sign of desert spirituality: there is a concern for unceasing prayer in

this tradition, not as a support to works but as the life of the monk, and this is often expressed in terms of 'the prayer of fire'. The end and aim of the monk was to become so open to the action of God that his life would fill each moment of the day and night. Prayer was not a duty or obligation but a burning desire. The older monks never 'taught' prayer; they prayed and the newcomers could find in their prayer a way for them to follow. Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot, 'You cannot become a monk unless you become like a consuming fire', and when Abba Lot asked what more he could do beyond his moderate attention to prayer each day, 'the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven his fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame"' (Joseph Panephytis 6 and 7 in *Sayings*).

The search for God in the deserts of Egypt in the fourth century came to an end with the devastation of Egypt in 407, though there is at present a revival of this way of life in the monasteries of the Wadi al' Natrun, which is in some sense a continuation as well as a revival. What remains to us are the written records of their lives. Certain documents of the early generations, a few letters and some brief sayings of the fathers provide a clue to the lives they lived; the accounts of their actions and their conversations with visitors also survive, in the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of John Cassian, the *History of the monks of Egypt*, and the *Lausiac history*. The theology of the monastic life of Egypt was first analyzed by Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian. In Palestine and in Syria, other men experimented with monastic life and left other records, most notable of which are the *Letters of Barsanulfus and John*. But it is in the sayings of the fathers, the collections of their words, that the spirit of the desert can best be found. They themselves began to commit their words to writing and many of them regretted that this had already become necessary even in Scetis and Nitria; the first fathers, they said, lived practical and realistic lives, the second generation seemed to them to rely upon that distorting mirror, the written word, more and more. Abba Poemen asked Abba Macarius, weeping, for a word, but he said, 'What you are looking for has disappeared among monks' (Macarius 25 in *Sayings*). Perhaps the essential message of the desert lies precisely there: it is not in reading or discussing or even in writing articles that the life of the soul is to be discovered; nor is it in the advice of anyone else however experienced; it lies in the simplicity of Antony the Great who, hearing the gospel read, went and did what he had heard said, and so came at the end of his life to such a point of discovery of the kingdom of God within himself that he could say, 'I no longer fear God; I love him' (Antony 32 in *Sayings*).

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NOTES

¹ St Athanasius: *Life of Antony* translated by Robert C. Gregg (London, 1980), section 20. This will be referred to as *Life of Antony*. References in the text are to this and the following books:

Sayings of the Desert Fathers translated by Benedicta Ward (London, 1975) — to be referred to as *Sayings*. *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* edited by Benedicta Ward (Systematic Series, SLG Press, Oxford, 1979) — to be quoted as *Systematic Series*.

Lives of the Desert Fathers translated by Norman Russell (Mowbrays, London, 1980), which is a translation of the *History of the monks of Egypt*. This will be referred to as *Lives*. The numbers refer to numbered sections in these works and not to pages.

² Climacus, John: *The ladder of divine ascent*.