Introduction

ANCIENT MASTERS

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human
heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.
—1 Corinthians 2:9

Who of us can know the mind of God? In this informational age, we seek answers to every question, yet we are so often lost in the drought-stricken climate of selfism, individualism, and functionalism. We risk losing respect for our human dignity, for our eternal calling in the Lord, and for the fulfillment of God's plan in our lives. All too often, we seek to master the mystery rather than allowing the mystery to master us. Our sense of the sacred suffocates under the weight of noise pollution, talking heads, and wariness of any authoritarian voice or self-revelatory reflection.

No wonder exposure to the teachings of these ancient masters may be a shocking experience. Popular psychology lauds self-actualization and shudders at the thought of self-mortification, preaching revenge and eschewing forgiveness until we find it unbearable to sit with our own thoughts. Still, the ancients remind us, there are times when words must give way to silent presence to the mystery.

Out of this depth of inner stillness come prayers, sighs, and songs celebrating every experience from the glory of new birth to the shadow of death. These masterful texts remind us to acknowledge our creaturehood and never delude ourselves into playing god. They teach us that our deepest identity is reducible not to what we do but to the essence of who we are. Only from this

transcendent perspective can we resist the temptation to live by untruths that neglect the splendor of the whole and Holy to whom we bow in adoration.

I

Quiet Your Head and Hear with Your Heart

TEACHINGS FROM THE DESERT TRADITION ON THE FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

Abba Theodore of Scetis said, "A thought comes to me which troubles me and does not leave me free; but not being able to lead me to act, it simply stops me progressing in virtue; but a vigilant man would cut it off and get up to pray."
—*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 68

In a world dominated by superficial chatter and uncommitted togetherness, there weaves a narrow way, slender as a thread, through the desert tradition. It is revealed to us in Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God!" The quest for solitude, to be alone with the Alone, manifests itself in all people seeking to find the meaning of life; it is as natural an instinct as solidarity, or reaching out to find communion with like-minded others.

The essential purpose of withdrawing from the world, or, better still, of fleeing the emptiness of a merely worldly existence, is to free the seeker to find God, whether in the wilderness or in the hermitage of the heart. The seeker longs to experience God, to know God not just intellectually but also intimately and personally.

The pursuit of this relationship with the Divine leads souls through a radical detachment from self-gratification to the way of total abandonment to the mystery. Abnegation of self liberates us to seek God directly, to quiet our minds in order to hear with our hearts. In this state, we no longer rely on sensible consolations and virtuous accomplishments or even on spiritual exercises and satisfying meditations, as sure signs of salvation. We do not reject these gifts when they come, but we do not actively seek them out—we feel detached from any gratification, human effort, or satisfaction that threatens to replace our reliance on grace.

The desert tradition teaches us to bind ourselves to what is lasting, good, and true. It instructs us in inner silencing and self-awareness, repentance and continual abandonment to God, humility and self-renunciation for Christ's sake. The masters of the desert remind us of the Gospel truth that we are to be in this world but not of it since "the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever" (1 Jn 2:17).

Meet the Masters

During the reign of the Emperor Constantine (312–337), hundreds of seekers fled to the deserts of Egypt and Syria and other remote places such as Nitria, Scete, and Gaza. They sought a way to live in fidelity to their own baptism and in the fellowship Christ modeled in the breaking of the bread. Above all, they wanted to pursue an inner life of prayer, resulting in loving service to their neighbor. And they turned to the teachings and traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers to show them the way.

Exemplary in this movement is the life of St. Anthony of Egypt (250–375), who believed that bodily austerity, practiced with moderation, promoted a compassionate form of Christian living.[1] Solitude was meant to foster solidarity. He taught those who followed him to flee to the desert not out of hatred for the world but to seek words of truth by which to live their lives in service of the Lord and in love and harmony with others.

So edifying was Anthony's teaching that he found it almost impossible to handle the crowds who made their way across the desert, wanting to discuss their personal and spiritual problems with him. He escaped to an oasis in

a mountainous region near the Red Sea and spent the remainder of his life seeking solitude while still being available to serve others.

Desert living flowed into two streams. The one was eremitical, the hermit life preferred by St. Anthony. The other was cenobitical, the community model pioneered by St. Pachomius (290–346). Both ways became part of Christian culture, representing a spiritual force still found today in every contemplative and apostolic community. In the desert—be it a retreat center, a hermit's cell, or a house of prayer—the seeker learns how to escape the traps of self-indulgence through total abandonment to the unfathomable mystery of which the prophet Hosea spoke, when God says: "Therefore, I will . . . bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (Hos 2:14–15).

Around the same year of Anthony's flight to the desert, Church history records the rise of the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ and was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The rise and fall of this heresy were closely bound up with the development of the eremitical life, which defended the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. At the time of Origen and Clement of Alexandria—both defenders of the faith—hermits, whose lives were the best witness to Gospel values, began to drift westward, propagating in Italy and France the ideals of primitive Egyptian monasticism as lived in Palestine and Asia Minor. Within a century, life based on the Egyptian model of solitude and solidarity had become an almost universal part of Christian culture. Its common theme was the complete abandonment of "everything" for "nothing"—that is to say, for no-thing but for God, who is our All in all.

FLEE TO BE FREE

Desert Fathers such as Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian held fast to the goal of freeing ourselves from attachment to all that is not God. The core of our freedom equates with the awareness that God alone can fulfill our deepest longings. Did not Christ himself spend forty days in the desert prior to the start of his public life? He taught us from experience how to resist

the devilish temptations to power, pleasure, and possession. In the fullness of his humanity and his divinity, he showed us the way to *flee* (from illusory promises of fulfillment) to be *free* (to pursue God in poverty of spirit and purity of heart).

In imitation of Christ, the Desert Fathers and Mothers asserted in their timelessly true sayings, narratives, and counsels that life in a dissipated, disbelieving world is like a shipwreck from which we must swim away to save our own lives. The tenets held up by the world as exemplary were a formula for spiritual, if not physical, death and disease. This flight *from* decadent society was a flight *to* communion with God and others. Only in the desert, guided by grace, might the seeker find the true self by rejecting the false self, fabricated by a fallen and obtuse ego.

The literature of the desert formed a genre comprised of sayings about how to unlock the prison of pride into which we have thrown ourselves by the immoral choices we have made. We must find a way, say the ancient ones, to smash the idols that preoccupy our attention and cause us to forfeit our love relationship with the Lord. Defacing the divine image in us are sins such as succumbing to selfishness, choosing to be loveless and unforgiving, and refusing to conform to Christ's unsparing efforts to redeem us.[2]

The story is told, for example, of Abba Agathon, who met a crippled man by the roadside; he asked the holy man rather abruptly to take him into the town where Agathon was heading to sell products that the brothers had produced to support the community. Each time Agathon sold an article, the beggar demanded that the holy man buy something for him to eat or drink. At the end of the day, the crippled man then demanded a ride back to their original meeting place. Then the cripple said, "Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth." Raising his eyes, Agathon saw no man; it was an angel of the Lord, come to try him.[3]

Other obstacles desert dwellers overcome with the help of grace include a dissipating lassitude that overlooks the least sign of progress and refuses to focus on the blessing in every limit; an unwillingness to admit that conversion has to be ongoing; and a resistance to signals of transcendence, telling us to unlock the prison of pride into which we have thrown ourselves. Worst of all, we may refuse to smash the idols that preoccupy our attention and cause us to lose our living relationship with God through prayer and

presence. Missing the mark through sin, succumbing to selfishness, and choosing to be loveless are some of the many ways in which we deface the image of God in ourselves and discount the divine design we were destined to fulfill in the desert of deep longing.

Those who sought the guidance of teachers such as Agathon or John the Dwarf came to see that the conditions for the possibility of following Jesus had to be emptying the self of willfulness and bowing in obedience to the will of the Father.

> It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, "Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit." Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, "Take and eat the fruit of obedience." (*Sayings*, 1:73)

To quiet our mind and hear with our heart, here are some counsels the desert tradition teaches us to follow:

- Flee from the demons of dissonance, dissipation, and distraction and flee to God in solitude, silence, and peace.
- Experience a heightened sense of repentance or compunction of heart.[4]
- Do not become so absorbed in a functionalized world or in the pursuit of fame and gain that you deny the truth that you are a weak, wounded, finite creature in need of God's grace.
- In moments of quiet contemplation, realize how agitated and distracted you are and try to be present to God in the here and now.
- Abandon the self-deception of treating temporal goods as if they were timeless.

In a word, the desert leaves no room for dishonesty. Hardship is part of this limited life, yet it is also a stepping-stone to complete acceptance of our finitude. Like the first apostles, we have to let go of the safety nets of

our own contriving, embrace the Cross, and join Christ in proclaiming that we are a new creation.

The Lord asks us a question in the desert we cannot ignore: Do we want to live the life of the spirit in the abstract, as if it were reducible to an impersonal outline of rules and regulations, or do we want to abide in communion with him in the deserts of everydayness where he himself lived? The answer the masters give us is never to veer erratically from one extreme to another, as from a perfectionistic model of spirituality to the flabbiest sort of laxity, or from too much discipline to none at all. The solution is not to cultivate any extreme but to practice moderation; it is to engage in the kind of compassionate asceticism that guards our heart while encouraging us to care for others as Christ cares for us.

In the desert, we learn to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us to watch and wait, not to question the changing nature of our call until we receive some inkling of what God asks of us. It is our sacred duty never to stop praying for peace, for transformation, for the fullness of joy God wants to grant our soon-to-be-liberated spirits.

FIND YOUR INNER DESERT

As our capacity for reflective dwelling increases, we may discover that we are becoming present to the Divine Presence, not only in moments of meditation but also in the midst of our daily tasks. We are less inclined to become irritable and agitated when our best-laid plans go astray. We look for meanings that might otherwise be lost in the rushing streams of labor and leisure. We try to slow down and sip the wine of ordinary living. Why rush when we can wait upon the Lord with "patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech" (2 Cor 6:6–7)?

When the burden of discipleship becomes exhausting, we can do as Jesus did and go off to a quiet place to pray. In moments of physical, functional, or spiritual dryness, we can call out to the Father, echoing Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). The pain of feeling deserted may be unavoidable at times, but to take up this cross is to discover, much to our amazement, that in this felt absence God may be more present to us. Naked faith convinces us that God is near. The self-emptying and

detachment characteristic of the desert experience are part of the painful process of purification. The closer we come to God, the more we uncover the attachments we have not yet shed and the harm they are doing to our inner and relational growth. Whatever threatens to deplete us can be transformed by grace into another reason not to lose hope. God's purpose is that "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom" (Is 35:1). Now is the time to listen anew to desert messengers and to take the risk of entering into a solitary encounter with God, all the while knowing that we cannot predict the outcome:

> One day when Abba John was going up to Scetis with some other brothers, their guide lost his way for it was night-time. So the brothers said to Abba John, "What shall we do, abba, in order not to die wandering about, for the brother has lost the way?" The old man said to them, "If we speak to him, he will be filled with grief and shame. But look here, I will pretend to be ill and say I cannot walk anymore; then we can stay here till the dawn." This he did. The others said, "We will not go on either, but we will stay with you." They sat there until the dawn, and in this way, they did not upset the brother. (*Sayings*, 17:76)

Seekers who go to the desert are as ordinary as the pilgrims with whom I once traveled to the Holy Land. All of us have the same problems: our bills come due; our faucets leak; people we thought we could trust betray us; our children disappoint us; our colleagues complain; our health fails; our prayer life becomes arid and routine. We are everyday folks who enjoy the carefree nature of youth, the responsibility of adulthood, the sobering reality of aging, and the solitude of death.

No wonder Jesus preferred parables and living examples as his modes of teaching. With one story he could lead his listeners to expose their fears and dreams, their griefs and hopes. He shows us in the breaking of the bread that the world is not an alien place but the Father's domain. Every day he asks us if we are willing to undergo our own desert initiation and become living witnesses to the truths he teaches.

This symbolic martyrdom is the foundation of our spiritual life. Like soldiers who have trained long and hard to carry out a difficult mission, so must we go through the training that results in the disciplining of our reluctance to be abandoned to the will of God. In the desert we learn to wait upon the Lord, convinced by *faith* that the dry land of doubt does give way to the lush garden of *hope*. Sustained by the Spirit, we become channels through whom the Triune God calls the world out of darkness into the light of liberating *love*.

Left to our own resources, we could never cope with the demands of radical conversion. As the desert alters our customary perceptions of life, so, too, does it compel us to reflect on our story. Mysteriously, in the darkness of unknowing and in the throes of spiritual dryness, we trust that God is moving us *from* the illusion of self-sufficiency, *through* layers of self-awareness, *to* new insights that break open the providential meaning of our journey as a whole.

In every desert experience, we walk on the razor's edge between following the Triune God and succumbing to the ways of the world with its counterparts, the flesh and the devil.[5] To cite but one example of such a commitment: we feel compassionate toward evildoers, but we make no compromise with evil. In short, we live *in* the world without being *of* the world. We accept the reality that we must be willing to combat, not only externally but in the secret places of our heart, our own persistent lack of faith, hope, and love.

Consider the reply of Abba Theodore of Perme, when a brother asked him what the chief work of a monk ought to be:

> So the old man said, "Suppose you hear it said that I am ill and you ought to visit me; you say to yourself, 'Shall I leave my work and go now? I had better finish my work and then go.' Then another idea comes along and perhaps you never go; or again, another brother says to you, 'Lend me a hand, brother'; and you say, 'Shall I leave my own work and go and work with him?' If you do not go, you are disregarding the commandment of God which is the work of the soul, and doing the work of your hands which is subordinate." (*Sayings*, 11:64–65)

Our readiness to serve others depends on our willingness to die to every form of domineering condescension. Only then can we respect the innate dignity and worth of others. Having relinquished under the desert sun all remnants of vainglory, we give the Spirit free rein to teach us the truth that our faith does not "rest on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2:5). The desert experiences we have undergone grant us a glimpse of who we and others really are. While fleeing to an actual desert may be impossible, we can always retire to the hermitage of our heart. The inner peace we now enjoy changes our focus from one of frantic pursuit of spiritual highs to the calm demeanor of desert disciples willing to go wherever the Beloved deigns to lead us. In that quiet place, we are free to encounter the Divine Presence and to grow in compassion.

> Abba Macarius was asked, "How should we pray?" The old man replied, "There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer say, 'Lord, help!' He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy." (*Sayings*, 19:111)

Reflect Now

1. When do you feel most in need of taking time for silence and solitude?
2. Do these times of quiet increase your awareness of the necessity of repentance and forgiveness? What other fruits do solitude and silence bear in your life?
3. How do you cope with the spiritual aridity that often accompanies a desert experience?

Read More

Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1975).

Peter H. Görg, *The Desert Fathers: Saint Anthony and the Beginnings of Monasticism*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

Anselm Gruen, *Heaven Begins within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Crossroad, 1999).