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DOCTORES ECCLESIAE

THE CALL OF THE DESERT

Purity of Heart and Power in Early Christian Monasticism

Douglas Burton-Christie

INTRODUCTION

*In the waning years
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It is the strangest of stories. And one of the most insistently compelling in the entire history of Christian spirituality. How in the waning years of the third century, a young man named Antony, walking through his small Egyptian village one day, heard a word from Scripture being read in the local church. How in response to that word, he sold his 300 beautiful arourae of farmland, abandoned his settled life in the village and moved to the edge of the desert, giving himself over to the practice of *ascesis*, or discipline. How he moved still deeper into the wilderness, settling eventually in an abandoned fort where he engaged in fasting, prayer and meditation upon Scripture. How he battled day and night with the demons and beasts who assaulted him there, confronting the

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treacherous depths of his own heart, struggling to keep from being drawn over the precipice into madness. We hear further how he emerged from this crucible after twenty years, inwardly serene and physically whole, possessed with the power to exorcise demons, heal the sick, confound pagan opponents (even though he was unlearned) and reconcile disputes. How his dwelling became a magnet for disciples, pilgrims, and celebrity seekers, so much so that he was compelled finally to flee into one of the remotest regions of the Egyptian desert, a place known as the inner mountain. How he lived out his remaining days in solitude, tranquillity and ever-increasing renown. And finally, how his reputation spread across Egypt and throughout the Roman Empire, inspiring countless imitators and helping to create, as Athanasius' *Life of Antony* famously remarks, a city of the desert.¹

Here is the classic mythic account of the "call of the desert" within early Christian spirituality.² With its sharp narrative line and its portrayal of a dramatic and unexpected reversal, it is not difficult to understand the immediate and enduring appeal of this tale within the history of Christian spirituality: the hero renounces everything for the sake of the kingdom, undergoes a terrible purification in the wilderness, and emerges fully restored and possessed of immense power and compassion. The story is so seamless, the mythic resonance of Antony's journey into the wilderness so imaginatively alluring, the psychological depth of his struggle with the demons so compelling, his triumph over demons and pagan opponents so complete, that it has proven an irresistible and nearly inexhaustible source of inspiration and challenge for later generations of seekers.

Much of the enduring appeal of this story, I would argue, lies in its honest and searching portrayal of a struggle of the human heart, the longing to acquire what the New Testament called "purity of heart."³ As ideal and accomplishment, purity of heart was central to the early

It is not difficult to understand the immediate and enduring appeal of this tale within the history of Christian spirituality: the hero renounces everything for the sake of the kingdom.

1. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, translation and introduction by Robert Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980).
2. In calling Athanasius' account of monastic origins "mythic" I am acknowledging two things: first, the mythic depths at which the story itself works and second, the clear sense in which this tale is a "construction" of early monastic origins, motivated by a variety of theological, ecclesial, political motives and should in no way be taken as a completely accurate historical account of the origins of monasticism. On the complex motives behind the construction of the *Life of Antony*, see: Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981). On the question of the historical value of the *Life of Antony* and its relationship to other early monastic sources, see: David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 201-265 and Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995).
3. The relationship between purity of heart and spiritual transformation had been central to Christianity since the beginning. Early Christian monasticism built upon and extended this tradition. See the fine series of articles by Juana Raasch, O.S.B.: "The Monastic Concept of Purity of Heart and its Sources." "Introduction and Part I: The Greek Concept of Purity," *Studia Monastica* 8 (1966): 7-33; "Part II: Among the Second Century Apologists and Anti-Heretical Writers and in the Literature of the Third Century, Not Including the Alexandrians," *Studia Monastica* 8 (1966): 183-213; "Part III: Philo, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen," *Studia Monastica* 10 (1968): 7-55; "Part IV: Early Monasticism," *Studia Monastica* 11 (1969): 269-314; "Part V: Pseudo-Macarius, the School of Evagrius Ponticus, and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*," *Studia Monastica* 12 (1970): 7-42.

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monastic ethos, helping to account for much of the monks' power and influence within the world of late antiquity. Recent scholarship has helped us to see more clearly than before the social, cultural context within which early monasticism arose, the constructed character of early ascetic accounts, and the social significance of the ascetic realization of purity of heart.⁴ Yet, we have perhaps given less attention than we should have to the highly personal and deeply religious drama that lay at the center of the quest for purity of heart. The two are of course intimately related. But they are not always seen in relationship to one another. I would like to suggest that only by considering the more personal, inward dimensions of the quest for purity of heart will we come to an adequate understanding of its cultural significance within the fourth century world.

This means examining carefully how the monks spoke of the heart, exploring the arduous and exacting confrontation with the self that this quest entailed, and asking what it required to relinquish layer upon layer of the ego's carefully constructed identity, to be reduced by a purifying fire to a simpler, more transparent self. It also means considering a particular aspect of the monastic *ascesis*, the work of *ruminatio* or chewing upon the Word of God that occupied the center of their life, understanding how their long, slow rumination upon the Word over time effected its transformative work at the deepest possible levels of the heart. Finally, within this rhythm of *ruminatio*, we need to consider a strange paradox, how as the monk proceeded into ever deeper levels of self-knowledge, he moved in two directions at once — toward an ever sharpened capacity for attention and toward an every greater capaciousness of heart. To understand this unfolding drama of the heart is perhaps to begin to see why the desert beckoned so strongly to late antique Christian men and women, and why those wild, adventurous souls who ventured into the wilderness came to be seen as possessed of such immense and disturbing power.

PROBING THE HEART

In the first of John Cassian's *Conferences*, Abba Moses tells his visitors that there are two primary aims of the monastic life. The ultimate goal

4. Peter Brown's work has been instrumental in helping to resituate early Christian asceticism within its precise social, cultural context. See especially his groundbreaking article, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971). Reprinted with revisions in *idem, Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). This same trend can be seen in more recent works: Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

or *telos* is the kingdom of God. But the proximate objective or *scopos*, the means by which one reaches the kingdom, is the acquisition of purity of heart.⁵ This is an instructive distinction. Moses makes it clear that what the monk is ultimately seeking is nothing less than to enter into that transformed awareness of the world, self and God symbolized by the kingdom. Yet, in keeping with the practical emphasis of the desert, he makes certain that his hearers understand there is a particular means, a practice, a focus for realizing this ultimate goal — namely, purity of heart. The centrality of this focus upon the heart is echoed elsewhere in the desert literature, particularly in one haunting saying of Antony the Great: “He who wishes to live in solitude in the desert is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight; there is only one conflict for him and that is with the heart.”⁶ What is the nature of this conflict with the heart? What is at issue? And if purity of heart is the means of reaching the kingdom, what is the means of acquiring purity of heart?

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The following exchange between Abba Poemen and a brother provides some insight. The brother put this question to Abba Poemen:

What does ‘See that none of you repays evil for evil’ (I Thess. 5: 15) mean? The old man said to him, “passions work in four stages — first in the heart; secondly in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.”⁷

5. John Cassian, *Conférences*, ed. and trans. by E. Pichery. Sources Chrétiennes 42, 54, 64 (Paris: Cerf, 1955, 1958, 1959), [SC]; English translations: Edgar C.S. Gibson, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, n.s., no. 11 (Oxford, Parker and Co., 1894), Reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973 [Gibson]; Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958) [Chadwick]; Colm Luibheid, *John Cassian: Conferences* (New York, Mahwah, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1985) [Luibheid]. I: 3-4.

6. Antony 11 [PG 65: 77C]; Ward, p. 3. References from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* that follow are, for the most part, taken from the *Alphabetico-Anonymous Collection*. For the Alphabetical collection, see J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 65: 72-440 [PG]; supplemented by Jean-Claude Guy in: *Recherches sur la tradition Grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum. Subsidia Hagiographica* 36 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962, reprinted with additional comments, 1984) [*Recherches*]; English translations from: Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London: Mowbrays, 1975) [*Sayings*]. For the Anonymous Collection, see F. Nau, ed. “Histoire des solitaires égyptiens (MS Coislin 126, fol. 158f.)” 1-132 in *Revue d’Orient Chrétien* 13 (1908) [ROC]; 133-215 in ROC 13 (1908); 216-97 in ROC 14 (1909); 298-358 in ROC 17 (1912); 359-400 in ROC 18 (1913). English translations from: Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: Apophthegmata Patrum from the Anonymous Series* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975) [*Wisdom*] and Columba Stewart, *The World of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986) [*World*]. I have occasionally modified the translations and indicate this: [m].

Other collections of the sayings referred to: Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: collection alphabétique* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1981) [SPAlph]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Nouveau recueil*. 2nd ed. (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1977) [SPN]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Série des anonymes* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe/Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Solesmes/Bellefontaine, 1985) [SPAN]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Troisième recueil et tables* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1976) [SPTr].

7. Poemen 34 [PG 65: 332AB]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 172.

Putting such a question about the meaning of Scripture to an elder was a common occurrence in the desert, where monks heard if not read Scripture on a regular basis, and ruminated or chewed upon the words as part of their daily ascetic practice. Often, as here, questions would arise about the meaning of given text. But notice how Poemen responds to the brother's question. He does not answer by attempting to interpret the text, at least not directly. Instead he comments on the working of the passions, those mysterious inner forces that the monks believed drive and shape every aspect of human behavior. His phenomenological description of how the passions proceed — from the heart, to the face, to words and finally to deeds — is, on the face of it, an odd way to respond to the brother's question.

However, by proceeding in this manner he signals clearly the depth of catharsis or purification that must occur if one is to understand and realize the meaning of this text in one's life. To refrain from returning evil for evil means not merely refusing to lash out when one has been insulted or abused. It means facing up to and rooting out the multiple layers of recrimination, resentment and ill-will that grow and fester in the heart and that manifest themselves sometimes beyond one's control in one's face (say in a furrowed brow or a sneer) in one's words (in a cutting, sarcastic remark), and finally in a malicious act. Such expressions *manifest* what is in the heart and provide important clues about struggles that have yet to be faced. To *realize* the meaning of this text, Poemen suggests, means to embark on an arduous and exacting process of purification, involving the identification, examination and rooting out of the deep sources of anger, resentment and self-deception that grow in the heart. It means working to reorient one's entire life around a purified heart.

This brief saying of Poemen is immensely helpful for understanding the trajectory of the monastic quest for purity of heart and the means of realizing it. It suggests, first, the inextricable relationship for the monks between rumination on the word and purification of heart. But it also suggests the depth of transformation that such rumination entails. To chew upon the words of Scripture, to ingest them into the sinews of one's being is to open oneself to the most delicate, revealing and painful probing. It is to be brought face to face with gaps and weaknesses in the self and invited to move toward the horizon of the biblical text. The quest for purity of heart is, in other words, an interpretive process, where growth in self-knowledge and deepening understanding of the word are woven together into a single fabric. Finally, there is a practical, relational dimension to this entire process. Both interpretation and purity of heart must be manifested in a transformed life.

It will help us in understanding this process to consider how the monks thought about and struggled with that tender, deceptive and infinitely

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malleable organ, the heart, how they sought to cultivate the depth of self-knowledge and compassion that purity of heart demanded. The heart was felt to be immensely sensitive and fragile. It was so prone to distraction and dissipation that Abba Arsenius could declare: "when one who is living in silent prayer hears the song of a little sparrow [or the sound of wind rustling through the reeds], his heart no longer experiences the same peace."⁸ We may wonder at such hypersensitivity or at the hostility to the created world that Arsenius' words suggest. Within the context of the ascetic process, however, this saying signals something else: the recognition on the monk's part of the need for radical attention and vigilance in attending to the infinitely delicate movements of the heart. The early monastics learned through their long hard struggle in solitude how unstable the heart was, how easily it could wander.

Because of this, they proceeded from a fundamental suspicion of the heart's motivations. Abba Isidore believed that: "Of all evil suggestions, the most terrible is that of following one's own heart, that is to say, one's own thought, and not the law of God."⁹ Another elder counseled, "Do not do anything before you ask your heart if what you are about to do is according to God."¹⁰ And Abba Evagrius relates this advice: "Do not set your heart on what seems good to you but rather what is pleasing to God when you pray. This will free you from disturbance and leave you occupied with thanksgiving in your prayer."¹¹ Why such suspicion of the heart's motivations? The juxtaposition here between the heart and the "law of God" or what is "according to God" provides a hint. There is a danger, these elders believed, especially at the beginning stages of the ascetic journey, of being deceived by the baser motives of the heart. From within the heart there arises a vast array of desires, not all of which are equally useful in leading one toward God. The monk is asked to test, scrutinize and evaluate the myriad conflicting motives arising from the heart.

This acute attention on the part of the monks to the intricate contours of the inner landscape is significant. One could, after all, come away from the *Life of Antony* with the impression that the monastic struggles consisted of a kind of quasi-physical hand-to-hand combat. There we read of enormous, grotesque creatures who attack the monk unceasingly from all sides, compelling him to cry out in desperation for help, for relief from the attacks. However, the language employed by the monks to speak of their most intense struggles — especially the terms

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8. Arsenius 25 [PG 65: 96B]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 13.

9. Isidore the Priest, 9 [PG 65: 221C]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 98.

10. Anonymous 103 [Nau, ROC 12, p. 402]; Stewart, *World*, p. 36.

11. Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), p. 70.

logismoi and *daimones*, reveal what an intensely inward experience this was. *Logismos* means a "thought," and the *logismoi* spoken of in the literature of the desert are caused by demons. But our word "thought" hardly conveys the full meaning of *logismos* for the monks. Nor does it help us in understanding how closely bound up such impulses were with the workings of the heart. Peter Brown captures the real meaning of *logismos* when he says:

Consent to evil thoughts, many of which were occasioned, in the first instance, by the dull creakings of the body — by its need for food and its organic, sexual drives — implied a decision to collaborate with other invisible spirits, the demons, whose pervasive presence, close to the human person, was registered in the 'heart' in the form of inappropriate images, fantasies and obsessions. For these demonic promptings also had a dynamism that could not be explained by the normal stream of conscious thought. Hence ... the 'heart' was a place where momentous, faceless options were mercifully condensed in the form of conscious trains of thought — *logismoi* ... to consent to such *logismoi* was to 'consecrate oneself' to demonic partners. It was to give oneself over, on many more levels of the self than the conscious person, to an alternative identity: it was to lose oneself to the powers of numbness that still lurked in the hidden reaches of the universe, and to take on the character of chill demonic spirits who had been content to exist without the ardent search for God.¹²

The monk in the desert was above all, claims Brown, a person grappling with his own personality.

But to struggle with these *logismoi*, to learn to discern their particular source and meaning was to begin to attain a depth of freedom that would have been recognized, appreciated and admired by the monk's contemporaries, who knew only too well the power of the demonic world.

The monk in the desert was above all, claims Brown, a person grappling with his own personality. The demonic, in this context, was

sensed as an extension of the self. A relationship with the demons involved something more intimate than attack from the outside: to be "tried by the demons" meant passing through a stage in the growth of awareness of the lower frontiers of the personality. The demonic stood not merely for all that was hostile to man; the demons summed up all that was anomalous and incomplete in man.¹³

Thus when Abba Abraham asks Abba Poemen: "How do the demons fight against me?" Poemen makes this telling distinction: "The demons fight against you? ... Our own *wills* become the demons, and it is these which attack us in order that we may fulfill them."¹⁴

One might conclude from such a comment that the monks had a radically pessimistic view of the human heart. But this is not so.

12. Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 167.

13. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, pp. 89-90.

14. Poemen 67 [PG 65: 337C]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 176; cf. Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 90. Emphasis mine.

Consider another saying of Abba Poemen: "Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart."¹⁵ Such a comment is issued in much the same spirit of caution as the others we have seen above, but adds the significant note regarding satisfaction: that is, one should indeed be suspicious and vigilant regarding the multitude of motives arising from the heart, but should also recognize that the heart knows, at its deepest levels, what will truly satisfy. This effort to uncover and give expression to the heart's deepest longings occupied the center of the monk's ascetic work.

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Still, the ability to cultivate such self-awareness required long practice and the help of those elders able to diagnose the diverse sources of the heart's impulses. Considerable attention was given to the process of discernment of spirits, the cultivation of an ability to sense which particular shade of desire was manifesting itself at any given time and to know how to respond. On the most basic level, such discernment took the form of encouragement, helping the one who was engaged in a struggle of the heart to *endure* the assaults of the demons without becoming discouraged or overwhelmed. This meant learning to maintain a basic equilibrium. The heart was always in danger of becoming either "cooled" in its desire for God or "overheated" by the fuel of the passions. Thus we hear of one brother who complained to Abba Poemen that his heart became "lukewarm" when a little suffering came his way. Poemen invited the brother to hold before him the images of two biblical heroes, Joseph and Job, both models of endurance.¹⁶ The example of such figures could, Poemen suggests, help the listless monk rekindle his heart, thus recovering a sense of balance and purpose. On the other hand, monks often faced a very different problem, the overheating of the heart. A case in point concerns a certain brother who tells of being attacked by lust, for whom the "warfare was like a burning fire in his heart, day and night." But he "fought hard not to consent to these thoughts," and "after a long time the warfare ceased, unable to do anything because of the brother's endurance."¹⁷ Here, endurance signifies the monk's capacity to struggle against the *logismoi*, and his ability to survive until such time as his heart cooled down enough to recover its balance.

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Beyond sheer endurance, there were also subtler questions concerning how much attention to give to problematic thoughts in the first place. Should one engage them through direct confrontation or let them go? This is what Abba Anoub asks of Poemen concerning the torrent of impure thoughts and vain desires pouring forth from his heart. In response to Anoub's question, Poemen cites a text from Isaiah, "Is the

15. Poemen 80 [PG 65: 341C]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 178.

16. Poemen 102 [PG 65: 348A]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 181.

17. Anonymous 163 [Nau, ROC 13, p. 53]; Ward, *Wisdom* [# 31], p. 7.

axe any use without someone to cut with it?" (Is. 10: 15) and adds this telling comment: "If you do not make use of these thoughts, they will be ineffectual too."¹⁸ In other words, simply let them go. To acknowledge and struggle against them is to give them more power than they actually possess. However, there were also cases when fierce, direct resistance was advocated, especially when a monk seemed oblivious of the danger he faced. A certain brother told his elder: "I see no warfare in my heart." But the elder responded: "You are a building open on all sides, and whoever wishes can pass through you and you are unaware of it. If you have a door, you should shut it, and not allow wicked thoughts to enter through it; for then you will see them standing outside and attacking you."¹⁹ Here, the lower frontiers of the self were seen to be dangerously open. The monk must become vigilant in guarding the border.

These sayings reveal just how wide a range of responses was possible and necessary in discerning and responding to the myriad impulses of the heart. We see here the monks' awareness of the heart's extraordinary sensitivity and fragility, their understanding of how easily the heart could be divided against itself, and their flexibility regarding strategies for rehabilitating the heart. Amongst the wide range of ascetic strategies for realizing this vision, the monks maintained an abiding conviction regarding the healing, restorative power of rumination upon Scripture.

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RUMINATION: ATTENTIVE MIND, EXPANSIVE HEART

The simple repetition or rumination of sacred texts had immense significance for the monks in their quest to restore the heart. Two dimensions of this process were especially important. First, the monks saw rumination upon Scripture as a means of sharpening one's attention. One could, through this practice, cultivate a sophisticated psychology of concentration or attention which would lead one from a dissipated to a more focused existence. Second, the monks believed that the art of rumination was necessary to expand the capacity of the heart. They understood and respected the long, mysterious process whereby the heart was transformed through constant contact with the Word — from a hard, brittle, unreliable organ into one that was soft, malleable, and tender, capable of endless expressions of compassion.

To one engaged in inner warfare, rumination upon Scripture was believed to be deeply restorative, a source of healing power and encouragement, a means of psychological reorientation. Abba Macarius tells how one day while he sat watching the road by his cell,

18. Poemen 15 [PG 65: 325C]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 169.

19. Anonymous 57 [Nau, ROC 12, p. 180]; Stewart, *World*, p. 34.

he met a demon who was "going to stir up the memories of the brothers." Upon his return the demon gloomily reported to Macarius that he had all but failed in his task. Only one of the brothers had succumbed to him. "When he sees me," the demon said, "he changes like the wind." Hearing this, Macarius journeyed down to visit the brother to inquire about his welfare. The brother assured the elder that all was well with him. But Macarius pressed him, asking, "Do not your thoughts war against you?" Fearful about admitting the depth of his entanglement to the elder, the brother again replied that he was fine. Macarius sensed the brother's fearfulness and discomfort and, changing his approach, began telling the brother of his own struggles, how even after so many years of living as an ascetic, he was still beset by temptations. Astonished and comforted to hear this, the brother opened himself to Macarius, confessing to him the immensity of the struggles he faced. In response, the elder offered him this advice: "meditate on the Gospel and the other Scriptures, and if a thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at once to your help." The brother followed the advice and eventually became liberated from the assaults of this demon.²⁰

This story provides a good illustration of the kind of psychological relief that meditation on Scripture could bring to those who felt themselves beset by inner warfare. It also shows the capacity — for which many of the elders were renowned — for compassionate engagement with those lost in a lonely agony. It is intriguing to note the form this particular assault takes — the "stirring up of memories." *The Sayings* speak often of the kinds of memories that plagued the monks. They were not simply memories of their "former life in the world," although many were afflicted by questions about family and loved ones left behind. They were memories of a life-time of struggle — often laced with failure — to live in a certain way, memories of malicious words or deeds still left unresolved, memories of ancient wounds as yet unhealed, memories of current, insistent obsessions. Such memories could, if allowed to fester and deepen, eventually become overwhelming, and sink one into a state of discouragement, even despair. Such was apparently the case with this monk.

Macarius responds to the brother with both a gesture and a word. The gesture — his empathetic participation in the brother's experience — is spontaneous and generous, and enables his troubled *confrere* to begin his long climb out of the abyss. It is the climate of trust created by this gesture that allows the exchange between them to begin, that allows Macarius to speak and the brother to hear a healing word. We are not told what particular text he recommends or of any process of reflection

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20. Macarius the Great 3 [PG 65: 264A]; Ward, *Sayings*, pp. 126-7.

Meditation itself would not enable the monk to overcome the demons. Only the attitude of abandonment to God cultivated through meditation could bring one to that deep peace the monks called *hesychia*.

One of the main purposes of meditation was the cultivation of simplicity, or unity within the mind and heart.

the brother should engage in. But the invitation to meditate upon Scripture is itself significant. Meditation here means not what we usually understand it to mean — thoughtful reflection on the meaning of a text or an idea — but something deeper. It means ruminating, literally chewing upon or masticating the text, digesting it, so that it becomes absorbed into the depths of one's being. Meditation on Scripture in this way would not only allow the monk's heart to be occupied with something besides wounding memories, but would initiate and eventually effect a healing, a renewal of the heart. Even so, Macarius notes, the *logismoi* are tenacious — old thoughts and memories will inevitably continue to arise from within. When they do, one should avoid a "head on" confrontation with them. They are too strong. Instead, when these thoughts arise, one should "look upwards" to the Lord. Help will come at once. Such advice takes seriously the reality of the struggle with thoughts and, without advocating their repression, provides the monk with a practical strategy for avoiding their fiercest blows. More than this, there is a deeply Christian sense of hope which permeates these words. Meditation itself would not enable the monk to overcome the demons. Only the attitude of abandonment to God cultivated through meditation could bring one to that deep peace the monks called *hesychia*.²¹

Even in less extreme circumstances, if one's thoughts had simply become scattered during the course of the day, the recitation of Scripture was advocated as a means of restoring one to an inner equilibrium. Abba John Colobos apparently noticed how working every day in the harvest had the effect of dissipating his attention, making him vulnerable to all kinds of thoughts. Because of this, when he returned from the harvest, he would give himself to "prayer, meditation and psalmody until his thoughts were re-established in their previous order."²² This saying suggests that one of the main purposes of meditation was the cultivation of simplicity, or unity within the mind and heart. Such attentiveness helped the monk avoid the kind of spiritual torpor which so often resulted when one became overwhelmed by a multitude of thoughts.

The ability to remain attentive in this way, to *remember* the sayings of Scripture and not give way to forgetfulness was believed to be crucial to the health and well-being of the monk. One saying tells of a brother who, while reciting Scripture at the *synaxis* with one of the elders, "forgot and lost track of a word of the psalm." The elder noticed this. When the *synaxis* was finished, he told the brother of his own practice. When I recite the *synaxis*, he said, I think of myself as being on top of a

21. A sense of deep peace is one of the many meanings of *hesychia* in the desert literature. For a good analysis of the term, see: Pierre Miquel, OSB, *Lexique du désert: Étude de quelques mots-clés du vocabulaire monastique grec ancien* (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1986), pp. 145-180.

22. John Colobos 35 [PG 65: 216A]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 92.

burning fire: "my thoughts cannot stray right or left." He then asked the brother: "Where were your thoughts, when we were saying the *synaxis*, that the word of the psalm escaped you? Don't you know that you are standing in the presence of God and speaking to God?"²³ We see here how crucial attention is in the life of the monk, especially while reciting Scripture. Carelessness or inattention not only caused one to forget the words of Scripture, but also opened the door to a stream of *logismoi* and caused one to become oblivious to the presence of God mediated through those words. It was this concern that led one elder to affirm: "if God reproaches us for carelessness in our prayers and distractions in our psalmody, we cannot be saved."²⁴

Attention, then, means acute awareness of *presence*. But one arrived at such awareness and at the deep peace of *hesychia* not merely by self-scrutiny and reflection, though these are useful up to a point, or by fierce resistance to thoughts and temptations. These are, after all, only the acts of the conscious and active mind. The desert monastics knew the process of purification went much deeper. If to consent to *logismoi* meant consecrating oneself to demonic partners, then attainment of tranquillity of mind and purity of heart meant consecrating oneself to the One whose presence is manifested in the sacred texts. Interpretation and rumination in this context lead to *encounter*.

Perhaps this helps to account for the monks' willingness to reduce the scope of their attention so radically, often to a single verse of Scripture. In Cassian's *Conferences*, Abba Isaac advocates the continual repetition of a single verse from Psalm 70: "O God, make haste to save me, O Lord, make haste to help me." He notes that "the verse is an impregnable battlement, a shield and a coat of mail which no spear can pierce ... it will be a saving formula in your heart."²⁵ Why such trust in a single verse? A clue is provided in Isaac's allusion to the inner disposition which one should cultivate in repeating this text. He contends that "a person who perseveres in *simplicity and innocence* ... is protected."²⁶ Simplicity and innocence then are the key. The person who meditates in such a spirit of concentrated attention is already on the way to realizing what he seeks — the deep inner clarity in which God can be apprehended. Nor should one imagine this to be merely an external process. To keep the text always before one, "ceaselessly revolving it" within oneself, meant for Abba Isaac, "that continual meditation becomes finally impregnated in our soul."²⁷

We see here how crucial attention is in the life of the monk, especially while reciting Scripture.

The person who meditates in such a spirit of concentrated attention is already on the way to realizing what he seeks — the deep inner clarity in which God can be apprehended.

23. Anonymous 146 [Nau, ROC 13, p. 50] [m]; Ward, *Wisdom* [# 14], p. 4.

24. Theodore of Enaton 3 [PG 65: 197A] [m]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 79. The word "distraction" here literally means to be led away into captivity. The sense is that carelessness and distraction can lead one literally to forget the meaning of salvation.

25. *Conference* 10: 10; SC 54, p. 86; Chadwick, 240-242.

26. *Conference* 10: 11; SC 54, p. 91; Chadwick, 243.

27. *Conference* 10: 10; SC 54, p. 90; Chadwick, 243.

This ever deepening grasp of the text within the soul is precisely what the monks sought in their rumination upon the text. At a certain point the text becomes an "interior possession" and there is no longer any distance between the text, the One revealed in the text, and the person chewing on the text. Abba Nestoros notes:

If these things [from Scripture] have been carefully taken in and stored up in the recesses of the soul and stamped with the seal of silence, afterwards they will be brought forth from the jar of your heart with great fragrance and like some perennial fountain will flow from the veins of experience and irrigate channels of virtue and will pour forth copious streams as if from some deep well in your heart.²⁸

This is precisely the process that Abba Isaac traces for us with such sympathy and delicacy in another of Cassian's *Conferences*. Isaac comments on the remarkable power that is available to the monk from ceaselessly reciting in the heart the verse from Psalm 70: "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me (Ps. 69:2)." This verse, says Isaac:

"...carries within it all the feelings of which human nature is capable. It can be adapted to every condition and can usefully be deployed against every temptation. It carries within it a cry of help to God in the face of every danger. It expresses the humility of a pious confession. It conveys the watchfulness born of unending worry and fear. It conveys a sense of our frailty, the assurance of being heard, the confidence in help that is always and everywhere present...this is the voice of ardor and charity. This is the terrified cry of someone who sees the snares of the enemy, the cry of someone besieged day and night and exclaiming that he cannot escape unless his protector comes to the rescue. ...this verse keeps us from despairing of our salvation since it reveals to us the One to whom we call..."²⁹

Here we have in nuce an entire psychology and spirituality of meditation. It is striking to note how capacious Scripture was seen to be, a single verse carrying within it and calling forth from the one who recites it "all the feelings of which human nature is capable."

Here we have *in nuce* an entire psychology and spirituality of meditation. It is striking to note how capacious Scripture was seen to be, a single verse carrying within it and calling forth from the one who recites it "all the feelings of which human nature is capable." What a complex labyrinth of emotions are compressed into and carried by this briefest of utterances: a cry for help; humility; watchfulness (born of unending worry and fear); a sense of frailty; assurance; confidence; desire; love; terror. And how religiously *potent* the recitation of this verse is, revealing "the *One* to whom we call."

Richard R. Niebuhr rightly calls such meditation an art. For it involved nothing less than:

the interpolation of the text or passage into the reader's experience and the reader's experience into the passage, not, to be sure, either hap-

28. *Conference* 14: 13, SC 54, p. 201; Gibson, 442.

29. *Conference* 10: 10, SC 54, p. 86; Luihheid, p. 133.

hazardly or according to rigid values but tactfully and experimentally. [Such readers] ... found in the Bible a reflection and adumbration of their own experience. Sometimes they searched in themselves for experiences answering to the examples they encountered in biblical narratives or in the Psalms...; sometimes they were overcome by an unexpected surfacing in their own awareness of an experience that deepened the example set before them on the printed page.³⁰

The art of meditation, as the monks understood it, led directly and irrevocably toward a living *encounter* with the One speaking in and through the text. It is for this reason that Isaac suggests that to meditate was to move beyond the wealth of thoughts toward simplicity or poverty of intention. He says that the mind will go on grasping this single verse of Scripture "until it can cast away the wealth and multiplicity of other thoughts, and restrict itself to the poverty of a single verse."³¹ And when it does so, the monk may well find himself in that sublime place that Abba Isaac describes when the experiential grasp of the meaning of Scripture becomes fused with the experience of pure prayer — "contemplation of God alone."

The art of meditation, as the monks understood it, led directly and irrevocably toward a living encounter with the One speaking in and through the text.

PURITY OF HEART: MADNESS OR TRANSPARENCY?

What kind of experience is being described here? Where is the monk being led in this ever increasing reduction of the heart's attention to a single reality? Do we have here increasing depths of transparency and self-knowledge? Or myopia? Does this ascetic process yield something worth knowing? Or does it represent a closing down of possibilities? Observers of early Christian monasticism have been divided regarding how to assess monastic asceticism, including its emphasis on purity of heart. It is striking that this same tradition can be viewed by one observer as a kind of "madness," and by another as representing "the very limits of what is humanly possible."³² There is no easy way of resolving this basic tension. In fact, I think there is much to be said for retaining, as the monks themselves did, a sense of both the strangeness and the allure of the desert, its wild edges and its comforting serene center. Still, it is also worth asking what kind of experience the early desert literature relates to us in speaking of the quest for purity of heart and how we are to evaluate its meaning and significance.

Observers of early Christian monasticism have been divided regarding how to assess monastic asceticism, including its emphasis on purity of heart.

Consider Robin Lane Fox's assessment of the monastic practice of reducing the scope of one's attention. In his book, *Pagans and Christians*, Lane Fox discusses the impact of the ideal of virginity within

30. Richard R. Niebuhr, "The Strife of Interpreting: The Moral Burden of Imagination," *Parabola* 10 (1985), 39-40.

31. *Conferences* 10: 11; Chadwick, p. 243.

32. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965), p. 34; Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993), p. 5.

early Christian asceticism, treating specifically the issue of "single-mindedness":

Virginity encouraged single-mindedness and dependence upon God alone.... This praise of simplicity and single-mindedness exalted human achievement by greatly limiting its scope. It denied man's capacity for living in complexity, for pursuing desirable ends which might not be mutually consistent, for enlarging his sympathies and own understanding by engaging in several pursuits at once. To return to a child-like Paradise was to exclude almost everything and understand next to nothing: 'single-mindedness' is a dangerous, enfeebling myth.³³

Many of us would find ourselves in tacit agreement with at least some of what Lane Fox has to say, would admit to a certain discomfort with the radical character of monastic reduction.

Many of us would find ourselves in tacit agreement with at least some of what Lane Fox has to say, would admit to a certain discomfort with the radical character of monastic reduction. We can identify with E. R. Dodds' exasperated cry — "Where did all this madness come from?" — at the specter of monasticism spreading across the ancient world.³⁴ Living as we do in an "age of information," where one of the most valuable forms of currency is one's ability to master and interpret a vast array of complex data, we may indeed be suspicious of the impulse toward simplification. And who among us would not feel our lives the poorer in the absence of art, literature, poetry, music? What precisely is gained by eschewing culture, by reducing one's life to a single concentrated point of attention? Doesn't this represent a flight from reality? A "failure of nerve"? Nor do we warm easily to the prospect of contracting the physical dimensions of our life to the confined space of a cell. "Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything," said one of the monks. We nod appreciatively yet without comprehension as we consider the architect's plans for the new addition to the family home. Madness indeed.

Yet is it madness — this longing to reduce the scope of one's attention, to clarify the mind and heart in order to live out of the still center of one's life?

Yet is it madness — this longing to reduce the scope of one's attention, to clarify the mind and heart in order to live out of the still center of one's life? Or is it genius, courage, devotion? Perhaps it is some incalculable combination of all of these that led the monks to engage in their strange, demanding experiment. One thing is clear — they did not see or experience this reduction, as Lane Fox does, as a "zero sum game." They had a more complex and capacious understanding of the mind and heart than this. They understood, as poet Mary Oliver does, that radical attention, self-knowledge and religious epiphany are often intimately bound up together. Telling of an old couple living in Greece a long time ago, she describes how they "opened their door / to two

33. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 366.

34. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 34. It is significant, however, that Dodds cites examples mostly from the *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius, one of the most hellenized and dualistic of the early monastic documents. He makes no distinction between the ascetical practices depicted there and the much more restrained and moderate picture presented by the *Sayings*.

strangers who were, / it soon appeared, / not men at all, but gods. / The old couple / had almost nothing to give / but their willingness / to be attentive — / and for this alone / the gods loved them / and blessed them.”³⁵

The monks knew, through rigorous and demanding practice, the truth of the beatitude: only the pure of heart can see God.

Is not this simple, radical willingness “to be attentive” close to the spirit that informed the monks’ quest for purity of heart? Is not purity of heart a simultaneous sharpening of one’s attention and expansion of one’s understanding and capacity for love? In the desert, unity of mind and purity of heart are very close to one another. They are different ways of talking about the quality of awareness and spiritual translucence that are necessary if one wishes to feel the subtle touch of God upon the soul. The monks knew, through rigorous and demanding practice, the truth of the beatitude: only the pure of heart can see God. Some of them actually enjoyed such intimacy with God. They experienced that *parrhesia*, that freedom of speech with God so longed for by their peers. This intimate relationship between purity of heart and encounter with the divine helps to explain, I think, why certain of the monks were so highly revered, why they were perceived to possess such power and authority.

Here we arrive at one of the most compelling aspects of the quest for purity of heart in early desert monasticism, the conviction that the transformation occurring in the most hidden reaches of the heart must become visible and accessible to others in a life of power. The monks were convinced that purity of heart had to *manifest* itself in one’s life. In the story about Poemen and the passions described above there is a clear sense that what happens in the heart shows itself at every level of a person’s being — in their words, their gestures and facial features and their actions. The elders, especially those most revered for their purity of heart, were sensitive readers of the heart who knew how to interpret the subtlest gestures and actions of another human being. Similarly, their own actions, words and gestures were read by their contemporaries for clues about how to acquire a pure heart. This is in fact one of the keys to understanding why ancient biographies of holy men and women (such as *The Life of Antony*) were written, and why they had such power in the ancient world. Their aim, notes Patricia Cox Miller, “was to evoke, and thus to reveal the interior geography of the hero’s life.... [Thus] when they sought to ‘capture the gesture,’ they were negotiating the intersection of the human and divine.”³⁶

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It was especially in gestures of compassion that purity of heart was seen to shine forth in the life of the monk. Indeed love was so central to the desert monks that they referred to it simply as “the command-

35. Mary Oliver, “Mockingbirds,” in *White Pine* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 16.

36. Patricia Cox Miller, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi.

ment.³⁷ The significance accorded to love by the desert monks is worth noting, for it reminds us how deeply *relational, communal* the quest for purity of heart was in the desert. One can easily get the impression from reading *The Life of Antony* or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* that the quest for purity of heart was a ruthlessly solitary affair. While it did include a solitary dimension that could at times be fierce and unyielding, there can be no denying the social and communal context in which the quest for purity of heart was carried out in the desert. This means acknowledging not only, as Peter Brown has suggested, that life in the desert represented to some degree an effort to resolve and point the way beyond a “crisis in human relations” in fourth century Egyptian villages. It also means appreciating, as Graham Gould has shown in painstaking detail, the inescapably communal reality of life in the desert itself, the sense in which relationships with one’s fellow human beings represented *the* acid test of whether anything like purity of heart had been realized.³⁸ If withdrawal to the desert included a terrifying confrontation with the self and God in solitude, it cannot be said to have celebrated or privileged anything like a Plotinian “flight of the alone to the alone.”

The monks wanted to know in the most practical terms what it meant to realize the commandment to love within the ordinary circumstances of their lives. Within the often abrasive relational life of early monastic communities, love meant above all learning to live free of judgment and anger. There was, for example, an ongoing temptation within the ascetic life to place ascetic rigor before the demands of love. The most revered of the elders resisted this temptation. We hear, for example, how Abba Moses was asked one day to participate in the communal judgment of a brother who had fallen into sin. After much prodding, he reluctantly agreed to follow the others to the place of the trial. But he brought along a large jug, which leaked from his shoulder as he walked along. Pressed by his companions for an explanation of his behavior, he told them, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge another.” Seeing this, the brothers were pierced to their depths and gave up their vendetta against the one who had sinned.³⁹ The unwillingness to judge could apparently turn into an *incapacity* to judge, a complete cleansing of this impulse within the heart. It was said of Abba Ammonas that he had “advanced to the point where his goodness was so great, he no longer took any notice of evil.”⁴⁰ In fact, if anyone came to him asking him to

37. John Colobos 19 [PG 65: 212BC]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 90; Theodore of Pherme 11 [PG 65: 189CD]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 75; Cassian 1 [PG 65: 244AB]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 113. John Colobos 39 [PG 65: 217A]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 93.

38. Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

39. Moses 2 [PG 65: 288B]; Ward, *Sayings*, pp. 138-139.

40. Ammonas 8 [PG 65: 121BC]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 27.

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judge another, he would “feign madness” to avoid doing so.⁴¹ There was a particular emphasis on the need for compassion toward those who were weakest, most in need of help. This is eloquently expressed in the simple tenderness of Poemen toward a brother who could not maintain the ascetic rigors of the monastic regime — especially the lengthy recitation of the Psalms during the night. Some of the brothers, who were insistent on preserving what they believed to be the necessary strictness in the monastic observances, asked Poemen: “When we see brothers who are dozing at the *synaxis*, shall we rouse them so that they will be watchful?” He responded: “For my part, when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

It is in tender, seemingly insignificant gestures such as this that one begins to understand why the early Christian monks came to be seen as bearers of divine presence and power. More compelling than feats of ascetical rigor or miracles was their insistence, manifested in their own lives, that the heart could be rehabilitated, that a human life could become suffused by love. But it was not only in words or in particular acts or gestures that the monks were seen to manifest this depth of compassion. It was in the quality of their presence. There is a story told of three elders who used to visit Antony every year. Two of them would discuss their thoughts and the salvation of their souls with him, but the third always remained silent, not asking him anything. Antony finally asked him why it was that he always came with the others but did not ask him anything. He replied, “It is enough for me to see you, Abba.”⁴³

Radiant presence arising from a purified heart: this is what contemporaries of the monks saw in these figures who haunted the wilderness of the Egyptian desert. This is what drew seekers and imitators out into the desert. And this, finally, was the source of the monks’ power and influence. They became healers, mediators, even power brokers within the world of late antiquity because in their ascetic accomplishment they summed up the longings of an age. They had resolved within themselves to a very great degree the seemingly irresolvable social, emotional and spiritual conflicts and anxieties that plagued so many of their contemporaries. And if they accomplished this in part by withdrawing from the fray, they did not remain aloof. In turning their gaze inward

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41. Ammonas 9 [PG 65: 121D-124A]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 27.

42. Poemen 92 [PG 65: 344C]; Ward, *Sayings*, pp. 179-180.

43. Antony 27 [PG 65: 84C]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 7.

they were also looking outward, to the new possibilities for human community made possible by a purified heart.

If we listen carefully to the stories and sayings of the desert monks, we can hardly help but conclude that all of this true.

Is it really possible that the human heart can be rehabilitated? That a person can learn to reorient himself around his own deepest center? That human relationships can be put onto a more honest, compassionate footing? That a person's words, gestures, even visage can be seen to manifest, give authentic expression to a pure heart, the presence of the divine? That it is possible to bring a healing presence into the world? If we listen carefully to the stories and sayings of the desert monks, we can hardly help but conclude that all of this true. Perhaps the call of the desert is heard nowhere as clearly as it is here, where the astounding and seemingly infinite power of the human heart is laid bare. "If you have a heart," Abba Pambo said, "you can be saved."⁴⁴ □

44. Pambo 10 [PG 65: 372A]; Ward, *Sayings*, p. 197.