

Topic 5: Discovering God in the Desert, Part 3

Overview: The teachings of the desert fathers and mothers came from the spiritual figures living in the desert. They discerned reality and shared the wisdom that they found with others. The desert was a place of asceticism and prayer whose fruits were experienced in the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers. The Life of St. Antony by St. Athanasius became the classic text for those who wanted to embrace desert spirituality. Antony became the model for living the Christian life in these early centuries. He continues the tradition of the temptations experienced in the desert by the Israelites, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

Writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers

- The sayings of the desert fathers and mothers are characterized by a radical simplicity and a lot of common sense.
- They withdrew from the world and lived a radically simple lifestyle, exploring the deeper meanings of life.
- They constantly emphasized charity in their writings. Charity is at the root of all virtue, the ultimate test of whether these words were the work of the Spirit.
- Their asceticism was challenging but never severe.
- They prayed constantly. In their sayings, we see the fruits of their prayer.
- *Apophthegmata Patrum* (The Sayings of the Fathers)
 - 1) These sayings were meant to be carried into prayer and meditation.
 - 2) One could spend a lifetime reflecting on their wisdom.

The Life of St. Anthony of the Desert by St. Athanasius

- St. Athanasius' biography of St. Anthony became a template for all later hagiography - writings on the lives of the saints. It is the oldest monastic biography that we have.
- St. Anthony was born around 250 C.E. and entered monastic life when he was about twenty. According to legend, he lived until he was 105.
- The Life of St. Anthony shows the progressive state of desert life.
 - 1) The ideal of desert life and the monk is progressive.
 - 2) At the time, the religious vows were nonexistent.
- Initially, Anthony was led along blindfolded by his passions and by everything that flattered him.

1) In The Life of St. Anthony, asceticism is necessary to awaken a consciousness of self that is truly human and Christian. This is the basis for recasting the whole of existence.

- What were the characteristics of the new monk in the desert?
 - 1) The monk or solitary is a poor person who recognizes that our riches are in God and God alone.
 - 2) The monk is a manual laborer. Work is the primary form of asceticism.
 - 3) The monk focuses on charity.
 - 4) There is a ladder-like quality to his life.
- Anthony goes into the desert not to escape reality but to embrace it.
- Certain practices that emerged in desert spirituality would also play a role in the monastic traditions:
 - 1) Lectio divina, the reading the Word of God
 - 2) Night vigils
 - 3) Constancy in all trials, humility
 - 4) Penances
- Athanasius uses the temptation model (i.e., temptations of Christ in desert) as a template for this biography.
- A return to the world takes place. Anthony brings what he found in solitude into the world.
- In the biography, we see the emergence of certain rules for discerning what does and does not come from God. Later traditions will pick up on this.
- Desert spirituality is not meant just for the monk in the desert. Rather, the monk in the desert becomes a symbol for living the Christian life that all people, in one way or another, are called to embrace.

St. Anthony's Spirituality in Our Lives

- Anthony is convertible.
- There is a ladder-like quality to his life. Each step was preceded by a harder fall.
- He is completely dependent on Christ and God.
- He does good works.

- He transforms into the image of Christ.
- We can apply these themes to our spiritual journeys today.

Review Questions

1. The desert fathers/mothers spoke of “pearls of wisdom.” Do you resonate with any of these sayings of the desert fathers and mothers?
2. Temptations are not only a part of the desert experience but also a part of all of life. Think about your temptations and struggles and invite God into the struggle.