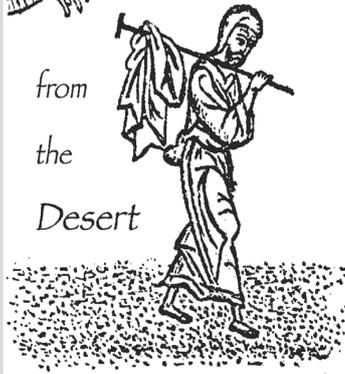




from
the
Desert



Christ withdrew to the desert to pray and suffered temptation. In the 4th Century others followed. Some lived many years alone, while some joined others on Saturday and Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist followed by an Agape meal. Afterwards they might gather round an Elder and ask, "Give us a word, Abba", "Give us a word Amma". And so arose the tradition of spiritual guidance through wisdom from the desert. Their path spread throughout the Christian world and developed into the eremitic form of monasticism that we know today. We continue to be guided towards God by this wisdom.

Many women were drawn to live a life of prayer and asceticism in the desert. A record of the sayings of the Mothers existed and was known as the 'Materikon', just as the record of sayings of the Fathers was known as the 'Paterikon'. The Ammas were highly respected and visited by the Abbots and pilgrims for council and advice. While the Fathers used many examples and metaphors from nature and the animal world, the Mothers tended to draw examples from their domestic world. In so doing they bring the understanding of desert wisdom into the homes of us all. The Materikon did not survive, but the sayings of three Egyptian Ammas; Syncletica, Theodora and Sarah, became included in the Paterikon.

Amma Syncletica said,

"In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek, as it is said: 'Our God is a consuming fire' (Heb.12:24): so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work." She also said,

"Just as a treasure that is exposed loses its value, so a virtue which is known vanishes; just as wax melts when it is near a fire, so the soul is destroyed by praise and loses all the results of its labor." She also said,

"Do not let yourself be seduced by the delights of the riches of the world, as though they contained something useful on account of vain pleasure. Worldly people esteem culinary art, but you, through fasting and thanks to cheap food, go beyond their abundance of food. It is written: 'One who is sated loathes honey' (Proverbs 27:7). Do not fill yourself with bread and you will not desire wine."

Blessed Syncletica was asked if poverty is a perfect good. She said,

"For those who are capable of it, it is a perfect good. For those who can sustain it receive suffering in the body but rest in the soul, for just as one washes coarse clothes by trampling them underfoot and turning them about in all directions, even so the strong soul becomes much more stable thanks to voluntary poverty."

Amma Theodora was asked about the conversation one hears. "If one is habitually listening to secular speech, how can one yet live for God alone, as you suggest?" She said,

"Just as when you are sitting at table and there are many courses, you take some but without pleasure, so when secular conversations come your way, have your heart turned towards God, and thanks to this disposition, you will hear them without pleasure, and they will not do you any harm."

Amma Sarah

Some monks of Scetis came one day to visit Amma Sarah. She offered them a small basket of fruit. They left the good fruit and ate the bad. So she said to them,

"You are true monks of Scetis."

(Scetis was an area of the Egyptian desert where many monastics lived)

Quotations:

*The Forgotten Desert Mothers by Laura Swan
Paulist Press 2001*

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