

Devotions – August 11-17, 2019
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Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Sunday, August 11, 2019

The Desert Tradition is a period in Christianity which may be unfamiliar to some, but has profoundly influenced Christian theology, piety, and imagination as we know it today. The Desert Mothers and Fathers lived in the arid landscape of Egypt from the third to the fifth century CE. A spiritual revival was occurring in the Egyptian deserts, where thousands flocked to form monastic communities. Several of these folks were highly regarded, and pilgrims from all over would come to seek spiritual guidance from them.

The desert monastics valued silence, self-examination, hard work, recitation of Scripture, and continual prayer in their everyday lives. May these words from the desert facilitate contemplation and reflection in your hearts this week.

All quotations are taken from “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers” as translated by Benedicta Ward.

A brother at [the monastery] committed a fault. A council was called to which Father Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, “Come, for everyone is waiting for you.” So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water, and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, “What is this, Father?” The old man said to them, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.” When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him.

How easy it is to judge others! Today Father Moses provides a teaching example for us. We so often forget our own sins as they pour out behind us but have harsh words for another at fault.

We are called to forgive, but what does forgiveness look like in practice? For Father Moses, forgiveness is letting one’s sins evaporate like water poured onto desert soil. Sins leave a mark, but a temporary one if we let the Sun dry them away. Is there someone in your life you are having trouble forgiving? What would you need in your life to forgive this person? How can God help you forgive?

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, you teach us to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven. Inspire in our hearts a spirit of love that covers a multitude of sins. Help us to reach out to others in compassion and encourage us to have difficult and reconciling conversations with those with whom we feel estranged. In your name we pray, Amen.*



Monday, August 12, 2019

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Mother Sarah said, “If I prayed God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each one, but I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all.”

Even in the relative remoteness of the desert, the temptation for validation continued for many sisters and brothers in their monasteries. Nearly everyone wants some kind of approval—from a boss, a spouse, a friend, even a stranger.

But universal approval is a futile exercise, as Mother Sarah reminds us. Throughout our lives, we will undoubtedly find people who disagree with us. If we spent each day at their doors, begging for approval, we could never get anything else done! Mother Sarah invites us to focus on what truly matters: a pure heart and disposition towards all of God’s children.

Let us pray: *God of all, the Psalmist reminds us how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell in unity together. Yet, O God, we so often disagree with one another. Teach us to have compassion on those with whom we are in conflict, so that unity prevails over division. In your name we pray, Amen.*



Tuesday, August 13, 2019

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Mother Syncletica said, “Imitate the publican, and you will not be condemned with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water.”

Mother Syncletica is referencing Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:9-14, wherein the humble Publican pleads for mercy before God while the Pharisee touts his accomplishments. Humility was a high value for the Desert monastics, and pride was a constant temptation. Many monks had visitors from hundreds of miles away, traveling through the treacherous desert to be spiritually nourished by the presence and sayings of these holy people. Pride had to be resisted by the monks, lest they fall into the trappings of the Pharisee.

Over a thousand years later, and Christians today still struggle with pride. What would it look like in your life to choose the meekness of Moses? How can you embody humility in your everyday life?

Let us pray: *Jesus the Christ, Sovereign of Heaven, you came to earth in humble beginnings. Help us to choose the meekness of Moses, recognizing our limits, our sinfulness, and our need for your abundant grace. Inspired by your Spirit, let our love and service for one another overflow as spring water bubbles up from its source. In your name, Amen.*



Wednesday, August 14, 2019

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Mother Syncletica said, “There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one’s mind while living in a crowd, and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of their own thoughts.”

I am currently living in Chicago, about a block away from a fire station. At least ten times a day I hear the telltale blaring of sirens and tires screeching as a truck pulls out of the station. Every time I walk through the city—at any time of day or night—I will encounter another human being somewhere. To be honest, it can be exhausting. I yearn for a moment of silence.

But Syncletica reminds both city dwellers and rural folk that solitude and a quiet heart are not dependent on one’s outside environment. Even when hiking through the woods or sunbathing by a lake, it is possible to be distracted by thoughts and not mindful of the moment God has given us. What can you do today to cultivate inner silence in your heart?

The prayer for this day is a silent one. Take five minutes, find a comfortable posture in your seat or while kneeling. Listen to your breath—if you get distracted, return to the rise and fall of your chest. Remember that it is the Holy Spirit who breathes in you, giving life with each inhale.



Thursday, August 15, 2019

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Father Poemen was asked for whom this saying is suitable, ‘Do not be anxious about tomorrow.’ He said, ‘It is said for the one 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’.

Father Poemen gives us his thoughts on Matthew 6:25-34. In the midst of anxiety and concerns over the future, it is tempting to look far off into the future for a solution. But yet, today is the day with which we should concern ourselves. His insight is as enlightening as it is challenging.

In a world of food scarcity and the harsh Egyptian climate, Father Poemen knew all too well that the only day guaranteed to us is today. Even in anxious times, it is vital to remember that. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Perhaps the trouble will continue, and maybe not. Today’s troubles are enough for today.

Let us pray: *Holy Spirit, you bring us life with each new dawn. Each day is an opportunity to glorify your workings in the world. Where there is anxiety, bring your peace that passes all understanding. Where there is fear, send courage in the face of adversity. Where there is uncertainty, remind us of the certain hope of the Resurrection promise. To you we pray, Amen.*



Friday, August 16, 2019

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A word from Father Agathon: It was said that for three years he lived with a stone in his mouth, until he had learnt to keep silence.

Today's saying from the Desert is suited for those of us, like myself, who are big talkers. Hopefully none of us will have to resort to the drastic measures of Father Agathon!

Father Agathon had a problem: he talked too much. And so he used what he had around him—a stone—and put it to good use. I am sure many of us have a vice not dissimilar to Father Agathon's. For me, I have difficulty getting up early in the morning to pray. My 'stone' to solve my problem are multiple alarms on my phone, as well as an alarm for evening prayer.

What do you have around you that you can use to help you with a spiritual problem? How can you work with your environment to bring you closer to God?

Let us pray: *Holy and gracious God, you provide for all that we need. Help us to use the gifts we are given for your service, that our whole lives may praise you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



Saturday, August 17, 2019

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One day some old men came to see Father Anthony. In the midst of them was Father Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, “You have not understood it.” Last of all he said to Father Joseph, “How would you explain this saying?” and he replied, “I do not know.” Then Father Anthony said, “Indeed Father Joseph has found the way, for he has said: ‘I do not know.’”

I'm currently a seminarian, finishing up my final year of academic studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. In my classes, we naturally talk about theology *a lot*: who God is, what is sin, etc. etc. It's so easy for us to talk about all that we do know about God, but I end this week's reflection with a reminder of all that we do *not* know.

As much as we know about God, there is an infinite amount that we will never understand till we see God face to face. The Desert Mothers and Fathers spent their lifetime trying to learn all they could about God, but Father Joseph spoke rightly. Recognizing how much we do not know allows us to read Scripture with a fresh heart for the Holy Spirit to plant new seeds of spiritual growth.

Let us pray: *Lord God, there is so much of you that we can never understand. You who created the cosmos, who breathed life into creation, who protected your people, who spoke through your prophets, who came to us in human suffering and raised us to divine glory—your love and awesome power are incomprehensible. Renew our hearts and minds every time we open Scripture that we may be awed and overjoyed at your Word. In your name we pray, Amen.*

