



PI MONAKHOS THE MONK

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A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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READING THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS



Reading the lives of the saints is one of the most important spiritual means that is used by the grace of God to make our relationship with the Lord grow and inflame our love for Him and for His Kingdom. **It offers us the practical way to carry out the spiritual principles.**

The lives of the saints deeply affected all generations throughout the ages. The story of St Anthony that was written by St Athanasius the Apostolic had an amazing effect on the people of Rome that it became the cause of monasticism spreading there. When St Augustine read it, he was greatly affected and it hence led him to repentance. The same with the lives of the monks in the wilderness of Scetis. They were attracted by the lives of the anchorite fathers, and so they journeyed from afar to see these earthly angels, and hear from them a word of spiritual benefit. Many recorded the lives of these virtuous fathers, which history has reserved for us to this day.

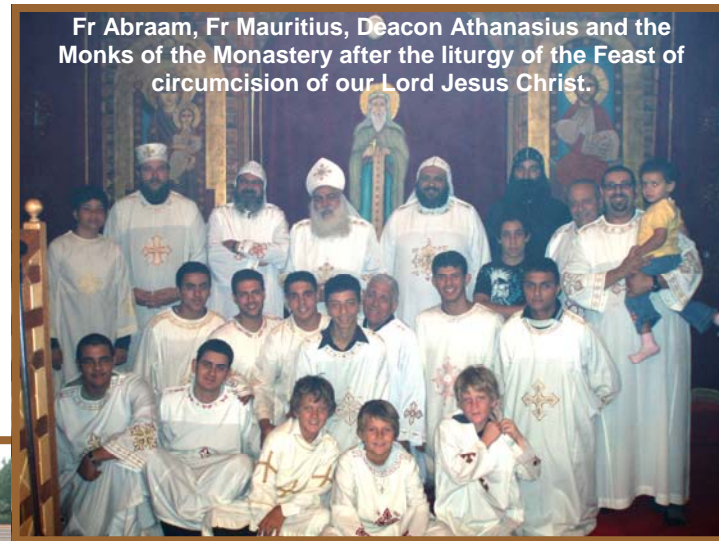
These saints never wrote about their own lives, but their lives, which others recorded, were a most desirable book. It was the living history that was read by their generation who lived with it and passed it onto future generations. It is a spiritual food that nobody can do without. It brings to us the feeling of God's love and the love of His ways that lead to the Kingdom. It also makes us love virtue and love those righteous saints and take them as our fathers and intercessors. We aspire to deepen our relationship with them, as if they were alive with us on earth, so we talk to them and call on them. We might not be able to pray without ceasing, as St Arsanious the Great or St Macarius of Alexandria did. But at least we should have the love for prayer and the longing to continue in it as much as our spiritual level permits. We ought to know that the way the saints lived in the wilderness is different from the way we live in the world. So we should not imitate them in fasting for days, for they mastered this after many years of spiritual striving, and the life of calmness also helped them.

Whenever we read about the heights of spirituality that these saints attained, our souls will be humbled and we will feel as if we are nothing compared to them. **Truly, the lives of the saints cast away from our**



souls all the warfares of pride and vain glory, if the enemy attacks us with it. No matter how much we become contrite, we will never reach the humility of the saints: Those who, in spite of all their virtues, would weep over their sins! St Macarius the Great wept and made the whole council weep with him. St Moses the Black, St Shishwy, St Pachomios the Great. What made all these great ones weep? St Arsani-ous would stand up for prayer at sunset with the sun behind him, and would remain standing in prayer until the sun would rise once more the next morning before him. It was said that his eyelashes fell due to much weeping and he used to wet his palm leaves with his tears!! Where is then our humility, no matter how much we humble our-selves?! St Macarius the Great, the founder of monasticism in Scetis, after having seen two of the anchorite fathers in the inner wilderness, said: "I am not a monk, but I have seen true monks!"

By: H.H. Pope Shenouda



Fr Abraam, Fr Mauritius, Deacon Athanasius and the Monks of the Monastery after the liturgy of the Feast of circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ.



Fr Abraam, Fr Mauritius, and Fr George and the Monks of the Monastery After the Liturgy



A Reading from the Lives of Saints

“Father, if one is bothered by a certain temptation and sees that he is slowly being conquered by it, and that, despite reading many times what the Fathers say about overcoming temptation and trying to apply it, does not totally succeed, what is preferable? That he should reveal his temptation to one of the Fathers, or that he concern himself with applying what he has studied and be satisfied in his conscience?” The Elder answered:

“One who is embattled by a temptation has the obligation to reveal this thought of his to someone who has the strength to benefit him. He should not rely on himself, only, for support. For no one is able to help himself, when he is actually tormented by passions. To me,” continued the Elder, “the following occurred when I was younger. I suffered from a spiritual passion, and I succumbed to it. I was informed that Abba Zeno healed many who found themselves in situations like mine. Therefore, I also decided to go and to reveal to Abba Zeno my passion; however, Satan hindered me, whispering in my soul high sounding thoughts: “Since you know what you must do, act according to what you have studied in books. Why should you go and trouble the Elder?” As many times, then, as I would decide to go to visit the Elder and to reveal to him my temptation, I would feel relief from the onslaught of that passion.

This certainly was the cunning of the devil, so that I would not go, since when I would decide not to go, I would again be possessed by the passion. Now, for a long time the enemy pulled me astray into this trap, not tolerating that I should confess my temptation to the Elder. Many times I would go to the Elder with the decision to tell him my temptation; however, the enemy would not let me, because of the embarrassment which he caused in my heart. Since you know, he would say in my thoughts, how you must heal yourself, what is the need to reveal to someone your passion? Besides, you are not negligent. You know what the Fathers have said about similar situations.

The enemy brought all these things into my mind, so that I would not reveal my passion to the doctor and be healed. The Elder, however, realized that I was being tormented by temptations. He did not reproach me, but waited for me to reveal them myself. He also instructed me about the correct manner of living, and let me depart with his blessing. Once, however, after one such visit, while grieving over my miserable condition, I said to myself: How much longer, my miserable soul, will you go without being healed? Many come to the Elder who live far away and are healed. Are you not ashamed to have the physician so near by, and yet not be healed? Thus, since my heart was warmed by these thoughts, I arose at once and said to myself: I will go to the Elder and, if I find there no visitors, I will know that it is the will of God that I confess to him my thought. And indeed, going to the cell of the Elder, I found no one.



The Elder, as was his custom, instructed me again about the salvation of the soul and how it is necessary for a man to be cleansed of shameful thoughts. I, from shame, again disclosed nothing to him, and was getting ready to leave. Standing up, he blessed me and showed me out, walking ahead of me to the front door of his cell. Tormented, however, by the thought of whether or not I should confess my temptations to the Elder, I walked behind him with hesitating steps. Then the Elder turned to me and, seeing me thus, tortured by thoughts, tapped me in a friendly way on the chest and said to me:

“My son, what is wrong? I am also a man.”

“I felt the words of the Elder open my heart and, falling on my knees, I implored him with tears: “Father, take pity on me.”

“What is the matter, my child? asked the Elder. “Do you not know what is wrong?”

The Elder, as if he knew the secret in my heart, said to me:

“It is necessary that you say it.”

“At that moment, then, I, with great shame, confessed to him my passion.”

After listening to me, the Elder said:

“Why were you ashamed to entrust this to me for so long? Perhaps I am not also a man? “Did you just want me to reveal to you what I knew? Why would you come here for three years already, tormented by these temptations, but without confessing them? After this, deeply moved by him, I fell again on my knees, saying:

“You are right, Father. I beg you now to take pity on me, for the love of the Lord.”

And again the Elder added graciously:

“Go, do not neglect your prayer and criticize no one.

Going back to my cell and busying myself constantly with my prayer, by the Grace, to be sure, of Christ and through the prayers of the Elder, I was never again bothered by that passion. A year later, the following thought assailed my mind: Perhaps God had compassion on you because of His mercy alone, and not because of the Elder? As soon as this thought came to me, I went immediately to the Elders cell, in order to test him. After finding him, I prostrated before him and said:

“Father, for the love of God, I implore you to pray for me on account of that temptation which once I confessed to you.

The Elder left me on my knees. Then, falling silent for a moment, afterwards said to me:



“Get up. You should have faith.”

As soon as I heard this answer, I experienced such shame at that moment that I wanted the earth to swallow me. And after I rose, I did not have the strength to face the Elder, but returned to my cell, full of wonder and astonishment.”

From: Evergetinos

Such, my brethren, are the wonders of God. And God reveals His hidden saints so that some may emulate them and others have no excuse for not doing so. Provided they live a worthy life, both those who choose to dwell in the midst of noise and hubbub and those who dwell in monasteries, mountains and caves can achieve salvation. Solely because of their faith in Him God bestows great blessings on them. Hence those who because of their laziness have failed to attain salvation will have no excuse to offer on the day of judgement. For He Who promised to grant us salvation simply on account of our faith in Him is not a liar.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

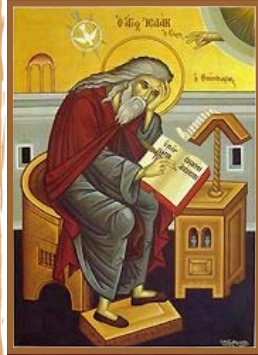


Do you see the humility of the saints and how their hearts were set on it? Even when messengers straight from God were sent to them they were not turned away from humility but fled from self-glorification. As men clad all in silk flee if a filthy rag is thrown at them, so that their noble robes will not be stained, so the saints, clad in virtue, take flight from human glory lest they be stained by it. Those who desire that sort of glory are like the naked man who always wishes to find a few rags, anything at all, to cover his shame. So too one who is naked of virtue desires to be praised by men. Therefore the holy men who are sent from God to help men, do not let go of humility.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza



Reading Early Monastic Texts



In the year 576, a certain Abba Theodore, abbot of the monastery of the Syrians in Scetis, the monastic settlement southwest of the Nile delta, bought a book for his monastery library. The papyrus receipt of this purchase has survived, and from it we learn that Theodore bought the book "for the contemplation, reading, and spiritual advancement of all those who open it.

Theodore's receipt is the first definite evidence we have of a permanent library among the several communities in Scetis, but undoubtedly monks in all parts of Egypt had been collecting books from an early date. The majority of monks, it seems, were not the illiterate fellahin of popular (and historical) imagination but were, rather, literate (often bi-lingually so) and educated."

Archaeological evidence shows that many monks possessed books despite some adverse opinions regarding book collectors and books themselves; they stored them in their cells in cupboards, niches recessed into the walls. Scattered statements show that individual monks possessed books in the fourth century or even earlier. Theodore of Pherme "had acquired three good books" which he used and which he also loaned to his monastic brothers; he told Abba Macarius, "I have three excellent books from which I derive profit; the brethren also make use of them and derive profit from them." When Theodore asks Macarius whether he should keep the books or sell them, Macarius says that it is better to possess nothing, so he sold them. However, at some point Theodore kept books as possessions, because they were stolen. Cassian records that the fourth-century monk Paphnutius of Scetis was "framed" by an envious monk who hid a book amidst Paphnutius's handiwork and then charged him with theft. The famous "Tall Brothers," origenist leaning monks run out of Egypt by Archbishop Theophilus in the year 400, were said to have a collection of "excellent and canonical books."?

Books in the desert often came to be stored in churches near monasteries; undoubtedly most of these early books and collections were of Holy Scripture or lectionaries designed for public or private reading. But they were later joined by collections of homilies, doctrinal statements such as encyclical letters from the Archbishop of Alexandria or canons from the ecumenical councils, and lives and sayings of the saints."

The Monastery of Saint Epiphanius outside Thebes offers a glimpse into some of the teaching and reading habits of the early Egyptian monks. The monastery had an assembly room where the abba of the monastery sat with his disciples and offered instruction. In the room "the walls were built up of brick, recessed with shallow, round topped niches, and along both sides low brick benches were constructed? This room was clearly a favorite sitting place as all the edges of the benches were worn away with use and they had been re-plastered and re-whitewashed at least three separate times."



Undoubtedly much of the abba's instruction in this room was teaching on Scripture, but the wall inscriptions surely suggest that other texts were used. Among these would have been the writings and sayings of earlier monastic Fathers. It was in the fifth century when a later generation of monks looked back with awe, reverence, and some nostalgia to the monks of the fourth century that such monastics as Cassian, Palladius, Theodoret, and Rufinus began publishing the lives, histories, and sayings of the desert Fathers." The Apophthegmata, or Sayings of the desert Fathers had their origins in the fourth century, but they were more systematically gathered together in the fifth and sixth centuries; they enjoyed great popularity in Greek, Coptic, Latin, and Syriac on into the Middle Ages. Athanasius wrote the Life of Antony in the mid-fourth century, and by the fifth century the genre of monastic lives and stories of famous holy men (and a few women) was thriving." A later catalogue of Coptic texts from the library of the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Egypt shows numerous copies of Lives, Martyrdoms, and Sayings of the desert Fathers as well as other monastic writings, such as homilies.

Tradition mattered to the ancient monks. What the saints of old had said and lived was worth reading about and hearing again. The saints continued to offer instruction, guidance, consolation, precepts, and edification. Theirs was holy wisdom, passed on to new generations.



Fr Jonathan and Year 8 & 9 group from St Mark's Church spending a retreat at the monastery

By: Tim Vivian

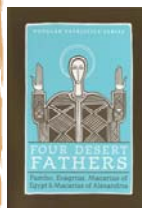
Just as painters in working from models constantly gaze at their exemplar and thus strive to transfer the expression of the original to their own artistry, so too he who is anxious to make himself perfect in all kinds of virtue must gaze upon the lives of the saints as upon statues, so to speak, that move and act, and must make their excellence his own by imitation.



Questions & Answers

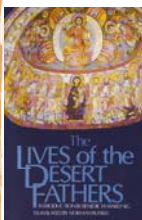
I have a strong desire to live the monastic life but my confession father objects to the idea?

I think that the confession fathers would never prevent a person who is really longing for monasticism. However, they may clarify things for them, explaining the hardships of the life, that they will face, their responsibility towards the family etc. At times the father confessor may observe or test the persons true will. The mature youth has to convince their confession father that they are sincere in their intention. If the father confessor is certain of his/her decision for monasticism, he would not object, knowing that if he objected or prevented him without an adequate reason and was acting in this manner out of his spiritual authority, he will be responsible for this before God, particularly if the youth's spiritual life weakened as a result of living in the world, feeling that they have not fulfilled their monastic calling .



Trans By: Tim Vivian, ***“Four Desert Fathers”***, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press

The four desert Fathers who give their names to this volume Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt, and Macarius of Alexandria were well known some 1600 years ago in Alexandria and the monastic communities of Lower Egypt. These biographies, introduce the thought and practice of these desert dwellers through their Sayings, Virtues, and Lives, offer the best access to their world.



Trans By: Norman Russell, ***“The Lives of the Desert Fathers”***, Cistercian Publication.

In the year 394 seven monks from Palestine made a difficult journey through the Egyptian desert, drawn there by stories of remarkable men. What they found in the communities living far up the Nile Valley fully accorded with their expectations, and in the account written by one of their number we have a rare contemporary source of information about the *lives of these Desert Fathers*.