

Radical honesty about the self: the practice of the desert fathers

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It is obvious that the sayings of the desert fathers touch modern people in ways that other ancient Christian writings do not. This is not because they are pithy, humorous, or bizarre, although they are sometimes all of those things. What sets the *apophthegmata* apart from so much of patristic literature is that they speak from and to experience rather than text or theory; they are practical rather than intellectual. The sayings and the stories in which they are set do not try to pursue a topic as far as may be done, to run a concept to ground and examine it, or to construct an argument. The sayings open up rather than exhaust, suggest rather than describe. Like parables, they are explosive, and where the bits land after the explosion is different each time the stones are told or read. The significance of this quality runs deeper than matters of literary genre: it was not a studied preference for gnomic statements rather than treatises which gave rise to these sayings. The very form of the *apophthegmata* arose from and leads back into the heart of the desert quest. These monks staked everything on the effort to destroy illusion and deception. Their various disciplines were intended to help them cut through the noise of lives hooked on the deceptions, materialisms, and games which have characterised human beings since the Fall. The desert itself gave them a landscape which mirrored what they sought for their own hearts; an uncluttered view through clear air.

The very nature of the *apophthegmata* frustrates any effort to systematise them or to reduce their wisdom to formulae. They have to be worked through again and again, heard fresh every time. A valuable exercise is to choose a theme and to follow it through the desert literature, a procedure which allows one to catch glimpses of many other themes while keeping to some sort of path through vast quantities of material. The theme proposed here is the desert fathers' radical honesty about the self, and the means by which they worked towards this honesty. The principal element of that process was offering the secrets of one's heart to another person for discernment. This was typically done by a young, or at any rate novice, monk to his *abba*, his monastic elder. This practice of self-revelation was both the means and the fruit of the monk's growth in singleness of heart. This theme is one which is particularly interesting for modern people, presumably because it is something we would like to do ourselves but find very difficult.

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This article will deal mainly with the *apophthegmata* themselves, the classic collections of sayings rooted in the fourth and fifth centuries. There will also be reference to later texts, especially the correspondence from Gaza associated with Barsanuphius and John in the early sixth century and the writings of John Climacus, abbot of Sinai in the seventh century.

A word about terminology and language. Because these are monastic texts, 'monks' will be referred to throughout. This does not suggest that the *apophthegmata* are of interest only to monks, nor that the teaching of the desert is something reserved for monks. The other point which must be made is that virtually all of the surviving stories are about monastic men. The desert was full of monastic women as well, but as so often in history, their experiences went almost completely unrecorded or were suppressed. Everything described here would have been occurring among *ammās* and the women who came to them to undertake the monastic life. Therefore reference will generally be made to 'elders' and 'disciples' rather than *abbas* and 'brothers' as a reminder of this point. Where terms like 'spiritual father' occur, it is because they are found in the texts, with their restricted focus.

The practice and its ascetical context

The practice of manifesting the thoughts of the heart was simple. A monk would go to a trustworthy (usually older) monk and say, for example, 'I am bothered by thoughts of envy towards someone. I wish I could see my parents. I think a lot about the happiness of the saints in heaven. I get distracted from my prayers. I wonder if I shall ever be a real monk'. Sometimes the issue might be a particular sinful act, sometimes it might be something which was not sinful at all, but pre-occupying. For young monks this would have been a fairly regular practice, even daily or more frequent, as they began to learn about the topography and inhabitants of their hearts.

The power of this simple, but difficult, practice lay in the fact that the monk was confident enough in God's mercy, working through the elder, to turn the soul inside out without cleaning it all up beforehand. This was spontaneous, not calculated, trust. Some of the matter so revealed may have been sinful, some confusing, some neutral, some hopeful. The idea was that by putting these things out in the light of day rather than keeping them in the stuffy confines of one's heart, they could be seen for what they are. The insight underlying the practice is one described in the *Life of Antony*: the mastery of the demons over the human soul is an illusory power, based on deception. The demons are robbed of their power when they are exposed as demons, when the monk confronts them and calls on the name of God¹. And so here: when the heart is opened to the light of truth, when there are no secrets, catches or barriers, the demons have nowhere to lodge and hide, and they cannot begin their crafting of obsessions and illusions. Things are brought into the arena of truth before they have a chance to lodge themselves in a chamber of the inner self and grow twisted, perverse, and stunted from lack of light and air.

Note that this is not obsessive introspection, or scrupulous self analysis. The whole point was to prevent obsession. It is self-awareness rather than modern self-consciousness: no alienation, no wallowing in the self, rather a spontaneous freedom to lay it all out. And *all of it* had to be laid out, because one cannot see in the dark to tell what is good, what is evil, what is indifferent.

Too often the interplay of disciple and elder is considered from the perspective of spiritual direction, of what the old man does for the young monk, placing the focus on the elder who receives the thoughts of the disciple's heart. This emphasis on the role of the elder is understandable in the light of later development. But what is noteworthy in the *apophthegmata* is that the weight of the narrative more often than not falls on the disciple, for he is the one engaged in hard work. The elder is the witness and encourager, but not the controller, of the process. This reminds us that the *abba* or *amma* is not the centre of the desert life, nor is the elder/disciple relationship itself the point of it all. The whole life was about opening up: of self to another and of true self to God, with no obsessive concentration on the self or on the relationship with one's *abba*. The point at issue will be immediately clear to people who have sought spiritual direction or been in a position to provide it: there can be many things that go on in spiritual director that have little to do with discernment and prayer. We seek a director because we want someone to sort us out; we offer direction because it makes us feel validated as spiritual persons. These are ways to untruth, and the desert fathers saw these dangers clearly.

Perhaps another way to understand this is to remember that it was the commitment to truth, to seeing things as they are, which disposed the monk for contemplation of God. The classic hierarchies of contemplation described by Evagrius and others moved from disciplined work on the self to contemplation of the created world, to contemplation of the spiritual world, to contemplation of God. The commitment to truth is initially expressed and realised in the ascetical labour of self-knowledge. To see things as they are, and to see God as God can be seen, without masks of fantasy, projections and pious wishes depends in the first place upon stripping away the masks of fantasies and projections about ourselves. We find that the masks we place on ourselves and the masks we see on the face of God are, in the end, the same, and are of our own making.

The goal of the desert was utter transparency to divine light. The elder, far from being a centre of power and a 'director', served in his or her transparency to divine light as a lens which could focus the light of truth on the dark places in the disciple's heart.

The practice itself

One must remember that the practice is best described as manifestation of thought and not just confession of sins. The dominant values here are humility and obedience, rather than penitence and pardon. Everything was matter for manifestation to the elder, not just sins. Indeed, Poemen said that there was no need to consult one's *abba* about the avoidance of sin: visible faults were to be cut off at once,

whereas the elusive ways of the thoughts required the discernment of another². This practice was intended to be preventive rather than remedial, dealing with issues early on, before they had time to become manifest in action. *Abba* Isaias of Scetis and Gaza wrote that the monk should ask about his thoughts before he carries them on into action³. John Climacus compared unrevealed thoughts in the heart to egg placed in warm dung: the thoughts are bound to hatch evil deeds unless revealed⁴. The range of matter was broader than is usually the case in confession as known today: here the monks were usually more concerned with thoughts or attitudes than with deeds. The other practices of the monastic life, the exterior disciplines of prayer, fasting, vigils, would have more to do with restraining sinful or inappropriate actions.

The origins of this practice are mysterious. There is nothing in the New Testament which would have led directly to it; a text in the Letter of James refers to confessing one's sins to a fellow Christian, but then that really was not what the desert monks were up to (the text from James appears only once in the indexed collections of the *apophthegmata*). A look at the *Life of Antony* shows that Antony consulted with wise old men in his early days, but his hardest work in coming to self-knowledge was done alone. The first of the *apophthegmata* about Antony tries to explain this unusual, virtually unique, exception to the general rule of working with an older monk.

When the holy *abba* Antony lived in the desert he was beset by *accidie*, and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved but those thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do about my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, 'Do this and you will be saved.' At these words, Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved⁵. Antony's interior struggle, undertaken in solitude, is here externalized so that he, too, has an *abba*: but it is an angel who is a sort of mirror-image of himself.

The desert tradition is universally insistent upon the young monk's need for a discerning elder: even Antony's life had to be brought into line with the norm.

Another story, attributed to Macarius the Great, tells of two young men who came and lived near him in Scetis. Macarius taught them the basic disciplines of the life, and they set to it. For three years they lived as he had showed them, but without consulting him about their progress. Macarius, telling the story, said, 'I wrestled with my thoughts thinking, "what is their way of life? Why do they not come to ask me about their thoughts? Those who live far off come to see me, but those who live quite close do not come. They do not go to anyone else either; they only go to church, in silence, to receive the Eucharist." Macarius, overcome with curiosity, goes to visit them and receives a revelation about their way of life, seeing

that although one of them was still troubled by demons the two of them kept up their prayer and soon died, presumably with every expectation of paradise. Macarius would show their cell to visitors and say 'Come and see the place of martyrdom of the young strangers'⁶. Like Antony these young monks were a great exception so unusual in their heroic isolation from the *abba* that they baffled and then amazed one of the greatest of the desert fathers. But note that they did have each other.

The basic insight of the desert evident even in those stories I have just told was that one cannot grow towards perfection through isolated solitary effort: grace is mediated through one's neighbour especially one's *abba*⁷. A common exhortation, attributed to many different monks was that the enemy the devil rejoices in nothing so much as unmanifested thoughts⁸. If the devil was delighted by a monk's self-imposed isolation surely this was because the opposite of isolation, encounter with another was the way to salvation. The necessity of this encounter, urged in more positive ways throughout the tradition rested on two points.

First there is breaking from the illusion of self-sufficiency a pose which encourages self-absorption and can lead to a devouring conscience in the words of *abba* Poemen⁹. A sin which is hidden begins to multiply¹⁰: one becomes trapped in obsessive and compulsive patterns *Abba* Isaias wrote, 'As the creeping plant which surrounds a tree chokes its fruit, as a worm eats wood the moth devours clothing and rust eats away iron, so sin consumes and withers the one who does not confess it'¹¹.

Second there is a connection with humility. The ability of a monk freely to open his heart to his *abba* indicated growth in humility¹². Humility and its companion, obedience are the key monastic virtues the foundation for everything else. The link between manifestation of thoughts and humility helps one to understand better what monastic humility is all about: it is the quality of someone who has begun to see as God sees and who has started with the self. A limpid heart allows for a clear eye and humility becomes the basis for contemplating the rest of creation and then the Creator.

This very practical approach was complemented by stories which spoke of the act of opening the heart as being in and of itself a good thing, a means of grace¹³: 'reveal your thoughts to your fathers so that the grace of God dwell in you'¹⁴. Dorotheus of Gaza summed it up pithily: 'nothing is more burdensome than directing oneself; nothing is more fatal'¹⁵.

It was not the verdict of the elder which was so important as the stories will show but rather the act itself of manifesting the soul: the revelation breaks the hold of unreality¹⁶. The desert fathers were absolutely committed to breaking the cycle of deception which began with Adam and Eve. One might say that the great tragedy of the Fall lay not so much in that they disobeyed; God could handle that. The tragedy of Adam and Eve was that they hid. Far from thinking of themselves as like God they thought of God like themselves and thinking God could not bear their failure they hid. The desert fathers knew that one of the fundamental

characteristics of fallen humanity is that we think we can keep things going by hiding and pretending. They saw that Christ hides nothing, and promises that all will be made known: they took him at his word and got on with making it all known.

For these people, then, humility, that key virtue, could be reduced in practice to this one indicator: the ability to speak honestly, overcoming the embarrassment and shame about the deepest stirrings of the heart. And they knew that this is the hardest thing anyone can ever do.

Issues in practice

The best way to raise practical issues is by way of one of the *apophthegmata* from the Greek Anonymous Series. The speaker, as a young monk, has known abba Zeno.

'When I was young', he said, 'I had this experience. I had a passion in my soul which mastered me. Having heard it said that *abba* Zeno had healed many I wanted to go find him and open myself to him. But the devil prevented me from doing so saying, 'Since you know what you must do, conduct yourself according to what you have read. Why go and scandalise the old man?' Each time that I was ready to go to him the warfare in me abated a little and I did not go. And when I had given up the idea of going to see the old man once more the passion would assail me. I would begin to fight in order to leave, and the enemy would deceive me by the same trick and would not let me open myself to the old man. Often I would actually go to the old man in order to tell him everything, but the enemy would not let me speak by putting shame in my heart and saying to me, 'Since you know how to heal yourself, what is the point of speaking about it? You are not giving yourself enough credit: What the fathers have taught.' Such is what the adversary suggested to me so that I would not reveal my sickness to the physician and be healed.'

Yet at no time did the old man intervene. He left it to the would be disciple to come to his senses and to reveal his thoughts. In due course the narrator felt that he had summoned up sufficient courage

'I went and found no other person there. The old man as was his custom gave me some teaching about the salvation of the soul and the ways of cleansing oneself of impure thoughts. But once more I was ashamed and I did not open up I asked him for his blessing.

'The old man got up said a prayer and led me to the door. He walked ahead of me and meanwhile I was tormented by my thoughts. Would I speak to the old man or would not? I walked a little behind him without his paying me any attention. He put his hand to the door to open it for me but when he saw me tormented by my thoughts he turned towards me tapped me on the chest and said: "What is the matter with you? Am I not a man too? [Acts 10:26].

'When the old man said this to me I thought that he had uncovered my heart. I prostrated myself at his feet begging him with tears saying "Have pity on me." He said to me: "What is the matter with you?" I told him "You know what it is what is the use of saying it?" He said to me it is you who must say what is the matter with you.'

'Covered with shame I made known to him my passion, and he said to me: "Am I not a man too? Do you want me to tell you what I know? That you have been coming here for three years with these thoughts and you have not let them out".

I prostrated myself, begged him and said, "For the Lord's sake, have pity on me ' He said to me, "Go, do not neglect your prayer, and do not speak ill of anyone." I returned to my cell, and did not neglect my prayer; and by the grace of Christ and by the prayers of the old man, I was bothered no longer by that passion¹⁷.

This story touches on many key themes: the illusion of self-sufficiency and self-discernment; the power of embarrassment and shame; the patience and humility of the *abba*; the need to take the hard step of saying aloud the secrets of the heart; the pastoral sensitivity of the *abba* shown more in his overall strategy than in the actual advice he gave after the manifestation of conscience. These themes must be considered in turn.

(a) *Self-direction and self-deception.* The greatest flaw in self-direction lay in the simple inability of the beginner to see anything, much less the self, without the distorting influence of sin and self-deception. The whole battery of the 'passions' stood by, ready to twist any perception or insight. We know that someone caught in an unhealthy situation may not be able to see any way out and might need help in finding one. The desert monks, intent on casting out all hindrances to sight and insight, would have maintained that anyone seriously undertaking the Christian life (and the evidence is that some of them took on lay clients) began this work still trapped in the inevitable confusion of sinful humanity. Part of this confusion was an instinctive resistance to openness, a resistance to making real progress, owing to the human tendency to prefer familiar sickness to unfamiliar health. Monks in the desert, like modern people, fought to keep change at bay even while claiming to desire progress. This resistance appeared in many guises, and was often labelled self-will. About these there are hundreds of sayings, one of the most well-known being, 'If you see a young man climbing toward heaven by his own will, grab his foot and pull him down, for it will be for his good'.¹⁸

An aspect of self-will which bears directly on this theme was the tendency to think that one's self-discernment, based on experience and knowledge, could substitute for the elder's discernment and wisdom. Some of the most interesting pieces of desert literature concern this illusion. In some cases the temptation to self-reliance was so strong that it prevented a monk from approaching the elder (as in the story above); in other cases; it simply interfered with the process, and had to be recognised for what it was¹⁹.

The temptation to self-reliance was an issue for the elders just as for the young: many of the *apophthegmata* concern older monks who have lost their way and slipped into kinds of behaviour which prevent their seeing clearly. In the *Historia monachorum* there is a story of an *abba* who gets caught in a downward spiral of temptation and slackened discipline. Some brothers invite him to come and speak to them, and afterwards he realises that although he was advising them, he remained without advice himself. Then he remembers the verse from Proverbs, 'a brother helped by a brother is like a strong city ...' (Prov. 18:19)²⁰. And so one

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finds that often an *abba* would admit in his own failures or tell the story of his own struggles as a way to help a younger monk open up. Thus he would quote Paul's 'am I not a man, too?' as it; the story above: thus he would admit that the thoughts never cease²¹.

(b) *The elder's role*. This solidarity in experience between elder and disciple serves as a reminder of what the elder's role was in all of this. The desert *abba* or *amma* was not a guru: disciples did not just sit and listen to words of wisdom. Often there were no words to listen to. Nor was the elder a magician: there was real work to be done, and most of it was to be done by the disciple. The religious, medical, legal, and other sons of images which began to accumulate around the figure of the desert elder can obscure the actual means by which desert father or mother worked with the desert child. The elder was not a source of power. The elder was not a distributor of self-help guidelines. The elder was sometimes called 'healer', but was really more a sort of witness or midwife than an omniscient, self-assured professional. The desert elder was certified by experience rather than by vows or by an academic degree or by ordination. This experience lay in having had the shock of seeing oneself as a sinner, accepting that only God's mercy could bring hope of forgiveness, and setting about the hard work of making one's own the story not only of fall but of redemption as well. This experience continued to play itself out in recognising oneself in other sinners, and working with them to tease out the thousand secrets of the heart. Barsanuphius wrote to one of the monks who consulted him (in Derwas Chitty's archaizing but here charming translation) 'It is by thee [God] saves pitiful me²²'.

The role of the elder as encourager and witness rather than as judge is evident in the sort of advice they often gave: none or very little. Cassian quotes Theonas as having said to a brother after he revealed his thoughts, 'without any words of mine, your confession frees you from this slavery'²³. Paphnutius would walk twelve miles twice a month to see the old man to whom he told thoughts and remarked that he was always told the same thing 'wherever you go, do not judge yourself, and you will be at peace'²⁴. Remember; that the brother who struggled for three years before he could name his trouble was told only 'Go, do not neglect your prayer, and speak ill of no one'. These were hardly cases where there was no time for the elder to go into what the monk had brought to him, as if it were five minutes before midnight Mass with a queue of people waiting to make their confession. One might justify the scantiness of the advice by saying that these stories point to the hard work required to follow even this apparently simple advice. But there is something else here: the recognition that it is often the very experience of opening the heart which brings healing and insight, and not the elder's subsequent commentary. This brings to mind the many stories about the desert fathers' insistence that they teach primarily by example rather than by words, and their refusal to make rules or to prescribe. Barsanuphius, the great solitary of Gaza in the early sixth century, often

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refused to lay down a rule when asked to do so: he recognised that laws and obligations could short-circuit the growth he was there to encourage. Pointing out that Jesus preached the good news but did not compel anyone to believe it²⁵. Elsewhere he notes that a rule sets a limit, and he does not wish to restrict what the Lord empowers.²⁶

The elder's qualities of availability and patience are further indicators that the role is not one of controlled directing but of being present to or accompanying'. Often the brothers would be hesitant to bother the old man with their thoughts: the way such reluctance can play into resistance strategies is obvious. One brother was hesitant to bother Poemen during Lent; Poemen reminds him, 'we are to bar the door of our lips, nor of our cell'²⁷. John Colobos worked with a brother who kept forgetting what John advised him and who was embarrassed to keep coming back for a reminder; John told him not to hesitate to come to him, 'for even if all of Scetis came, it would not exhaust the grace of Christ'²⁸. Macarius of Alexandria kept to a balanced programme of life which made time for the needs of the brothers²⁹. This is not to say that they suffered fools gladly. Antony the Great screened visitors by using a monastic receptionist who would announce callers as 'from Egypt' (those who were politely refused admission) or as 'from Jerusalem' (those who were welcomed as being serious about spiritual matters)³⁰. The same brother who struggled for three years before confessing to abba Zeno later went back and confessed the same thing again as a test of Zeno's discernment, even though the thought no longer troubled him: his confession was met with silence followed by the comment, 'don't be ridiculous'³¹. Barsanuphius finally tells Euthymius not to bother him with any more questions or letters³².

Nonetheless, one of the most impressive qualities of the old men when dealing with the young was their great patience. Poemen, 'the Shepherd', was particularly famous for taking people as they were, and for being willing to wait until they were ready to change. One story is told of a monk who moved in with a woman who then gave birth to their child. Other monks were scandalised and would have nothing to do with them. Poemen sent over a gift of wine when the woman gave birth; through this kindness the brother came to see how he had been unfaithful to his true vocation³³. In another case, Poemen saw repentance growing in a woman who was living as a prostitute (she gave her earnings as alms): he was willing to wait for her repentance to bear fruit despite the scandal (or fascination) her life was causing others as she started to take on more customers and so as to be able to give more in alms to the poor³⁴. Poemen would even put up with outright denial by a brother, saying that in such cases one should not reprimand but stir the soul to repentance by saying 'do not lose heart be on guard'³⁵. Isidore the Priest was famous for taking on difficult monks who had exhausted the patience of their own elders.³⁶

The old men recognised themselves in the monks who were troubled, and the source of their sometimes astonishing patience was their experience that compassion in solidarity was the only way forward. They could not force a brother to open his heart they might invite, encourage, and give an example themselves, but sometimes all they could do was wait. Again, it was not their own diagnosis of the problem that was central to the process. Climacus wrote that even if a spiritual father had clairvoyant awareness of a brother's sins, he was not to reveal that knowledge to the brother, but was to urge him to open his heart, for it is that admission of troubles that brings forgiveness and comfort³⁷.

One issue addressed in some of the *apophthegmata* was the very practical one of finding an *abba* whom one could trust to be discerning and compassionate. One of the elders in Cassian's *Conferences* admits that not all of the old men are equal—li perfect and tested³⁸. Poemen told monks to go only to someone whom their heart trusted³⁹. One of the anonymous sayings warns against confusing trust with covert manipulation: it cautions against finding an *abba* who was according to one's own tastes, to whom one would go 'not so that you would obey his will, but so that he would obey yours'⁴⁰. Such a scenario, of course, would subvert the whole process, which rested on the assumption that one's own will was too warped by the Fall to be trusted. Irene Hausherr summarised this danger: The wondrous transformation of someone [from slave to faithful servant to child of God] took place by the total substitution of the divine will for the human one. Someone who does not consent to this abnegation fools himself if he thinks he has or seeks a spiritual father. What he is looking for is an accomplice.⁴¹

(c) *When it did not work out.* But sometimes things would not work out through no fault of the trusting disciple. Two kinds of cases appear in the *apophthegmata*. The first more benign, situation arose when someone's *abba* could not make sense of something offered to him for discernment. This was especially the case with dreams or visions, which could be bewildering. In some cases, the brother seeks specialist advice and is then sent back to his original *abba*⁴². In another and quite famous case, Palladius, author of the *Lausiac History*, went from the Cells to Scetis to see someone about his concupiscence: he felt that in Scetis he would find the real experts⁴³.

The more dangerous cases concerned elders who were overly harsh with their disciples, or who responded to a brother's opening of heart with indignation or condemnation; typically, these stories are about the intervention of another *abba* who saves the young monk from despair⁴⁴. One example is a salutary lesson for anyone engaged in pastoral or counselling work. A brother comes to his *abba* to reveal a problem, but rather than admitting straightaway what he has been struggling with, he says, 'If a thought of this kind came upon someone, could he still be saved?'. The old man replies, 'He would already have lost his soul.' The brother draws the obvious conclusion and heads off for town, stopping on the way to have another go with the same question, this time with *abba* Sylvanus, who sees through

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the subterfuge and works with him⁴⁵. Such stories are closely akin to the many stones which condemn the harsh treatment of disciples by their elders, the desert fathers seemed to have an acute awareness of how easily discipline could tip over into sadism⁴⁶.

The other side of the contract, of course, was the disciple's unreserved trust in the *abba*. It was this total giving over of the self to the elder that made the betrayals of trust described above so devastating. But there could be abuses on the side of the disciples too. It has been noted above that the inability to trust another person can show itself in a temptation to self-discernment. It can also show in the opposite extreme, a tendency to shop around for a congenial opinion. In places like Nitria and Scetis, where there were many elders nearby, it was common for monks to visit one after the other in search of wisdom.

So far so good: but sometimes monks would (perhaps unconscious of what they were doing) play off one *abba* against another by comparing their advice on specific points. *Abba* Arsenius encountered a case like this when a young monk came to him, bothered by the thought that he should move from the desert into a monastery. He had been to Paphnutius, who had given him some basic advice, and then to *abba* John, who modified Paphnutius' advice. When he came to Arsenius, Arsenius heard the saga and said, 'Do as the others have told you. I have nothing to say but that'⁴⁷. Barsanuphius and John dealt with this issue, especially when both of them were serving as spiritual fathers and thus could be consulted by the same person. John's basic line was that a monk should always consult the same father, for as the situation of the monk's life would change so would the father's counsel. To consult someone else would be to distort this interplay⁴⁸. As for getting a second opinion, John was blunt: to do so was to test God, for God had already spoken through his saint⁴⁹. Similar to this was John's wonderful reply to a monk who consulted both John and Barsanuphius without telling them that he had hedged his bets. John's comment was: 'The God of Barsanuphius and of John is one', and so too would be their advice⁵⁰. The disciple's fidelity to one *abba* was also a means of preventing a monk from spilling his thoughts and problems to everyone within earshot, a practice the old men knew was unhelpful for all concerned: the monk telling everything to everyone would lose the focus provided by the discernment of his own elder, would not receive due attention from those he pestered, and might actually upset other monks who were not able to bear what he had to say⁵¹. The result would be sadness for the blabbermouth and scandal among the victims of his indiscretion.

Later monastic developments will be considered in a subsequent article.

¹ *Vita Antonii* 28-9, 39, 41-2. *PG* 26.884-8, 893, 904-5).

² Poemen suppl. 2 as in 3. C. Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata patrum* (*Subsidia hagiographica* 36) (Brussels 1984), pp.29-30.

³ *Logion* 5.30. The writings of Isaias are most accessible in the French translation by H. de Broc, *Abbe Isaie: Recueil ascitique* (*Spiritualité orientate* 7 bis) (Abbaye de Bellefontaine 1976); p.81.

⁴ *The Ladder*, 26 (summary, 21).

⁵ S. Antony I (*PG* 65.76)

⁶ Macarius 33 (*PG* 65.273-77).

⁷ Cf. the apophthegm in the Syriac *Paradise of the Fathers*: 'Abbe Poemen said that *abba* Athanasius had said: "if someone possesses good deeds, before God will give him a gift on his own behalf (for it is known that one cannot perfect himself by labour or through property), if he opens himself to his neighbour, then he receives the gift by virtue of his neighbour, and finds rest". Syriac in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* vii (Leipzig 1897), p.826.

⁸ Attributed to John Colobos (*PG* 65.345); also to Poemen (*PL* 73.798).

⁹ Poemen 99 (*PG* 65.345).

¹⁰ Nau 592/50 as in the Solesmes volume, *Les sentences des peres du desert: Serie des anonymes* (abbreviated henceforth *SPA*) (Solesmes/Bellefontaine, 1985), p.227. This collection is unpublished in Greek

¹¹ Greek text published by R. Draguet in *Byzantion* 35(1965), p.48 and translated in Regnault's *Abbé Isaïas*, p.297.

¹² Nau 592/50, as no.10 above.

¹³ Apophthegm from the Ethiopian Collection 14.67, French translation in *SPN*, p.331.

¹⁴ *Logion* 9.11 in *Abbé Isaïas*, p.106.

¹⁵ *Discourse* 5.66.9-10, Greek text in *Soothed de Gaze. Oeuvres spirituelles* (*Sources chretiennes* 92) (Paris, 1963), p.258.

¹⁶ Cassian, *Conferences* 2.11; Latin in E. Pichery, *Jean Cassien: Conferences* (*Sources chretiennes*

¹⁷ Apophthegm 509 from MS Paris Coislin 126. The Greek is unpublished; this translation is from *SPA*, pp.184-6.

¹⁸ Nau 111, Greek in *ROC* 12 (1907), 402.

¹⁹ Nau 510 as in *SPA*, pp.186-7.

²⁰ *H.M.* 1,56-7, Greek in A.-J. Festugière, *Historica Mononacharum in Aegypto* (*Subsidia hagiographica* 53) (Brussels 1961, 1971), pp.31-2.

²¹ Macarius 3 (*PG* 65.261-4).

²² The Greek text of the letters of Barsanuphius and John is available in a partial critical edition by Derwas Chitty, *Patrologia orientalis* 31:3 (Paris 1966), and in a complete but uncritical form in the edition by Nicodemus the Hagiorite (Venice 1816), reprinted by SN. Schoinas (Volos 1960). The letters are most readily accessible in the French translation by L. Regnault *et al.*, *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaze, Correspondence* (Solesmes 1972). The difficulty is that the numbering differs from edition to edition. In this article, C will indicate Chitty's number, V will indicate numbers from the 1960 Volos edition, and R will indicate numbers from the 1972 Solesmes translation. The text quoted here is C 64/V 1 59/R 63.

²³ *Conferences* 2.11: E. Pichery, ed. *Jean Cassien: Conferences* (*Sources chretiennes* 42), p.122.

²⁴ Paphnutius 3 (*PG* 65.380).

²⁵ Barsanuphius, C/V/R 35.

²⁶ Barsanuphius, C 86/V 181/R 85

²⁷ Poemen 58 (*PG* 65.336).

²⁸ John Colobos 18 (*PG* 65.209-12)

²⁹ *Historic Lausiaca* 20.3: Greek in C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (*Texts and Studies* 6) (Cambridge 1898-1904), ii.63.

³⁰ *Historia Lausica* 21.8: Butler ii,66,

³¹ Nau 510: *SPA*, pp.186.7.

³² Barsanuphius, C 72/V 140/R 71.

³³ Greek in P. Evergetinos, *Synagoge* (Athens 1983), iii.2.3.22,

³⁴ Timothy 1 (*PG* 65.429).

³⁵ Poemen 23 (*PG* 65.328).

³⁶ Isidore the Priest I (*PG* 65.220).

³⁷ *The Shepherd* (*PG* 88.1196B).

³⁸ *Conferences* 2.13 (*Sources chretiennes* 42, p.124) p.313.

³⁹ Poemen as in Guy, *Recherches*, p.30.

⁴⁰ Nau 245 (*ROC* 14 [1909], p.364).

⁴¹ I. Hausherr, *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois* (*Orientalia christiano analecte* 144) (Rome, 1955), p.165.

⁴² Zachary 4 (*PG* 65.180).

⁴³ *Historic Lausiaca* 23.1-6

⁴⁴ Nau 217 (*ROC* 14 [1909], pp.357-8) Cassian, *Conferences* 2:12-13 (*Sources chretiennes* 42, pp.124.30); Poemen 6, II, 23 (*PG* 65.320-1, 324-5, 328)

⁴⁵ Nau 217 (*ROC* 14 [1909], pp.357-8).

⁴⁶ Macarius 21 (*PG* 65.269-72).

⁴⁷ Paphnutius 5 (*PG* 65.380).

⁴⁸ Barsanuphius, V/R 364.

⁴⁹ Barsanuphius, V/R 361.

⁵⁰ Barsanuphius, V/R 224.

⁵¹ Isaias, *Logia* 6.2 and 9.1 (French in Regnault and Broc, pp.87 and 105).