

Inward Spirituality with an Outward Purpose:
The Desert Fathers and Mothers

Janet Eriksson

A non-Christian visitor to a church service once asked, “Why do you sing songs that focus just on you and God? Why do you get lost in worship? Where is your concern for other people?” Her questions target the sometimes uneasy balance in the outward expressions of inward faith. Does getting lost in worship, prayer and quiet time with God hinder Christians in focusing on the needs of those around them? An answer is offered by the lives of the 4th-century Christian ascetics known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

At a time when Christianity was moving from the fringes into the mainstream of state and society, some individuals believed that the Christian faith was being compromised and losing its spirituality (Irvin & Sunquist, p. 210; Merton, p. 3). These individuals renounced their worldly attachments and went into the desert, including the desert areas of Egypt, seeking a deeper spirituality. These ascetics didn’t remain in isolation. Irvin & Sunquist note that they were “besieged” by travelers, to whom their way of life was attractive, and “the ascetics had little choice but to respond by sharing their spiritual insights and directions” (p. 210). This paints an image of people who wished to be left alone, and only begrudgingly interacted when outsiders came seeking them. Is that an accurate image? Was the intent of the Desert Fathers and Mothers to escape the world and be caught up in mystical, self-centered practices?

In his book, *In the Heart of the Desert*, John Chryssavgis poses the question: “Are the Desert Fathers and Mothers anti-social figures?” (p. 79) Detachment from the world might have reflected an early Christian belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ (Ward, viii). Indeed, some of the sayings recorded from these 4th-century ascetics reflect a desire to seek solitude

away from the world: “Until you can say in your heart, ‘Only I and God are in the world,’ you will not be at peace” (Abba Allois, cited in Ward, p. 119); “monks who stay outside their cell or remain with secular people fall away from their vow of quiet” (Abba Antony, cited in Ward, p. 8); “one who avoids others is like a ripe grape; one who stays in company is like a sour grape” (Abba Moses, cited in Ward, p. 10).

However, any image of the Desert Fathers and Mothers as otherworldly mystics, disconnected from people, or “not strong enough to endure the friction of worldly life” (Ward, xi) is incomplete. An exploration of their desert experiences reveals that what they sought inwardly had an outward purpose: to love God with all their heart, strength, soul and mind; and to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

For this purpose, they had a model in the person of Jesus Christ. In His ministry, Jesus modeled times of solitude followed by times of serving others. His ability to give flowed from His time alone with God, a time when God’s Spirit would consume Him. Jesus demonstrated that when a person seeks God with His whole heart, God will inevitably turn that person’s focus to others. Likewise, the Desert Fathers and Mothers were willing to live and learn from the outward impact of their inner explorations.

The outward focus of the Desert Fathers and Mothers is reflected in four areas of their desert existence: their relationships in community; their service to others; their desire for transformation; and their pursuit of understanding in relationships. This essay will explore these four areas in which many 4th-century ascetics demonstrated the vital connection between spiritual solitude and spiritual community. This connection is relevant for the Church today, as the Church continues to seek transformation and to balance inner spirituality with fellowship and service to others – what John Wesley described as “social holiness” (Snyder, p. 55).

Relationships in Community

The 4th-century ascetics that moved to the desert areas of Egypt were not, for the most part, in complete isolation or disregard of others. In her book, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*, Laura Swan discusses the connection that remained between the desert ascetics and the Church. The ascetics were concerned with evangelism, offered counseling, and participated by invitation of bishops in theological debates (p. 14). They did not behave as a people who desired to abandon society.

Communities of Desert Fathers and Mothers were typically within a day's walk to the nearest village. Often communities grew around a desert elder (Swan, p. 15). Abba Antony, who Merton describes as "the Father of all the Desert Fathers" (p. 21), allowed disciples to gather around him and became their spiritual director (Chryssavgis, p. 80).

A story captures Antony's sensitivity to the brothers in his community. One day a hunter came by and was surprised to see Antony spending leisure time with the brothers. Antony asked the hunter to shoot several arrows, one after another. Finally, the hunter said that he did not dare shoot another arrow, for his bow would break.

Antony replied, "It is the same with the works of God. If we stretch the brothers beyond their measure, they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs" (Chryssavgis, p. 80).

To concerns that the Desert Fathers and Mothers had an individualistic intent to withdraw from the world, Merton cites their numerous sayings that have been preserved as proof of their social interaction (p. 5). The collections of sayings are filled with warm-hearted and sometimes humorous dialogue among the ascetics and visitors (Merton, p. 16; Chryssavgis, p. 105). This suggests that what the ascetics experienced in the solitude of their cells in the desert was

intended to be shared, and that people were important to them. Abba Apollo affirms the value of others by his words: “When you see your brother, you have seen the Lord your God”

(Chryssavgis, p. 82).

Service to Others

A high regard for others is reflected in the service and hospitality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Irvin & Sunquist, p. 214). According to Merton, “Charity and hospitality were matters of top priority, and took precedence over fasting and personal ascetic routines” (p. 16).

Swan also comments that when a guest arrived to visit one of the desert ascetics, “silence would be broken for heart-to-heart conversation (p. 26). The guest would be treated as if Jesus had arrived (Swan, p. 22), as illustrated by this story:

Cassian said, “We came from Palestine to Egypt, and visited one of the hermits. After he had welcomed us, we asked him, ‘When you receive guests, why don’t you fast? In Palestine they do.’ He answered, ‘Fasting is always possible but I cannot keep you here forever. Fasting is useful and necessary, but we can choose to fast or not fast. God’s law demands from us perfect love. I receive Christ when I receive you, so I must do all I can to show you love. When I have said goodbye to you, I can take up my rule of fasting again. “The sons of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them; when he is taken from them, then they can fast” (Matthew 9:15).

Abba Antony is recorded as saying, “Our life and death are with our neighbor. If we do good to our neighbor, we do good to God; if we cause our neighbor to stumble, we sin against Christ” (Ward, p. 177). Many sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers reflect a high value placed on others. This regard for others is a fruit of humility which, according to the ascetic John the Dwarf, is to be “treasured ‘above all virtues’” (Chryssavgis, p. 73).

The following words express the heart of another ascetic: “I never wanted work to be useful to me while causing loss to my brother, for I have this hope that what helps my brother will bring fruit to me” (Ward, p. 182). Sacrificing self for others is reflected in the story of the ascetic who overheard another say that a trader was coming, and he had no handles for his baskets. The first brother took off the handles from his own baskets and gave them to the other (Ward, p. 180). This is not the gesture of someone so focused on inner spirituality that he is unaware of another’s needs.

Desire for Transformation

Chryssavgis warns that “we must never use love and service as excuses to avoid the inner work of transformation” (p. 81). It is plausible that the Desert Fathers’ and Mothers’ outward service and caring for others reflected an inner process of transformation. Merton states that “love demands a complete inner transformation” (p. 18), without which we will struggle to identify with others.

How did this transformation take place for the Desert Fathers and Mothers? Chryssavgis describes not only the desert but also the monastic cell as a place where an individual confronts what is in her heart and unmask herself (p. 33, 37). As Abba Poemen observed, “Cloth, if it is too long in a chest, becomes rotten. If our bodies do not bring [impure] thoughts into the daylight, then they will rot or be destroyed” (Ward, p. 99). The desert was a “place of death – the place to die to the false self” (Swan, p. 15).

Through personal struggle faced in solitude, a person not only becomes free of the masks and chains that bind him. He also learns to identify in compassion with others. An awareness of an individual’s own faults helps him embrace the same faults in others (Chryssavgis, p. 106).

The result is a heart made whole, a heart that can then love others as oneself (Matthew 22:39), with the love of Christ.

This compassion of Christ is demonstrated beautifully by Abba Poemen. He was asked, “When we see brothers who are falling asleep during the services, should we arouse them so that they will be watchful?” He answered, “For my part, when I see a brother falling asleep, I place his head on my knees and let him rest” (Chryssavgis p. 107).

Pursuit of Understanding in Relationships

As they sought transformation of their hearts, many Desert Fathers and Mothers were conscientious to walk out these changes in relationship with others. Relationships mattered to them. “If we gain our brother, then we have gained God,” Abba Antony is recorded as saying; “but if we scandalize our brother, then we have sinned against Christ” (Chryssavgis, p. 79).

A high regard for others can be seen in Antony’s response to a situation in a particular community. A brother had sinned, and the community expelled him. When Antony learned of this, he sent word back to the community, saying, “A ship was wrecked in the ocean and lost its cargo, and with great difficulty the empty ship was brought to land. Do you want to run the ship that has been rescued onto the rocks and sink it?” (Ward, p. 84) The community received the brother back into the fold.

Therefore, Chryssavgis posits that the Desert Fathers and Mothers did not pursue life in the desert to cut themselves off from others. Rather, they desired to gain a deeper understanding in relationship with others (p. 35). In the words of Abba Serinus, “There is no great virtue in keeping to your discipline in your cell. But there is, if you also keep it when you come out of

your cell” (Chryssavgis, p. 43). The transforming work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts required a witness in community.

One of the ways that transformation was demonstrated in relationship with others was through the practice of detachment. Detachment was an ascetic practice that did not entail removing oneself from people and things. Rather, it was “the spiritual capacity to focus on all things, material and other, without attachment” (Chryssavgis, p. 69). This implies a Christ-like quality of being fully present in the world, but not in bondage to things of the world. As learned from the sayings of Abba Zosimas, “When you do not seek after [material things], you will not be mindful of wrong done to you” (Chryssavgis, p. 25).

For the ascetics, the practice of detachment referred not only to material things but also to people. As Swan explains, “The desert ascetics’ relationships were nonpossessive: They cared for others while leaving them free” (p. 21). This is different from the patron-client relationships so prevalent in the cities and towns of Egypt at that time. The Desert Fathers and Mothers offered care with nothing expected in return.

Detachment required letting go of oneself, being vulnerable and transparent, which “allowed for truth and sincerity in personal relationships” (Chryssavgis, p. 70). In their community life and service to others, the Desert Fathers and Mothers had many opportunities to be transparent in relationships. In turn, their interactions no doubt contributed to their continued experiential learning and transformation.

Conclusion

This essay has highlighted four areas in which the Desert Fathers and Mothers of 4th-century Christianity demonstrated how a life of holiness can impact relationships in community.

The key is letting go of oneself – not to escape the world, but to be fully present in the world. This requires submitting oneself to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The result is death of self, followed by a new life of Christ within (Matthew 10:39), a life capable of loving and serving others with the love of Christ.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to determine whether or not every 4th-century ascetic actively or successfully pursued the connection between spiritual solitude and spiritual community. From the Desert Fathers' and Mothers' words that have been preserved, however, it is evident that many did pursue and experience the outward impact of inner transformation. In learning to die to themselves, many of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, as evidenced by their words, learned how to fully live, relate to and love others with the love of Christ. Their practice of dying to self, and thus finding resurrection life in Christ and His love for others, is part of the Desert Fathers' and Mothers' legacy to the Church today.

References

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