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Loneliness, Solitude, Community: Insights from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

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Abstract: The present article provides an urban reading of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in the broader context of the rediscovery and re-evaluation of monastic spirituality by and for the laity. On the one hand, the 21st century is considered to be the age of loneliness; on the other hand, loneliness defined the lives of the desert fathers, albeit its nuance was different. The wisdom of these elders could be a cure for contemporary loneliness, or, at least give us a set of models to navigate our loneliness.

Keywords: orthodox church; orthodox spirituality; *Apophthegmata Patrum*; desert fathers; loneliness; solitude

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1. Introduction

One can observe that there is a modern tendency to rediscover monastic spirituality and, above all, to find ways in which it can be lived to the full in the world. Perhaps an important point in this journey is the Russian theologian Alexander Bukharev, who in 1880 left monasticism to live holily in the world. As Elisabeth Behr-Sigel suggests in her monograph on Bukharev (Behr-Sigel 1977, pp. 88–89), it is possible that he was the model for Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov, who also went out into the world, sent by Abbot Zosima, in order to fulfil a similar ideal. In the twentieth century, in the Orthodox sphere, an important contribution was made by Paul Evdokimov, a great reader of Dostoevsky (Evdokimov 1961), who in his work "Ages of Spiritual Life" writes extensively about "interiorised monasticism" (Evdokimov 1980, pp. 121–41). Recently the number of publications devoted to this subject has increased significantly (Peters 2018; R. Carter 2020; Williams 2020).

The starting point of this article is the observation that the 21st century is one plagued by alarming levels of loneliness. For instance, in 2018 Great Britain announced the creation of the position of a Minister for Loneliness (Alberti 2019, p. 2). "The very texture of modern life is inflected by loneliness" (Dumm 2008, p. 44). The fields of psychology and mental health (Howatt 2021), as well as that of religion (Eason 2020; Howatt 2021), have been explored in the search for solutions to this problem. In this study I set out to revisit a set of sayings found in the alphabetical collection of *Apophthegmata Patrum* (AP), which I believe may offer answers for dealing with loneliness and for transforming it "into a form of spiritual solitude" (Marginean 2022, p. 2), one in which we would be able to reconnect with God, to restore communion and community.

I have to state from the very beginning that my perspective on the AP is that from within the spirituality of eastern Christianity, so I view this text as an integral part of the Church Tradition, and as such as a source from which every historical era can extract relevant meaning. Therefore, what I will attempt to offer is not a critical analysis of the AP, but a spiritual hermeneutic.

2. The Century of Loneliness

Loneliness can kill. The statistics are increasingly alarming. Loneliness spreads like a plague, "a Modern Epidemic" (Alberti 2019, p. 4), harder to fight than a virus and as

painful as war. A war in which one doesn't even have enemies. Noreena Hertz, in her book *The Lonely Century*, states without hesitation that "all over the world people are feeling lonely, disconnected, and alienated. We are in the midst of a global loneliness crisis. None of us, anywhere, is immune." (Hertz 2021, p. 7). In lonely people the risk of heart disease increases by 29%, that of a heart attack by 32%, the risk of clinical dementia increases by 64%, and that of a premature death by 30% (Hertz 2021, p. 24). These are just a few of the physical effects of loneliness; as for the psychological effects of loneliness, it is only in recent years that they have begun to be studied from a psychiatric perspective (Hertz 2021, pp. 32–33).

The solutions that emerge are fragile: social networks, noisy parties, expensive illusions that cover with a thick layer of blush the haggard face of isolation and the inability to get closer.

In solitude, vast silent dramas unfold, out of sight. Loneliness strikes at any age. Young people stuck in introversion, adults working to forget the frailties of their hearts, and forlorn elders; all are engulfed by the same wave of loneliness.

3. *Apophthegmata Patrum*

Once Christianity entered history, it permeated a whole series of literary genres. But nowhere has it felt more at home than in the space of storytelling passed down from generation to generation. This is the substance of tradition, the common bond, the mark of humanity. In the way they tell stories encapsulating the essence of human experience, the texts of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are fundamentally close to the Gospels, whose message they embody in the desert (Regnault 1990, pp. 6–7).

The old ascetics were loners, alone with the One God (Alonius 1, PG 65, 133A; Ward 1975, p. 35), far from people, but united in prayer with all (Evagrius Ponticus, PG 79, 1193C). At the same time, the stories of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were like a rope stretched across generations, but also a vehicle for grace, like the Gospels. A source of encouragement, teaching, and, very often, peace of mind and heart, because the privileged encounter with the desert fathers is accompanied by prayer.

The *AP* not only invites the reader to be a spectator, but offers him the luxury of intimacy with the most discreet of people. The elders, whose lives were so hidden in the heart of the desert, make themselves known: with their joys, efforts, and quests, but also their deeply human anxieties and temptations. AP says less than it shows. And precisely because it shows, what is seen can always be interpreted. The message is alive in every generation. Nothing is locked into definitive formulas. Their fundamental concerns always appear, but definitions are missing. The fathers speak about humility (Anthony 7, PG 65, 77B), but they don't say what it is; or even when they say, they are using elusive formulas that could never form a definition (Matoes 11, PG 65, 293B). They only show us how it is acquired, and we learn how it manifests itself and how important it is (Or 9, PG 65, 440A). In the end, however, one must seek humility, like love, on one's own.

The stories of the *AP* form a treasure trove that is never exhausted by exploration, because from there a distinct, well-defined voice can be heard, always reminding us of the fundamental quests of the people of each generation. And above all they connect us with those who lived their lives so heroically, hidden in the heart of the wilderness under the eyes of God.

3.1. AP from the Egyptian Desert to the Modern Reader

The textual history of the apophthegmata and of the manuscripts that contain them is complicated to the point that it is impossible to compile complete editions and to identify with precision the history of each saying (Westergren 2018, p. 284). However, we know enough to retrace the route they have taken so far.

The desert fathers, who bear this name from somewhere around the end of the 4th century (Regnault 1987, pp. 19–20), are not the ones who founded Christian monasticism, but went a step further than those who had previously practiced monasticism in Egypt.

These first monks had lived on the outskirts of cities and towns, kept in touch with their families or friends, and retained a part of their possessions in order to survive, so when Anthony the Great, the first Christian monk whose name we know (Wortley 2019, p. 18), decided to leave the proximity of people, he made a truly radical choice. He left everything behind to go deeper into the desert, searching for a place where he may live completely undisturbed; he settles at the base of Mt. Qolzum (where today is to be found the Coptic Monastery of Saint Anthony, about 155 km East from Cairo). Other monks leave from the Nile Delta, such as Ammonas, who settles in Nitria (Wortley 2019, pp. 19–20) and later in Kellia (Wortley 2019, pp. 20–22), or Macarius the Great (or Macarius the Egyptian), who went to live in Scetis (present day Wadi-el-Natrun) (Wortley 2019, pp. 22–24; Regnault 1987, p. 21). This intentionally definitive departure is a major event that took place in the 4th century and marked the Christian history, Church, and spirituality (Regnault 1987, p. 22). Retreating to the desert equals abandoning absolutely everything, thus amounting to a form of voluntary death (Regnault 1987, p. 24); nevertheless, it is not the most difficult thing to do, because it pales in comparison to the life-long effort of staying in the desert and not returning to the city (Wortley 2019, p. 11).

In the desert, the ascetics face the tension between the demands of being alone with God, on the one hand, and the commandment to love their neighbour, on the other (Regnault 1987, p. 27). Here it must be noted that asceticism is understood as "a discipline or a collectivity of disciplines which aim to the transformation of the self and the construction of a new one. Framed in the opposition to the dominant society around it, asceticism is not to be understood merely as a process of rejection, but also as one involving not only the construction of a self but also a new set of relations and understandings" (Dunn 2003, p. 6). It is precisely this tension between solitude and communion which makes the practices born in the desert be considered not the exclusive province of monks (Regnault 1987, p. 27), but relevant for all people, because they communicate "eternal values, spiritual truths" (Chryssavgis 2003, p. 2).

Even though the sayings of the desert fathers cannot be dated with accuracy, there are still some important stages of their development that can be identified. The first stage is the one in which these words came to life in the conversations of the monks and were transmitted orally to the visitors who came to seek advice from the ascetics. The second stage is the transition from the oral to the written tradition. The third is the transition "from the level of mere transliteration to that of edited written transmission". And finally, a fourth stage, spanning over 1500 years, deals with the compilation of the first collections, all the way to the various editions and translations of our times (Chryssavgis 2003, pp. 9–10).

While the studies undertaken by Wilhelm (Bousset 1923) and Jean-Claude (Guy 1962) are unavoidable landmarks for understanding the history of the text, along with new syntheses such as that of Zachary (Smith 2017, pp. 27–31), Lucien Regnault's contributions are significant for reconstructing the monastic context in which the apophthegmata were born.

The French monk and scholar states that apophthegms are living words, born in the very process of exercising spiritual fatherhood, words which spring from life and are inserted back into life, in order to answer something vital, an existential question. Then their transmission took place in the same context of spiritual guidance, when the disciples became spiritual fathers in their turn. Then, once they were fixed in writing, they continued to be transmitted within the same living monastic tradition (Regnault 1987, p. 34).

The AP is much more than an arsenal of handy quotes: it is a collection of familiar sayings, the living words of the monastic milieu (Regnault 1987, p. 34). Perhaps it is precisely the variety of problems addressed and the diversity of solutions offered in the AP that is the reason why these sayings have aroused such widespread interest (Gould 1993, p. 4).

The word "apophthegmata" was first used in relation to the desert fathers by a certain Palestinian monk named Zosimas from the 6th century (Regnault 1987, p. 58). With respect to its form, any apophthegm is a saying uttered in given circumstances. However, there are also numerous apophthegms that only record the gestures or actions of the ascetics, not their words, or, even more fascinatingly, a question asked by a disciple or a visitor, and the

cryptic answer instructing them to do what they see, but without any other details. In the apophthegms, words and facts are interwoven. That is why they can be said to have an audio-visual character, addressing both the sight and the hearing (Regnault 1987, p. 59).

The first small collections of apophthegms were compiled towards the end of the 4th century, whereas the more significant ones that are still accessible today appeared in the mid-5th century (Regnault 1987, p. 67). The reasons behind committing the apophthegmata to writing included the dispersion of the Scetis monks, the decline of ascetic fervour, and the desire to preserve the legacy of the old fathers (Regnault 1987, pp. 69–70). So the AP is born in the "monastic diaspora" and records both the sayings of the fathers of the Scetis which had been destroyed, and the words of their disciples (Chitty 1966, p. 67). In this context one can also discuss the influence of the compiler, who through his selections "can create meaning not originally intended at a saying's utterance" (Smith 2017, p. 48).

By the end of the 5th century, there were already numerous collections of the apophthegms of the desert fathers in both Palestine and Egypt. The first great alphabetical-anonymous collection was most probably born in Palestine, more precisely in the Gaza region. The model adopted was that used by Plutarch, namely, a longer first part, organised alphabetically, followed by a second part, gathering anonymous fragments (Regnault 1987, p. 70). Even though the oral tradition in which the apophthegmata circulated was Coptic, they were written in Greek and then translated into most of the languages of the major Christian cultures (Hevelone-Harper 2013, p. 2044).

After the Bible, there was no more widespread work than the Apophthegmata in Medieval Christianity (Regnault 1987, p. 267). The influence of the desert fathers was exerted with various degrees of intensity throughout the centuries, but as I. Hausherr observed in 1967, any given period of spiritual revival is accompanied by the desert fathers' sayings coming back into focus (Hausherr 1967, p. 359). Moreover, the interest in them has been permanent and their topicality can be seen from the fact that they are constantly quoted in works dedicated to Christian spirituality (Gould 1993, p. 4).

The enduring relevance of the desert fathers is also attested by the myriad of interpretations their sayings are subjected to. Their sayings have been the starting point of an attempt to structure pastoral psychology (Bishop Chrysostomos 1989), their type of guidance has been compared to modern psychotherapy, especially the one of Carl Rogers centred on the client (Plattig and Bäumer 1997, pp. 52–53), they have served as a source of inspiration for management (Manshausen 2000), and they have been read "in the light of deconstructive ethical theory" (Branch 2003, p. 811) or from the perspective of the meaning maladies have in the AP (Moberg 2018). And these are just a few of the approaches so far.

The multiplicity of interpretations is also made possible by the fact that the fathers' sayings form a very diverse mosaic in which different questions are asked, to which the most surprising answers are given.

3.2. Loneliness, Solitude and Community in AP

Apophthegmata Patrum, the collection of sayings of the desert fathers, is largely centred on the idea of solitude. A very important distinction is that between loneliness and solitude. "While loneliness is perceived as an involuntary rejection or abandonment by other people, solitude is voluntary—it is a state of being alone without being lonely or feeling lonely." (Marginean 2022, p. 3). In the following sections when we will analyse the sayings of the desert fathers, we will focus on solitude, as a free choice of spiritual import. As a side note, it should be mentioned that the desert fathers could be plagued by loneliness, boredom, laziness, desolation, etc. They even had a special concept for that, acedia (Bunge 2012).

Arsenius the Great received from God the exhortation to flee from people and in this flight find his salvation (Arsenius 1, PG 65, 88B; Ward 1975, p. 9). Solitude is the way to peace. Abba Alonius summed up his experience in the words: "If a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace. "(Alonius 1, PG 65, 133A; Ward 1975, p. 35). The ascetic's sayings are brief flashes, thoughts matured in solitude.

It is precisely solitude that is the common element, the bridge that links these desert dwellers with the population of the big cities. Nowhere is it easier than in the city to collapse crushed by loneliness; to suffocate in isolation in the midst of the crowds. The arid loneliness you feel among people in a hurry, to whom nothing connects you and with whom you cannot have deep relationships, is already a common experience. Noreena Hertz dedicates an entire chapter to this topic, called "The Solitary City" (although the problem of the loneliness does not limit itself to the urban areas) (Hertz 2021, p. 67). Anyone who has experienced loneliness, isolation, abandonment, imbalance, and existential disorientation can find an answer or at least consolation and reinforcement in meeting the desert fathers.

The wilderness, the emptiness and the various forms of loneliness are all marked by insecurity. In the desert it is so difficult to live by one's own strength that God becomes the only strong support, the only hope and source of hope. In the moving depths of depression, just as in the middle of the most monotonous wilderness, inner landmarks are completely missing. Only there, in that void, is an encounter with God not merely possible, but absolutely necessary.

On a certain level, it is the emptying entailed by living in the Egyptian wilderness or in the desert of one's own house that makes room for God. God withdraws into Himself to make room for the world, but the world tends to invade any remaining emptiness. This is why it is necessary to empty oneself and ignore the noise of the world and even one's own thoughts, moods, and emotions in order to make room for God.

Although the desert fathers sought isolation, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is not a book for lonely people, rather it is for the solitary; for those who need to quiet the outer and inner noise to hear God's voice. In a world increasingly split, fragmented, often in dissolution, the model of the ascetics in the desert goes the other way. They are monastics, i.e., people who seek unity, gather within themselves, and rebuild themselves inwardly with each step they take.

The connection of the Egyptian desert fathers of the 3rd and 4th centuries, over time, with the depressed or perhaps elated or agitated loners of the 21st century, is established through their warm and inclusive humanity. In their experience, hermits have gone all the way, explored the deepest recesses of the heart, exhausted torment, pain, and defeat, and gained comfort, peace, and joy in return.

The solitude that the ancient ascetics built with difficulty becomes natural for many today. This isolation is a gift we no longer know what to do with. This is precisely where the timeliness and freshness of the old ascetic texts lie. Today, they become manuals for managing isolation. In other words, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* answers the question: we have this isolation, what can we do with it? And this answer becomes especially vital when most of the methods invented to escape loneliness have been exhausted.

The solution of the desert fathers is quite simple: the most excruciating loneliness is a leap into the arms of God; it is the place where you can die for the world, according to the word of the Gospel, in order to be able to meet, in the mystery of the heart, with Christ. Loneliness is the awe-inspiring gift that we will learn, gradually, to transfigure.

4. Remedies of the Desert Fathers

The mixed character of the sayings in the AP makes it impossible for it to rigidly comply with any system. In the context of the mosaic and polyphonic structure of the AP, it is impossible to choose a definitive set of stories that exhaustively illustrate the whole. For this reason, there will always be a certain arbitrariness of choice. The same applies to the apophthegms selected for this study. When we talk about loneliness, solitude, and community, we have many stories to pick from. Because not all of them can be presented, we have chosen the ones that we considered sufficiently illustrative of the relationship between loneliness and community.

We have chosen a set of nine sayings that can offer encouragement and guidance in the fight against loneliness. The idea of the first one, Abba Alonius (1), is that by focusing exclusively on God one can attain inner peace. The second, Abba Matoes (13),

talks about the difficulties of living in a community, emphasising the fact that the really strong people are not the ones who withdraw from the world, but those who live among people. Relationships cannot be avoided, the person is defined by relationship and alterity, which is why the third apophthegm in the series is precisely about the relationship with Christ and with one's neighbour. Abba John the Dwarf (39) says that all of Christ's commandments are dependent on community relationships, on the relationship with one's neighbour. Relationships, however, involve difficulties. The fourth saying, belonging to Abba Poemen (116), talks about the significance of the sacrifices one makes for others. The fifth apophthegm, that of Abba Poemen (179), highlights the importance of being compassionate. The sixth, of Abba Theodore of Pherme (14), shows the spiritual potential of solitude, when it is experienced without contempt. The seventh, of Abba Motius (1), presents a special type of desert, i.e., that of anonymity.

The eighth apophthegm belongs to Macarius the Great (38) and shows loneliness as a failure that can be overcome through prayer. Finally, the ninth saying is an encouragement and a call for resilience from Abba Poemen (126), who stresses the importance of living in the present.

4.1. Only God and I Are in the World (Alonius 1)

"If a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace", Alonius 1 (PG 65, 133A, Ward 1975, p. 35). A short and challenging word. Counter-arguments can immediately be brought against it, even from the Holy Scripture. Jesus Christ Himself commanded us to love our neighbours (Mt 22,39), not to ignore them. Where does this thought of Abba Alonius come then?

Let's go back to the beginnings of the alphabetical collection of the Egyptian *Apophthegmata Patrum*. There we find Abba Arsenius, the one to whom God reveals the path he must take: "Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved", Arsenius 1 (PG 65,88B, Ward 1975, p. 9). A movement is born that leads those who want to be united with God into the desert. Alonius, however, goes a step further. Going deeper into the wilderness is not enough. Physical withdrawal from the world, away from it, does not guarantee peace of mind. The mind and heart retain their attachments, their bonds, which can keep you tied to the world, even if you have already walked away from it. In order to meet God, you need to sacrifice everything that could keep you away from Him; any bond that could replace Him and could claim you completely, as the Lord does.

The word of Abba Alonius says nothing about salvation. He does not connect loneliness with salvation. Salvation is the work of God. In order to attain it, one must acquire peace of mind, the inner peace that is often spoken of as being specific to monks who dedicate themselves to prayer.

The moment you say to yourself, in the words of the Abba Alonius, that only you and God are in the world, then you knowingly give up everything that could generate conflict and inner division. You create a good hierarchy of values. If you are humble (and the whole spirituality of the fathers is a ceaseless search for humility), it means that you dedicate yourself totally to God. And above all you stop placing your hope in anything else but the Lord. In the wilderness, where there is only you and God, everything leads you to surrender yourself to the will and in the hands of the Lord, and thus peace and salvation are attained.

Left alone in the one God you come to embrace in love the whole world, which you carry within you. Alone before God you remain inseparable from the whole Adam, from the whole world which you bring before God in prayer. This is the way in which the monk gets to be separated from all, but united to all (Evagrius Ponticus, PG 79, 1193C).

4.2. Mighty Are Those Who Dwell among Men (Matoes 13)

Why do ascetics retreat into the wilderness? Why the fascination with solitude and isolation? What are the reasons why some people hide in the depths of the desert, while

others, even when they dedicate themselves to God with their whole being, remain in small fraternal communities?

The answers we find in the AP go in at least two directions. Firstly, solitude is the privileged environment of the encounter with God, the one in which the Lord with his supernatural discretion makes his voice heard. "Silence and solitude are beneficial factors for gaining inner peace and a sinless life. It is not solitude which is valuable here, it is just a means towards avoiding distraction of the mind, which has been so problematic for the Patristic Christian tradition." (Marginean 2022, p. 7).

It is well known that Abba Alonius said that you find peace only if you consider yourself alone with the Only God (Alonius 1, PG 65, 133, Ward 1975, p. 35). This is why Abba Arsenius fiercely defended his isolation, which he did not want to leave (Arsenius 7, PG 65, 89B, Ward 1975, p. 10). But this is not the only reason.

Few outside the desert fathers have understood so clearly how different people are and how wide the range of our needs and possibilities stretches. This is precisely why the teachings of the elders form a kaleidoscope that rearranges itself differently each time, depending on whoever looks at it carefully and wants to draw a living and personal meaning from it.

Sometimes withdrawal is dictated by an inability to live in the community. Abba Matoes was asked, "What am I to do? My tongue makes me suffer, and every time I go among men, I cannot control it, but I condemn them in all the good they are doing and reproach them with it. What am I to do?." The brother's question is a testament to clarity and lucidity. And the elder says to him, "If you cannot contain yourself, flee into solitude. For this is a sickness. He who dwells with brethren must not be square, but round, so as to turn himself towards all".

A metaphor to describe someone living in a community could be that of a river stone. Contact with others softens their rough edges, their selfishness, their frowns. Community is not only a place of brotherhood and mutual caring, it is also a rough school where one learns love, openness, and availability. But the harder the stone, the more lasting the shaping. Living within a community is a form of openness that can ultimately teach us openness to God.

The apophthegm ends with Abba Matoes saying of himself: "It is not through virtue that I live in solitude, but through weakness; those who live in the midst of men are the strong ones" Matoes 13 (PG 65, 294C; Ward 1975, p. 145). These last words are another expression of his humility. He takes no credit, he knows the depths of his powerlessness and weakness. He does not say a word about the radical courage required for that meeting with one's self in the wilderness, beyond all comfort, consolation, or distraction.

In this way, Abba Matoes invites the brother to find his place, his vocation, his calling. Struggle cannot be avoided in any context, and the desert fathers are constantly aware if this. But we can settle in a place that better suits our soul. A place where love of God and neighbour can be cultivated in humility and with clarity.

4.3. Christ's Commandments Hang on the Neighbour (John the Dwarf 39)

For the desert fathers, faith in God and eternal life is incarnate. It is not an abstract set of principles and practices, but for them faith is their way of life, the only acceptable one. At the very heart of the human person is their relationship with other people and with God. In solitude, in isolation, cut off from everyone, without the possibility of communication of any kind, one loses the very quality of being human. And when I say all this, it becomes easier to feel the tension of the paradox intensifying. The person is relationship, and yet the fathers of the desert fled from people and shut themselves away. Did they become less human by their flight from the world, or, on the contrary, did their humanity become perfected?

John the Dwarf (39) said "A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top.' They said to him, 'What does this saying mean?' He said, 'The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this

one.'" (PG 65, 217A; Ward 1975, p. 93). So, the relationship with one's neighbour is the beginning of the spiritual life. We cannot speak of a spiritual life centred on one's self and on the recitation of a number of prayers, in complete disregard of the others. Kindness, attention, and care for the others are the foundation on which the spiritual life is built. Sensitivity to one's neighbour keeps the heart open to God and gives impetus to prayer. What is more, attention to others always remains the criterion for judging authentic need (and ultimately the law by which the Final Judgement will be passed). If prayer does not produce openness towards your brother and the heart remains hardened, it means that the foundation on which prayer was built is not good. If the foundation is good, then the more you build on it, the stronger it becomes. In other words, prayer and asceticism will increase your love for your neighbour. The great spiritual fathers are those who come to carry the whole world in their hearts, unceasingly praying for it with sorrow. If, on the contrary, nothing is built on the foundation of sensitivity towards one's neighbour, if prayer and love of God are not cultivated, then this sensitivity erodes over time and becomes distorted. Philanthropy without prayer is like an unfinished house without a roof, washed away by the rains and blown away by the winds.

Desert fathers withdrew from the world without running away from relationships. Moreover, I think we could say that in their flight from the world one can also read the refusal of superficial relationships and ignorant haste. Away from the crowds and the noise, relationships intensify, and with them humanity expands and deepens. In this way ascetics become repositories of an experience that sheds a whole new light on what it is to be human. And in order to repeat, in a small way, what they experienced and understood, we must start with something very handy: love and care for those close to us, together with prayer.

4.4. To Lay Down Your Soul for Your Neighbour (Poemen 116)

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." This is a word of Christ that we find in the Gospel of John (15:13). A simple word to understand, which does not seem to hide great mysteries. And yet, what lies behind it, what meaning does this exhortation, which the Lord himself fulfilled, carry with it? The desert fathers explain it in their own particular way: "In truth if someone hears an evil saying, that is, one which harms him, and in his turn, he wants to repeat it, he must fight in order not to say it. Or if someone is taken advantage of and he bears it, without retaliating at all, then he is giving his life for his neighbour", Poemen 116 (PG 65, 352C; Ward 1975, p. 184).

The desert fathers, the great loners, have learned the lesson of human relationships better than anyone living in a community. Distance gave them the right perspective. Their interpretation does not exclude the major, hard meaning of the Saviour's word. Ultimately, the final proof of love is shown by a willingness to make sacrifices for others, sacrifices that can go as far as laying down your life for the one next to you. But such moments are rare. Wars or moments of human crisis, while real, are not permanent. In calendars we find among the saints people who have chosen justly in favour of their neighbour. The 20th century witnessed the self-sacrifice of Maximilian Kolbe (Forristal 1977) or Mother Maria Skobtsova (Louth 2015, pp. 111–26). But the fathers of the desert, in the 4th century, had already seen that there was an everyday way of putting this commandment of Christ into practice. This way, though simple, seemingly banal, means creating daily availability in your heart for your neighbour.

The virtues at stake here are always mentioned: humility and non-judgment, an inseparable couple. In fact, humility is the ultimate foundation of all the other qualities exercised in the ascetic life. Abba Poemen says that the moment you freely and unquestioningly choose to break the chain of evil words that are said about a person, you lay down your soul for them. The moment you endure contempt without retaliation, you lay down your soul for your neighbour. In such situations, you actually put an end to the evil that is rolling like a snowball in the world. Your heart, inevitably a permanent battleground between good and evil, becomes the space where evil is contained. This small victory is not just a personal victory, but a cosmic one. Renouncing your own will and natural inclination is a

sacrifice you make for your neighbour and, implicitly, it is a step towards the eschatological defeat of evil. Every such small step taken with Christ is a step towards the enlargement of the heart to encompass the whole humanity.

4.5. The Solution of Compassion (Poemen 179)

The AP is essentially a book of meetings, dialogue, questions, and answers. If you look closely at the exchanges, you will see that there is something beyond the simple circulation of information, that elders are not sought to deliver solutions, and that often what is offered is simply the mutual solidarity of the *solitary* ascetics. For instance, Abba Anthony was sometimes sought for his mere presence. That is why a brother goes to him without asking anything: because it was enough for him to see him (Anthony 27, PG 65, 84D).

It is only natural that this should be so. Even the great elders do not have instant solutions to all the problems people face. Instead they have something else, much more important: they have compassion, care, and prayer for those who come to meet them.

"A brother asked Abba Poemen this question, 'What shall I do, because trouble comes to me and I am overwhelmed by it?' The old man said, 'Violence makes both small and great to be overthrown.'", Poemen 179 (PG 65, 365A; Ward 1975, pp. 191–92).

Once again we see that Abba Poemen does not answer the question directly; he breaks the ready-made frameworks of the questioner's expectations and avoids offering easy solutions. And the solutions to the big questions he does give are probably not unproblematic either. Instead he offers the brother confirmation that the experiences he is going through are as normal as can be. There is a great danger lurking in the psychological as well as the spiritual life: isolation. The moment things no longer go as you would like them to, you become destabilised and can end up thinking that you are the only one whose life is not going as expected, that you are the only one who cannot find your way, etc. This is a treacherous illusion that can be overcome when you discover yourself in a close bond of solidarity with everyone else.

Abba Poemen does not offer a solution, but his words point in a direction. If everyone is troubled by violence when confronted with adverse situations and events, it means that there are no miracle solutions that will solve things. There is therefore only one way: patience. But patience feels entirely different in community than it does being stuck in your own dead-end loneliness.

Abba Poemen also speaks to counsellors in general. By his attitude he says to the generations that come after him: free yourselves from the burden of always having to offer answers and solutions. Most often people do not need them, but they do need your love, attention, time, prayer, and solidarity. When someone talks about their problems, they first want to be less alone, they want to be heard and understood, they need someone to pray for them with an open heart, and then they need solutions.

4.6. Solitary, but without Contempt (Theodore of Pherme 14)

Abba Theodore of Pherme gives a definition of monasticism, which is based on experience the experience of solitude: "The man who has learnt the sweetness of the cell flees from his neighbour but not as though he despised him" (PG 65, 192A; Ward 1975, p. 76). The necessary condition for fleeing from the world is a founding experience: meeting God in solitude. The sweetness of the cell is, in monastic parlance, synonymous with the joy of prayer, without any reference to comfort and convenience (Regnault 1990, p. 18). Abandoning the world is not a gesture born out of cowardice or powerlessness, or out of a desire to avoid family or social obligations. It is the experience of God and the hope of the fulfilment of God's plan that bring about self-denial.

The great danger for people is to always think that what they do is important and what others do is secondary. They actively despise the contemplative for their lack of pragmatism, while the meditative and inward-looking look down on those who have not understood enough and have sunk into the amnesia of the daily rush. It is the eternal story of Martha and Mary, who cannot reconcile themselves in sisterly love. Abba Theodore of

Pherme notices how quickly and how easily the feeling of superiority can creep into the heart, how pride can make you see yourself as privileged, a chosen one of God, apart from the unintelligent crowd. For the inexperienced, even a small spiritual joy, a small effort in prayer, can become a cause for errancy because it is accompanied by contempt for the less privileged. This is why the elder points out that retreat is the result of God's call, made visible in the "sweetness of the cell", but the first condition is that retreat is not accompanied by contempt for the world and the people who have been left behind. Contempt is but one of the grossest manifestations of pride. Withdrawal from the world born of love of God is matched by the constant effort of prayer for the whole world. The monk is thus separated from all and united with all, as Evagrius Ponticus defines him (PG 79, 1193C). Pride drives the one cut off from the world into a deep solitude, because it breaks the unity with those who should fit into his ever-widening heart. The only consolation left is the painful lie of one's own importance. The great danger of loneliness, against which Abba Theodore of Pherme warns us, is that it can breed contempt and resentment. These two can easily transform solitude in loneliness and lock someone up in the prison of their own thoughts.

4.7. The Desert of Anonymity (Motius 1)

Ascetic literature focuses a lot on humbleness, which it tries to describe as best it can. Each of the fathers comes with their own experience and understanding. Several fathers say of humility that it is seeing yourself as lower than all creation (John the Dwarf 34, PG 65, 216B; Matoes 11, PG 65, 293B; Sisoes 13, PG 65, 396B). Some say that fasting and asceticism have no other purpose than to prepare the person for humility (Cronius 3, PG 65, 248C).

Abba Motius answers a brother who asks, "If you live somewhere, do not seek to be known for anything special; do not say, for example, I do not go to the synaxis; or perhaps, I do not eat at the agape. For these things make an empty reputation and later you will be troubled because of this. For men rush there where they find these practices." And then the elder elaborates, "Wherever you live, follow the same manner of life as everyone else and if you see devout men, whom you trust doing something, do the same and you will be at peace. For this is humility: to see yourself to be the same as the rest. When men see you do not go beyond the limits, they will consider you to be the same as everyone else and no-one will trouble you", Motius 1 (PG 65, 300A; Ward 1975, p. 148).

Competition is deeply ingrained in the human fibre. We always want to be better than others, always measuring ourselves and comparing ourselves to those around us. We need love and appreciation, we want to be seen and to be revered. But Abba Motius goes against this trend. Do not seek fame. Humility is not just living hidden in the bowels of the desert. Humility is living discreetly, unseen among people: to move unnoticed in the community and without wanting to attract attention in any way; without radical gestures that single you out and attract a hollow, empty fame. Beyond the pleasant flame of empty glory, such fame brings with it trouble. People are moved by curiosity. Every time something is out of the ordinary, penetrating gazes turn to it. And therein lies the source of the unrest. Some decide to retreat into the depths of the wilderness. Others, as Abba Motius advises, choose to retreat into anonymity.

How to live unnoticed? It is quite simple. Do what everyone else does, says the elder. Eat with those who are eating, go to church or to the meeting with those who do so. Anonymity is a desert in which to live the daily search for God. The inner life may be tumultuous, but that does not mean the tumult has to be visible from the outside. Hidden in anonymity you can be alone with the only God and thus acquire peace.

For Abba Motius humility means to be equal to all. Not looking for any form of prominence, not looking to show off, not wanting to step up, not seeking power and control. This is the path to freedom. Equal to all and unnoticed by all, you can live like the desert fathers in the midst of the most crowded communities. What is more, the loneliness and retreat may be even greater in the desert of anonymity than in the outer wilderness. And the silence that comes in this desert may be commensurate.

4.8. Loneliness, a Consoling Failure (Macarius the Great 38)

A state of wellbeing seems so natural that we get used to it all too easily; so much so that we stop feeling it. The relationship we have with evil and pain is part of a different register, one of greater complexity. The 20th century with its world wars, the Nazi extermination camps, the communist gulags, the depression and loneliness of the 21st century, all have together left their definitive mark on humanity.

"L'enfer c'est les autres", Jean-Paul Sartre's famous statement from the play "Huis Clos" (Sartre 2009, p. 93), has become a well-known saying. People hide behind closed doors, in bunkhouses, travelling alone with car doors locked. The only sacred space is private space. In solitude people build an autonomous heaven, where others, the substance of hell for Sartre, cannot penetrate. And if it is not heaven, then it is certainly a well-guarded hell.

The thought of hell is not very common among the fathers of the Egyptian desert. When it does appear, it is mostly one's own hell, built out of sins or passions that could not be overcome. There is, however, an unusual occurrence in the case of Abba Macarius. While walking in the desert, he found a skull thrown on the ground. He touched it with his staff, and the skull spoke to him: "I was high priest of the idols and of the pagans who dwelt in this place; but you are Macarius, the Spirit-bearer. Whenever you take pity on those who are in torments, and pray for them, they feel a little respite." The elder's prayer was therefore all-encompassing. It gripped and brought the whole world together. Not even those in hell were overlooked. And the voice of the heathen priest continues: "As far as the sky is removed from the earth, so great is the fire beneath us; we are ourselves standing in the midst of the fire, from the feet up to the head. It is not possible to see anyone face to face, but the face of one is fixed to the back of another. Yet when you pray for us, each of us can see the other's face a little. Such is our respite", Macarius the Great 38 (PG 65, 280A-B; Ward 1975, pp. 136–37).

The lonely Father in the wilderness is shown that hell is essentially the inability to relate: the face stuck to the other's back. Total loneliness. Being absolutely ignored. Closed in on yourself in the helpless indifference of those around you. The mere sight of a friendly face takes you out of loneliness for a little while, it gives you at least the intuition of communion, if not the fullness of it. "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). This is the diagnosis that God gives the newly created man.

Orthodox theology builds personalism around this rejection of solitude, because "the human being is defined through otherness" (Zizioulas 2006, p. 39). It is strongly affirmed that man is essentially a person, i.e., open to communion and relationship. Loneliness is a consoling failure; an exaggeration of man's God-given autonomy. Loneliness, lived in this way, ends up being dehumanising. It lays brick upon brick at the foundation of personal hell.

The solitude of the desert fathers is of a completely different kind. It is built around a solid relationship with God and, in most cases, with a few close people. Elders and disciples are bound by love to each other and to God, and through Him to the whole world, whose sorrows and life they are always living in prayer. And the efficacy of this prayer goes beyond the boundaries of the world, it penetrates to the bowels of hell, and brings peace and comfort to those whom they have never known, except in God, in a love without boundaries.

Outside of strong bonds, people are in permanent danger of being lost. What is more, the human face is a form of encounter and comfort, mediated by prayer.

4.9. Just Today (Poemen 126)

A counsel of Abba Poemen reverberates from the 4th century all the way to the 21st in the midst of the contemporary personal crises, of people caught in the grip of fears of all kinds, some of them justified, some not. The elder was asked to interpret a word from Scripture, from the Gospel of Matthew: "do not worry about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). Abba's interpretation is as follows: "'It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, 'How long must I suffer

this temptation?' He should rather say every day to himself, 'Today'", Poemen 126 (PG 65, 353C; Ward 1975, p. 185).

The psychological finesse of the desert fathers is extraordinary. Years of solitude, attention, and concentration in prayer refined their minds and sensibilities. If we are tied to the past by a series of strings that often end up determining our actions, the future also comes upon us in its own way. We are often invaded by the future in the form of fears, worries, and anxieties. We often find ourselves immersed in the anxiety caused by the very real war with the ghosts born of fear. The desert fathers in general, and Abba Poemen in particular, understood that the future has its own dose of inconsistency. The future belongs to the sphere of potentiality and therefore can be a huge reservoir to feed our daily fears.

The present, on the other hand, even if it is very difficult or hard to bear, is real and only it can withstand the assault of the fears that come from the future. Even the hardest trials can be borne a little longer, perhaps until the evening. All the weight of the future is condensed in worrying about tomorrow, which accumulates all possible forms of evil. In this way the imagination gives birth to unbearable monsters. The elder's solution is a simple one: stay firmly anchored in the present day, worry only about its reality, do not let fear fool you. Do not wonder how much longer it will last, you really cannot know that. Instead, you may very well hold on for "just today".

5. Conclusions

The stories in the AP have a certain independence and cannot be locked into a single interpretation. That is why the order in which I propose reading them is not the only possible one. Nevertheless, read in this order, the nine apophthegmata create a spiritual itinerary that begins from the centrality of our relationship with God as the basis for inner peace, insists on the importance of community relationships, with their inherent difficulties, warns against the failure of loneliness, which can nevertheless be overcome through prayer, and ends with the exhortation to live in the present and to bear temptations "just today".

In a world that is sinking into loneliness, where the incidence of depression and mental illness in general is increasing, reading the desert fathers in an appropriate hermeneutical key may be a solution. Imposed loneliness has the potential to be redeemed through spirituality, and it is precisely the experience of those who have known self-imposed isolation that can help to rediscover living relationships and rebuild functional human communities, communities centred around a relationship with God and love of one's neighbour.

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