



***Selections From  
THE SAYINGS  
Of  
THE DESERT  
FATHERS***

***Selections From  
THE SAYINGS  
Of  
THE DESERT  
FATHERS***

***With Kind Permission  
Of  
Cistercian Publication***

Title of the book - ***The Sayings of the Desert Fathers***

Name of the translator - ***Sister Benedicta Ward SLG***

Publisher - ***Cistercian Publication***

Address of the published - ***WMU Station, Kalamazoo, Michigan  
19008/USA***

***Copyright, 1975***



## **Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ King of Kings and Lord of lords**

Icon designed by Dr. Yousef Nassief and Dr. Bedour Latif



**ST ANTHONY AND ST PAUL**  
*Work of Dr Wedad and Dr*

## ***ABBA ANTHONY THE GREAT***

---

*Anthony the Great, called 'The Father of Monks' was born in central Egypt about AD the son of peasant farmers who were Christian. In c. 269 he heard the Gospel read in church and applied to himself the words. 'Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor and come . . . ' He devoted himself to a life of asceticism under the guidance of a recluse near his village. In c. 285 he went alone into the desert to live in complete solitude. His reputation attracted followers, who settled near him, and in c. 305 he came out of his hermitage in order to act as their spiritual father. Five years later he again retired into solitude. He visited Alexandria at least twice. Once during the persecution of Christians and again to support the Bishop Athanasius against heresy. He died at the age of one hundred and five. His life was written by Saint Athanasius and was very influential in spreading the ideals of monasticism throughout the Christian World.*

1. When the holy Abba Anthony 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 these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Anthony 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, Anthony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved.

2. When the same Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgements of God, he asked, 'Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag on to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper and why are the just in need?' He heard a voice answering him, 'Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgement of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them.'

3. Someone asked Abba Anthony, 'What must one do in order to please God?' The old man replied, 'Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved.'

4. Abba Anthony said to Abba Poemen, 'this is the great work of a man: always to take the blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath.'

5. He also said, 'Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. He even added, 'Without temptations no-one can be saved.'

6. Abba Pambo asked Abba Anthony, 'What ought I to do?' and the old man said to him 'Do not trust in your own righteousness do not worry about the past, but control your tongue and your stomach.'

7. Abba Anthony said, 'I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, "What can get through from such snares?" Then I heard a voice saying to me, "Humility."'

8. He also said, 'Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.'

9. He also said, 'Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalise our brother, we have sinned against Christ.'

10. He said also, 'just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.'

11. He said also, 'He who wishes to live in solitude in the desert is delivered from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight; there is only one conflict for him and that is with fornication.'

12. Some brothers came to find Abba Anthony to tell him about the visions they were having, and to find out from him if they were true or if they came from the demons. They had a donkey, which died on the way. When they reached the place where the old man was, he said to them before they could ask him anything, 'How was it that the little donkey died on the way here?' They said, 'How do you know about that, Father?' And he told them, 'The demons showed me what happened.' So they said, 'That was what we came to

question you about, for fear we were being deceived, for we have visions which often turn out to be true.' Thus the old man convinced them, by the example of the donkey, that their visions came from the demons.

13. A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, 'Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it.' So he did. The old man then said, 'Shoot another,' and he did so. Then the old man said, 'Shoot yet again and the hunter replied 'If I bend my bow so much I will break it.' Then the old man said to him, 'It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs.' When he heard these words "the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened.

14. Abba Anthony heard of a very young monk who had performed a miracle on the road. Seeing the old men walking with difficulty along the road, he ordered the wild asses to come and carry them until they reached Abba Anthony. Those whom they had carried told Abba Anthony about it. He said to them, 'This monk seems to me to be a ship loaded with goods but I do not know if he will reach harbour.' After a while, Anthony suddenly began to weep, to tear his hair and lament. His disciples said to him, 'Why are you weeping, Father?' and the old man replied, 'A great pillar of the Church has just fallen (he meant the young monk) but go to him and see what has happened.' So the disciples went and found the monk sitting on a mat and weeping for the sin he had committed. Seeing the disciples of the old man he

said, 'Tell the old man to pray that God will give me just ten days and I hope I will have made satisfaction.' But in the space of five days he died.

15. The brothers praised a monk before Abba Anthony. When the monk came to see him, Anthony wanted to know how he would bear insults; and seeing that he could not bear them at all, he said to him, 'You are like a village magnificently decorated on the outside, but destroyed from within by robbers.'

16. A brother said to Abba Anthony, 'Pray for me.' The old man said to him, 'I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God.'

17. One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba 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 Abba Joseph, 'How would you explain this saying?' and he replied, 'I do not know.' Then Abba Anthony 'Indeed Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: "I do said, not know."

18. Some brothers were coming from Scetis to see Abba Anthony. When they were getting into a boat to go there, they found an old man who also wanted to go there. The brothers did not know him. They sat in the boat, occupied by turns with the words of the Fathers, Scripture and their manual work. As for the old man, he remained silent. When they arrived on shore they found that the old man was going

to the cell of Abba Anthony too. When they reached the place, Anthony said to them, 'You found this old man a good companion for the journey?' Then he said to the old man, 'You have brought many good brethren with you, father.' The old man said, 'No doubt they are good, but they do not have a door to their house and anyone who wishes can enter the stable and loose the ass.' He meant that the brethren said whatever came into their mouths.

19. The brethren came to the Abba Anthony and said to him, 'Speak a word; how are we to be saved?' The old man said to them, 'You have heard the Scriptures. That should teach you how.' But they said, 'We want to hear from you too, Father.' Then the old man said to them, 'The Gospel says, "if anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matt. 5.39) They said, 'We cannot do that.' The old man said, 'If you cannot offer the other cheek, at least allow one cheek to be struck.' 'We cannot do that either,' they said. So he said, 'If you are not able to do that, do not return evil for evil,' and they said, 'we cannot do that either.' Then the old man said to his disciple, 'Prepare a little brew of corn for these invalids. If you cannot do this, or that, what can I do for you? What you need is prayers.'

20. A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, 'If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.' The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Anthony said, 'Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for

themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.'

21. It happened one day that one of the brethren in the monastery of Abba Elias was tempted. Cast out of the monastery, he went over the mountain to Abba Anthony. The brother lived near him for a while and then Anthony sent him back to the monastery from which he had been expelled. When the brothers saw him they cast him out yet again, and he went back to Abba Anthony saying, 'My Father, they will not receive me.' Then the old man sent them a message saying, 'A boat was shipwrecked at sea and lost its cargo; with great difficulty it reached the shore; but you want to throw into the sea that which has found a safe harbour on the shore. 'When the brothers understood that it was Abba Anthony who had sent them this monk, they received him at once.

22. Abba Anthony said, 'I believe that the body possesses a natural movement, to which it is adapted, but which it cannot follow without the consent of the soul; it only signifies in the body a movement without passion. There is another movement, which comes from the nourishment and warming of the body by eating and drinking, and this causes the heat of the blood to stir up the body to work. That is why the apostle said, "Do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery." (Ephes. 5:18) And in the Gospel the Lord also recommends this to his disciples: "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness." (Luke 21:34) But there is yet another movement, which afflicts those who fight, and that comes from the wiles and jealousy of the demons. You must understand what these three bodily movements are: one is

natural, one comes from too much to eat, the third is caused by the demons.'

23. He also said, 'God does not allow the same warfare and temptations to this generation as he did formerly, for men are weaker now and cannot bear so much.'

24. It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels.

## **ABBA ARSENIUS**

---

*Arsenius was born in Rome about 360. A well-educated man, of senatorial rank, he was appointed by the Emperor Tbeodosius 1 as tutor to the princes Arcadius and Honorius. He left the palace in 394 and sailed secretly to Alexandria. From there he went to Scetis and placed himself under the guidance of Abba John the Dwarf. He became an anchorite near Petra in Scetis. He seems to have had only three disciples, Alexander, Zoilus and Daniel. He was renowned for his austerity and silence and his combined with his learning made him seem somewhat forbidding to the Coptic monks. After the second devastation of Scetis in 434 he went to the mountain of Troe where he died in 449.*

1. While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, 'Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.' And a voice came saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.'

2. Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.'

3. It happened that when Abba Arsenius was sitting in his cell that he was harassed by demons. His servants, on their return, stood outside his cell and heard him praying to God in these words, 'O God, do not leave me. I have done

nothing good in your sight, but according to your goodness, let me now make a beginning of good.'

4. It was said of him that, just as none in the palace had worn more splendid garments than he when he lived there, so no one in the Church wore such poor clothing.

5. Someone said to blessed Arsenius, 'How is it that we, with all our education and our wide knowledge get nowhere, while these Egyptian peasants acquire so many virtues?' Abba Arsenius said to him, 'We indeed get nothing from our secular education, but these Egyptian peasants acquire the virtues by hard work.'

6. One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenius, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant.'

7. Blessed Archbishop *Theophilus*, accompanied by a magistrate, came one day to find Abba Arsenius. He questioned the old man, to hear a word from him. After a short silence the old man answered him 'Will you put into practice what I say to you?' They promised him this. 'If you hear Arsenius is anywhere, do not go there.'

8. Another time the archbishop, intending to come to see him, sent someone to see if the old man would receive him. Arsenius told him 'If you come, I shall receive you; but if I receive you, I receive everyone and therefore I shall no longer live here.' Hearing that, the archbishop said, 'If I drive him away by going to him, I shall not go any more.'

9. A brother questioned Abba Arsenius to hear a word of him and the old man said to him, 'Strive with all your might to bring your interior activity into accord with God, and you will overcome exterior passions.'

10. He also said, 'If we seek God, he will show himself to us, and if we keep him, he will remain close to us.'

11. Someone said to Abba Arsenius, 'My thoughts trouble me, saying, "You can neither fast nor work; at least go and visit the sick, for that is also charity."' But the old man, recognising the suggestions of the demons, said to him, 'Go, eat, drink, sleep, do no work, only do not leave your cell.' For he knew that steadfastness in the cell keeps a monk in the right way.

12. Abba Arsenius used to say that a monk travelling abroad should not get involved in anything; thus he will remain in peace.

13. Abba Mark said to Abba Arsenius, 'Why do you avoid us?' The old man said to him, 'God knows that I love you, but I cannot live with God and with men. The thousands and ten thousands of the heavenly hosts have but one will, while men have many. So I cannot leave God to be with men.'

14. Abba Daniel said of Abba Arsenius that he used to pass the whole night without sleeping, and in the early morning when nature compelled him to go to sleep, he would say to sleep, 'Come here, wicked servant.' Then, seated, he would snatch a little sleep and soon wake up again.

15. Abba Arsenius used to say that one-hour's sleep is enough for a monk if he is a good fighter.

16. The old man used to tell how one day someone handed round a few dried figs in Scetis. Because they were not worth anything, no one took any to Abba Arsenius in order not to offend him. Learning of it, the old man did not come to the *synaxis* saying, 'You have cast me out by not giving me a share of the blessing which God had given the brethren and which I was not worthy to receive.' Everyone heard of this and was edified at the old man's humility. Then the priest went to take him the small dried figs and brought him to the *synaxis* with joy.

17. Abba Daniel used to say, 'He lived with us many a long year and every year we used to take him only one basket of bread and when we went to find him the next year we would eat some of that bread.'

18. It was said of the same Abba Arsenius that he only changed the water for his palm-leaves once a year; the rest of the time he simply added to it. One old man implored him in these words, 'Why do you not change the water for these palm-leaves when it smells 'Instead of the perfumes and aromatics which bad?' He said to him, I used in the world I must bear this bad smell.'

19. Abba Daniel used to tell how when Abba Arsenius learned that all the varieties of fruit were ripe he would say, 'Bring me some.' He would taste a very little of each, just once, giving thanks to God.

20. Once at *Scetis* Abba Arsenius was ill and he was without even a scrap of linen. As he had nothing with which

to buy any, he received some through another's charity and he said, 'I give you thanks, Lord, for having considered me worthy to receive this charity in your name.'

21. It was said of him that his cell was thirty-two miles away and that he did not readily leave it: that in fact others did his errands. When *Scetis* was destroyed he left weeping and said, 'The world has lost Rome and the monks have lost *Scetis*.'

22. Abba Mark asked Abba Arsenius 'Is it good to have nothing extra in the cell? I know a brother who had some vegetables and he has pulled them up.' Abba Arsenius replied, 'Undoubtedly that is good but it must be done according to a man's capacity. For if he does not have the strength for such a practice he will soon plant others.'

23. Abba Daniel, the disciple of Abba Arsenius, related this: 'One day I found myself close to Abba Alexander and he was full of sorrow. He lay down and stared up into the air because of his sorrow. Now it happened that the blessed Arsenius came to speak with him and saw him lying down. During their conversation he said to him, 'And who was the layman whom I saw here?' Abba Alexander said, 'here did you see him?' He said, 'As I was coming down the mountain I cast my eyes in this direction towards the cave and I saw a man stretched full length looking up into the air.' So Abba Alexander did penance, saying, 'Forgive me, it was I; I was overcome by sorrow. The old man said to him, 'Well now, so it was you? Good; I thought it was a layman and that was why I asked you.'

24. Another time Abba Arsenius said to Abba Alexander, 'When you have cut your palm-leaves, come and eat with me,

but if visitors come, eat with them.' Now Abba Alexander worked slowly and carefully. When the time came, he had not finished the palm leaves and wishing to follow the old man's instructions, he waited until he had finished them. When Abba Arsenius saw that he was late, he ate, thinking that he had had guests. But Abba Alexander, when at last he had finished, came away. And the old man said to him, 'Have you had visitors?' 'No,' he said. 'Then why did you not come?' The other replied, 'You told me to come when I had cut the palm-leaves; and following your instructions, I did not come, because I had not finished.' The old man marvelled at his exactitude and said to him, 'Break. your fast at once so as to celebrate the *synaxis* untroubled, and drink some water, otherwise your body will soon suffer.'

## **ABBA DANIEL**

---

*Daniel was a disciple of Arsenius. He was present at his death in AD 449. Daniel being left his tunic, hair, shirt and sandals said, 'And I unworthy wear them that I may receive a blessing.'*

1. It was said concerning Abba Daniel, that when the barbarians invaded Scetis and the Fathers fled away, the old man said, 'If God does not care for me, why still live?' Then he passed through the midst of the barbarians without being seen. He said to himself therefore, 'See how God has cared for me, since I am not dead. Now I will do that which is human and flee with the Fathers.'

2. A brother asked Abba Daniel, 'Give me a commandment and I will keep it.' He replied, 'Never put your hand in the dish with a woman, and never eat with her; thus you will escape a little the demon of fornication.'

3. Abba Daniel said, 'At Babylon the daughter of an important person was possessed by a devil. A monk for whom her father had a great affection said to him, "No-one can heal your daughter except some anchorites whom I know; but if you ask them to do so, they will not agree because of their humility. Let us therefore do this: when they come to the market, look as though you want to buy their goods and when they come to receive the price, we will ask them to say a prayer and I believe she will be healed." When they came to the market they found a disciple of the old men setting there selling their goods and they led him

away with the baskets, so that he should receive the price of them. But when the monk reached the house, the woman possessed with the devil came and slapped him. But he only turned the other cheek, according to the Lord's Command. (Matt. 5.39) The devil, tortured by this, cried out, "What violence! The commandment of Jesus drives me out." Immediately the woman was cleansed. When the old men came, they told them what had happened and they glorified God saying, "This is how the pride of the devil is brought low, through the humility of the commandment of Christ."

4. Abba Daniel also said, 'The body prospers in the measure in which the soul is weakened, and the soul prospers in the measure in which the body is weakened.'

5. One day Abba Daniel and Abba *Ammoes* went on a journey together. Abba *Ammoes* said, 'When shall we, too, settle down, in a cell, Father?' Abba Daniel replied, 'Who shall separate us henceforth from God? God is in the cell, and, on the other hand, he is outside also.'

6. Abba Daniel said that when Abba Arsenius was at *Scetis*, there was a monk there who used to steal the possessions of the old men. Abba Arsenius took him into his cell in order to convert him and to give the old men some peace. He said to him, 'Everything you want I will get for you, only do not steal.' So he gave him gold, coins, clothes and everything he needed. But the brother began to steal again. So the old men, seeing that he had not stopped, drove him away saying, 'If there is a brother who commits a sin through weakness, one must bear it, but if he steals, drive him away, for it is hurtful to his soul and troubles all those who live in the neighbourhood.'

7. This is what Abba Daniel, the *Pharanite*, said, 'Our Father Abba Arsenius told us of an inhabitant of *Scetis*, of notable life and of simple faith; through his naivete' he was deceived and said, "The bread which we receive is not really the body of Christ, but a symbol." Two old men having learnt that he had uttered this saying, knowing that he was outstanding in his way of life, knew that he had not spoken through malice, but through simplicity. So they came to find him and said, "Father, we have heard a proposition contrary to the faith on the part of someone who says that the bread which we receive is not really the body of Christ, but a symbol." The old man said, "It is I who have said that." Then the old men exhorted him saying, "Do not hold this position, Father, but hold one in conformity with that which the catholic Church has given us. We believe, for our part, that the bread itself is the body of Christ and that the cup itself is his blood and this in all truth and not a symbol. But as in the beginning, God formed man in his image, taking the dust of the earth, without anyone being able to say that it is not the image of God, even though it is not seen to be so; thus it is with the bread of which he said that it is his body; and so we believe that it is really the body of Christ." The old man said to them, "As long as I have not been persuaded by the thing itself, I shall not be fully convinced." So they said, "Let us pray God about this mystery throughout the whole of this week and we believe that God will reveal it to us." The old man received this saying with joy and he prayed in these words, "Lord, you know that it is not through malice that I do not believe and so that I may not err through ignorance, reveal this mystery to me, Lord Jesus Christ." The old men returned to their cells and they also prayed God, saying, "Lord Jesus Christ, reveal this mystery to the old man, that he may believe and not lose his reward." God heard both the prayers. At the end of the week they came to church on

Sunday and sat all three on the same mat, the old man in the middle. Then their eyes were opened and when the bread was placed on the holy table, there appeared as it were a little child to these three alone. And when the priest put out his hand to break the bread, behold an angel descended from heaven with a sword and poured the child's blood into the chalice. When the priest cut the bread into small pieces, the angel also cut the child in pieces. When they drew near to receive the sacred elements the old man alone received a morsel of bloody flesh. Seeing this he was afraid and cried out, "Lord, I believe that this bread is your flesh and this chalice your blood." Immediately the flesh, which he held in his hand, became bread, according to the mystery and he took it, giving thanks to God. Then the old men said to him, "God knows human nature and that man cannot eat raw flesh and that is why he has changed his body into bread and his blood into wine, for those who receive it in faith." Then they gave thanks to God for the old man, because he had allowed him not to lose the reward of his labour. So all three returned with joy to their own cells.'

## **ABBA JOHN THE DWARF**

---

*John the Dwarf, son of poor parents in Tees, was born about 339. The second story here clearly belongs to his youth at home before he became a monk, while he was living with his family. At the age of eighteen he went to Scetis and was trained by Abba Ammoes for twelve years. One of the most vivid characters in the desert, he attracted many disciples and in order to preserve his own solitude he dug himself a cave underground. He was ordained priest, and the number of his sayings, recorded and preserved, points to his importance among his disciples. After 407 he went to Suez and the Mountain of Anthony.*

1. It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert 'at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His Abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, 'Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit.' Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, 'Take and eat the fruit of obedience.'

2. It was said of Abba John the Dwarf, that one day he said to his elder brothers 'I should like to be free of all care, like the angels, who do not work, but ceaselessly offer worship to God.' So he took off his cloak and went away into the desert. After a week he came back to his brother. When he knocked on the door, he heard his brother say, before he opened it 'Who are you? 'He said, 'I am John, your

brother. 'But he replied, 'John has become an angel, and henceforth he is no longer among men.' Then the other begged him saying, 'It is I.' However, his brother did not let him in, but left him there in distress until morning. Then, opening the door, he said to him, 'You are a man and you must once again work in order to eat.' Then John made a prostration before him, saying, 'Forgive me.'

3. Abba John the Dwarf said, 'If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food and so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak.'

4. He also said, 'He who gorges himself and talks with a boy has already in his thought committed fornication with him.'

5. He also said, 'Going up the road again towards Scetis with some ropes, I saw the camel driver talking and he made me angry; so, leaving my goods, I took to flight.'

6. On another occasion in summertime, he heard a brother talking angrily to his neighbour, saying, 'Ah! you too?' So leaving the harvest, he took to flight.

7. Some old men were entertaining themselves at *Scetis* by having a meal together; amongst them was Abba John. A venerable priest got up to offer drink, but nobody accepted any from him, except John the Dwarf. They were surprised and said to him, 'How is it that you, the youngest, dared to let yourself be served by the priest?' Then he said to them, 'When I get up to offer drink, I am glad when everyone

accepts it, since I am receiving my reward; that is the reason, then, that I accepted it, so that he also might gain his reward and not be grieved by seeing that no-one would accept anything from him.' When they heard -this, they were all filled with wonder and edification at his discretion.

8. One day when he was sitting in front of the church, the brethren were consulting him about their thoughts. One of the old men who saw it became a prey to jealousy and said to him, 'John, your vessel is full of poison.' Abba John said to him, 'That is very true, Abba; and you have said that when you only see the outside, but if you were able to see the inside, too, what would you say then?'

9. The brethren used to tell how the brethren were sitting one day at an *agape* and one brother at table began to laugh. When he saw that, Abba John began to weep, saying, 'What does this brother have in his heart that he should laugh, when he ought to weep, because he is eating at an *agape*?'

10. Some brethren came one day to test him to see whether he would let his thoughts get dissipated and speak of the things of this world. They said to him, 'We give thanks to God that this year there has been much rain and the palm trees have been able to drink, and their shoots have grown, and the brethren have found manual work.' Abba John said to them, 'So it is when the Holy Spirit descends into the hearts of men; they are renewed and they put forth leaves in the fear of God.'

11. It was said of him that one day he was weaving rope for two baskets, but he made it into one without noticing, until it had reached the wall, because his spirit was occupied in contemplation.

12. Abba John said, 'I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great numbers. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me; I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy.'

13. Abba *Poemen* said of Abba John the Dwarf that he had prayed God to take his passions away from him so that he might become free from care. He went and told an old man this: 'I find myself in peace, without an enemy,' he said. The old man said to him, 'Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.' So he besought God and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, 'Lord, give me strength for the fight.'

14. Abba John said, 'Here is what one of the old men in ecstasy said: "Three monks were standing at the edge of the sea, and a voice came to them from the other side saying, 'Take wings of fire and come here to me.' The first two did so and reached the other shore, but the third remained, crying and weeping exceedingly. But later wings were given to him also, not of fire, but weak and without strength, so that with great difficulty he reached the other shore, sometimes under water, sometimes above it. So it is with the present generation; if they are given wings they are not of fire, but wings that are weak and without power."

15. A brother questioned Abba John saying, 'How is it that my soul, bruised with wounds, does not blush to speak against my neighbour?' The old man told him a parable relating to slander, 'There was a poor man who had a wife. He saw another very beautiful woman and he took her. They were both quite naked. A feast was being held somewhere near and both women begged him to take them with him. Taking both of them, he put them into a barrel and put them aboard a ship. and so they reached the place. When it became hot, the people lay down to rest. One of the women looked out of the barrel and seeing no one, went to a pile of rubbish and joining old rags together, made herself a girdle and then walked about confidently. The other, sitting inside the barrel, naked, said, "Look at that courtesan who is not ashamed to walk about naked." Grieved at this her husband said to her "This is truly wonderful! She at least hides her nakedness, but, as for you, you are completely naked; are you not ashamed to say that?" So it is when one speaks against one's neighbour.'

16. The old man also said this to a certain brother about the soul which wishes to be converted, 'There was in a city a courtesan who had many lovers. One of the governors approached her, saying, "Promise me you will be good, and I will marry you." She promised this and he took her and brought her to his house. Her lovers, seeking her again, said to one another, "That lord has taken her with him to his house, so if we go to his house and he learns of it, he will condemn us. But let us go to the back, and whistle to her. Then, when she recognises the sound of the whistle she will come down to us; as for us, we shall be unassailable." When she heard the whistle, the woman stopped her ears and withdrew to the inner chamber and shut the doors.' The old man said that this courtesan is our soul, that her lovers are

the passions and other men; that the lord is Christ; that the inner chamber is the eternal dwelling; those who whistle are the evil demons, but the soul always takes refuge in the Lord.

17. One day when Abba John was going up to Scetis with some other brothers, their guide lost his way for it was night-time. So the brothers said to Abba John, 'What shall we do, Abba, in order not to die wandering about, for the brother has lost the way?' The old man said to them, 'If we speak to him, he will be filled with grief and shame. But look here, I will pretend to be ill and say I cannot walk any more; then we can stay here till the dawn.' This he did. The others said, 'We will not go on either, but we will stay with you.' They sat there until the dawn, and in this way they did not upset the brother.

18. There was an old man at *Scetis*, very austere of body, but not very clear in his thoughts. He went to see Abba John to ask him about forgetfulness. Having received a word from him, he returned to his cell and forgot what Abba John had said to him. He went off again to ask him and having heard the same word from him he returned with it. As he got near his cell, he forgot it again. This he did many times; he went there, but while he was returning he was overcome by forgetfulness. Later, meeting the old man he said to him, 'Do you know, Abba, that I have forgotten again what you said to me? But I did not want to overburden you, so I did not come back.' Abba John said to him, 'Go and light a lamp.' He lit it. He said to him, 'Bring some more lamps, and light them from the first.' He did so. Then Abba John said to the old man, 'Has that lamp suffered any loss from the fact that other lamps have been lit from it?' He said, 'No.' The old man continued, 'So it is with John; even if the whole of *Scetis*

came to see me, they would not separate me from the love of Christ. Consequently, whenever you want to, come to me without hesitation.' So, thanks to the endurance of these two men, God took forgetfulness away from the old man. Such was the work of the monks of *Scetis*; they inspire fervour in those who are in the conflict and do violence to themselves to win others to do good.

19. A brother questioned Abba John, saying, 'What ought I to do? A brother often comes to fetch me for work, and since I am ill and weak, I get tired out working; what should I do, in order to keep the commandment? 'The old man answered him saying, '*Caleb* said to *Joshua*, the son of Nun: "I was forty years old when Moses, the servant of the Lord, sent me with you into the desert in this land; and now I am eighty-five years of age; as then, so now I can still take part in the battle and withdraw from it." (cf. Jos. 14.7-11) In the same way you, too, if you are strong enough to go out and to come in, go to work; but if you cannot do it, sit down in your cell and weep for your sins and when they find you filled with compunction, they will not compel you to go out.'

20. Abba John said, 'Who sold Joseph?' A brother replied saying, 'It was his brethren.' The old man said to him, 'No, it was his humility which sold him, because he could have said, "I am their brother" and have objected, but, because he kept silence, he sold himself by his humility. It is also his humility which set him up as chief in Egypt.'

21. Abba John said, 'We have put the light burden on one side, that is to say, self-accusation, and we have loaded ourselves with a heavy one, that is to say, self-justification.'

22. He also said, 'Humility and the fear of God are above all virtues.'

23. The same Abba was sitting in church one day and he gave a sigh, unaware that there was someone behind him. When he noticed it he lay prostrate before him, saying, 'Forgive me, Abba, for I have not yet made a beginning.'

24. The same Abba said to his disciple, 'Let us honour one only, and everyone will honour us; for if we despise one, that is God, everyone will despise us, and we will be lost.'

## ***ABBA ISIDORE THE PRIEST***

---

*Isidore the Priest was a monk of Scetis and early companion of Macarius. He is mentioned by Cassian as one of the heads of the four communities in Scetis.*

1. It was said of Abba *Isidore*, priest of *Scetis*, that when anyone had a brother who was sick, or careless or irritable, and wanted to send him away, he said, 'Bring him here to me. Then he took charge of him and by his long-suffering he cured him.

2. A brother asked him, 'Why are the demons so frightened of you?' The old man said to him, 'Because I have practised asceticism the day I became a monk, and not allowed anger to reach my lips.'

3. He also said that for forty years he had been tempted to sin in thought but that he had never consented either to covetousness or to anger.

4. He also said, 'When I was younger and remained in my cell I set no limit to prayer; the night was for me as much the time of prayer as the day.'

5. Abba *Poemen* used to say this about Abba *Isidore*: every night he plaited a bundle of palms, and the brethren pleaded with him saying, 'Rest a little, for you are getting old.' But he said to them, 'Even if *Isidore* were burned, and his ashes thrown to the winds, I would not allow myself any relaxation because the Son of God came here for our sake.'

6. The same Abba said concerning Abba *Isidore* that his thoughts said to him, 'You are a great man.' He said to them, 'Am I to be compared with Abba Anthony; am I become like Abba *Pambo*, or like the other Fathers who pleased God?' When he said this he was at peace. When the demons who are at war with men tried to make him afraid, suggesting that, after all this, he would still go to hell, he replied, 'Even if I am sent there, I shall find you beneath me.'

7. Abba *Isidore* said, 'One day I went to the market place to sell some small goods; when I saw anger approaching me, I left the things and fled.'

8. Abba *Isidore* went one day to see Abba *Theophilus*, archbishop of Alexandria and when he returned to *Scetis* the brethren asked him, 'What is going on in the city?' But he said to them, 'Truly, brothers, I did not see the face of anyone there, except that of the archbishop.' Hearing this they were very anxious and said to him, 'Has there been a disaster there, then, Abba?' He said, 'Not at all, but the thought of looking at anyone did not get the better of me.' At these words they were filled with admiration, and strengthened in their intention of guarding the eyes from all distraction.

## ***ABBA MACARIUS THE GREAT***

---

*Macarius the Great (the Egyptian), born c. AD 300, was a former camel-driver, who traded in nitre. He was one of the pioneers of Scetis. He was ordained priest and lived as an anchorite in a village until he was falsely blamed for the pregnancy of a girl there; when he was cleared, he went to Scetis. Like many of the early monks, he travelled about and was not fixed in any one place, as these stories show. Cassian said of him, 'He was the first who found a way to inhabit the desert of Scetis. 'He was much influenced by Anthony the Great and visited him at least twice. He died in A. D. 390.*

1. Abba Macarius said this about himself: 'When I was young and was living in a cell in Egypt, they took me to make me a cleric in the village. Because I did not wish to receive this dignity, I fled to another place. Then a devout layman joined me; he sold my manual work for me and served me. Now it happened that a virgin in the village, under the weight of temptation, committed sin. When she became pregnant, they asked her who was to blame. She said, "The anchorite." Then they came to seize me, led me to the village and hung pots black with soot and various other things round my neck and led me through the village in all directions, beating me and saying, "This monk has defiled our virgin, catch him, catch him and they beat me almost to death. Then one of the old men came and said: "What are you doing, how long will you go on beating this strange monk?" The man who served me was walking behind me, full of shame, for they covered him with insults too, saying,

"Look at this anchorite, for whom you stood surety; what has he done?" The girl's parents said, "Do not let him go till he has given a pledge that he will keep her." I spoke to my servant and he vouched for me. Going to my cell, I gave him all the baskets I had, saying, "Sell them, and give my wife something to eat." Then I said to myself, "*Macarius*, you have found yourself a wife; you must work a little more in order to keep her." So I worked night and day and sent my work to her. But when the time came for the wretch to give birth, she remained in labour many days without bringing forth, and they said to her, "What is the matter?" She said, "I know what it is, it is because I slandered the anchorite, and accused him unjustly; it is not he who is to blame, but such and such a young man." Then the man who served me came to me full of joy saying, "The virgin could not give birth until she had said 'The anchorite had nothing to do with it, but I have lied about him.' The whole village wants to come here solemnly and do penance before you." But when I heard this, for fear people would disturb me, I got up and fled here to *Scetis*. That is the original reason why I came here.'

2. One day *Macarius* the Egyptian went from *Scetis* to the mountain of *Nitria* for the offering of Abba *Pambo*. The old men said to him, 'Father, say a word to the brethren.' He said, 'I have not yet become a monk myself, but I have seen monks. One day when I was sitting in my cell, my thoughts were troubling me, suggesting that I should go to the desert and see what I could see there. I remained for five years, fighting against this thought, saying, perhaps it comes from the demons. But since the thought persisted, I left for the desert. There I found a sheet of water and an island in the midst, and the animals of the desert came to drink there. In the midst of these animals I saw two naked men, and my body trembled, for I believed they were spirits. Seeing me

shaking, they said to me, "Do not be afraid, for we are men." Then I said to them, "Where do you come from, and how did you come to this desert?" They said, "We come from a monastery and having agreed together, we came here forty years ago. One of us is an Egyptian and the other a Libyan." They questioned me and asked me, "How is the world? Is the water rising in due time? Is the world enjoying prosperity?" I replied it was, then I asked them, "How can I become a monk?" They said to me, "If you do not give up all that is in the world, you cannot become a monk." I said to them, "But I am weak, and I cannot do as you do." So they said to me: "If you cannot become like us, sit in your cell and weep for your sins." I asked them, "When the winter comes are you not frozen? And when the heat comes do not your bodies bum?" They said, "It is God who has made this way of life for us. We do not freeze in winter, and the summer does us no harm." That is why I said that I have not yet become a monk, but I have seen monks.'

3. When Abba *Macarius* dwelt in the great desert, he was the only one living as an anchorite, but lower down there was another desert where several brothers dwelt. The old man was surveying the road when he saw Satan drawing near in the likeness of a man and he passed by his dwelling. He seemed to be wearing some kind of cotton garment, full of holes, and a small flask hung at each hole. The old man said to him, 'Where are you off to?' He said, 'I am going to stir up the memories of the brethren.' The old man said, 'And what is the purpose of these small flasks?' He replied, 'I am taking food for the brethren to taste.' The old man said, 'All those kinds?' He replied, 'Yes, for if a brother does not like one sort of food, I offer him another, and if he does not like the second any better, I offer him a third; and of all these varieties he will like one at least.'

With these words he departed. The old man remained watching the road until he saw him coming back again. When the old man saw him, he said to him: 'Good health to you.' The other replied: 'How can I be in good health?' The old man asked him what he meant, and he replied, 'Because they all opposed me, and no one received me.' The old man said, 'Ah, you did not find any friends down there?' He replied, 'Yes, I have a monk who is a friend down there. He at least obeys me and when he sees me he changes like the wind.'

The old man asked him the name of this monk. '*Theopemptus*,' he replied. With these words he went away. Then Abba *Macarius* got up and went to the desert below his own. When they heard of it the brothers took branches of palm to go to meet him. Each one got ready, thinking that it was to him the old man was coming down. But he enquired which was the one on the mountain called *Theopemptus*, and when he had found out he went to his cell. *Theopemptus* received him with joy. When he was alone with him the old man asked him, 'How are you getting on?' *Theopemptus* replied, 'Thanks to your prayers, all goes well.' The old man asked: 'Do not your thoughts war against you?' He replied: 'Up to now, it is all right,' for he was afraid to admit anything. The old man said to him, 'See how many years I have lived as an ascetic, and am praised by all, and though I am old, the spirit of fornication troubles me.' *Theopemptus* said, 'Believe me, Abba, it is the same with me.' The old man went on admitting that other thoughts still warred against him, until he had brought him to admit them about himself. Then he said, 'How do you fast?' He replied, 'Till the ninth hour.' 'Practise fasting a little later; meditate on the Gospel and the other Scriptures, and if an alien thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards,

and the Lord will come at once to your help.' When he had given the brother this rule, the old man then returned to his solitude. He was watching the road once more when he saw the devil, to whom he said, 'Where are you going this time?' He replied, 'To arouse the memories of the brothers,' and he went away. When he came back the saint asked him, 'How are the brothers?' He replied that it had gone badly. The old man asked him why. He replied, 'They are all obdurate, and the worst is the one friend I had who used to obey me. I do not know what has changed him, but not only does he not obey me any more, but he has become the most obdurate of them all. So I have promised myself not to go down there again at least not for a long time from now.' When he had said this, he went away leaving the old man, and the saint returned to his cell.

4. One day Abba *Macarius* the Great came to Abba Anthony's dwelling on the mountain. When he knocked on the door, Anthony came out to him and said to him, 'Who are you?' He replied, 'I am *Macarius*.' Then Anthony went inside and shut the door leaving him there. Later, seeing his patience, he opened the door and received *Macarius* with joy, saying to him, 'I have wanted to see you for a long time, having heard about you.' He rendered him all the duties of hospitality and made him rest for he was very tired. When evening came, Abba Anthony soaked some palm-leaves for himself, and Abba *Macarius* said to him, 'Allow me to soak some for myself.' He replied: 'Do so.' Having made a large bundle, he soaked them. Then sitting down in the evening they spoke of the salvation of the soul, while they plaited the leaves. The rope which *Macarius* was making hung down through the window in the cave. Going in early, blessed Anthony saw the length of Abba *Macarius*' rope and said, 'Great power comes out of these hands.'

5. Concerning the devastation of *Scetis*, Abba *Macarius* said to the brethren, 'When you see a cell built close to the marsh, know that the devastation of *Scetis* is near; when you see trees, know that it is at the doors; and when you see young children, take up your sheep-skins, and go away.'

6. Again, wishing to comfort the brethren, he said, 'A mother came here with her little child, possessed with a devil, who said to his mother, "Get up, woman, let us go away from here." She replied, "I cannot walk any further," and the little child said to her, "I will carry you myself." I wondered at the devil's tricks and how eager he was to make them flee.'

7. Abba *Sisoës* said, 'When I was at *Scetis* with *Macarius*, we went up, seven of us, to bring in the harvest. Now a widow cried out behind us and would not stop weeping. So the old man called the owner of the field and said to him, "What is the matter with the woman that she goes on weeping?" "It is because her husband received a deposit in trust from someone and he died suddenly without saying where he had hidden it, and the owner of the deposit wants to take her and her children and make slaves of them." The old man said to him, "Tell her to come to us, when we take our mid-day rest." The woman came, and the old man said to her, "Why are you weeping all the time like this?" She replied, "My husband who had received a deposit on trust from someone, has died and he did not say when he died, where he had put it." The old man said to her, "Come, show me where you have buried him." Taking the brethren with him, he went with her. When they had come to the place, the old man said to her, "Go away to your house." While the brethren prayed, the old man asked

the dead man, "So and so, where have you put the deposit?" The corpse replied, "It is hidden in the house, at the foot of the bed." The old man said, "Rest again, until the day of resurrection." When they saw this, the brethren were filled with fear and threw themselves at his feet. But the old man said to them, "It is not for my sake that this has happened, for I am nothing, but it is because of the widow and the orphans that God has performed this miracle. This is what is remarkable, that God wants the soul to be without sin and grants it all it asks." He went to tell the widow where the deposit was. Taking it, she returned it to its owner and thus freed her children. All who heard this story gave glory to God.'

8. Abba Peter said this about the holy Macarius: 'One day he came to the cell of an anchorite who happened to be ill, and he asked him if he would take something to eat, though his cell was stripped bare. When the other replied, "Some sherbet," that courageous man did not hesitate, but went as far as Alexandria to fetch some for the sick man. The astonishing thing is that no-one knew about it.'

9. He also said that when Abba Macarius received all the brethren in simplicity, some of them asked him why he mixed with them like this. He replied, 'For twelve years I served the Lord, so that he might grant me this gift, and do you all advise me to give it up?'

10. They said about Abba Macarius that when he visited the brethren he laid this rule upon himself, 'If there is wine, drink some for the brethren's sake, but for each cup of wine, spend a day without drinking water.' So the brothers would offer him some refreshment, and the old man would accept it joyfully to mortify himself; but when his disciple got to know

about it he said to the brethren, 'In the name of God, do not offer him any more, or he will go and kill himself in his cell.' When they heard that, the brethren did not offer him wine any more.

11. When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm-leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The latter struck at him as much as he pleased, but in vain, and he said to him, 'What is your power, Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too; you fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all; in one thing only do you beat me.' Abba Macarius asked what that was. He said, 'Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you.'

12. Some Fathers questioned Abba Macarius the Egyptian, 'Why is it that whether you eat, or whether you fast, your body is always emaciated?' The old man said to them, 'The little bit of wood that is used to poke the vine branches when they are burning ends by being entirely burnt up by the fire; in the same way, man purifies his soul in the fear of God, and the fear of God bums up his body.'

13. One day Abba Macarius went up from Scetis to *Terenuthis* and went into the temple to sleep. Now there were some old coffins of the pagans there. Taking one, he put it under his head as a pillow. The devils, seeing his audacity, were filled with jealousy and to make him afraid they called out, as though addressing a woman, 'So and so, come to bath with us.' Another devil replied from beneath him, as though among the dead, 'I have a stranger on top of me, and I cannot come.' But the old man was not afraid. On the contrary, he knocked on the coffin with assurance, saying, 'Awake, and go into the darkness, if you can.'

Hearing this, the devils began to cry out with all their might, 'You have overcome us. 'Filled with confusion, they fled.

14. It was said of Abba Macarius the Egyptian that one day when he was going up from Scetis with a load of baskets, he sat down, overcome with weariness and began to say to himself, 'My God, you know very well that I cannot go any further,' and immediately he found himself at the river.

15. A man of Egypt had a paralytic son. He brought him to the cell of Abba Macarius, and put him down at the door weeping and went a good distance away. The old man stooped down and saw the child, and said to him, 'Who brought you here?' He replied, 'My father threw me down here and went away.' Then the old man said to him, 'Get up, and go back to him.' The child was cured on the spot; he got up and rejoined his father and they returned to their own home.

16. Abba Macarius the Great said to the brothers at Scetis? when he dismissed the assembly, 'Flee, my brothers.' One of the old men asked him, 'Where could we flee to beyond this desert?' He put his finger on his lips and said, 'Flee that,' and he went into his cell, shut the door and sat down.

17. The same Abba Macarius said, 'If you reprove someone, you yourself get carried away by anger and you are satisfying your own passion; do not lose yourself, therefore, in order to save another.'

18. The same Abba Macarius while he was in Egypt discovered a man who owned a beast of burden engaged in

plundering Macarius' goods. So he came up to the thief as if he was a stranger and he helped him to load the animal. He saw him off in great peace of soul, saying, 'We have brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.' (1 Tim. 6.7) 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' (Job 1.2 1)

19. Abba Macarius was asked, 'How should one pray?' The old man said, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, "Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer say, "Lord, help!" He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.'

20. Abba Macarius said, 'If slander has become to you the same as praise, poverty as riches, deprivation as abundance, you will not die. Indeed it is impossible for anyone who firmly believes, who labours with devotion, to fall into the impurity of the passions and be led astray by the demons.'

21. It was said that two brothers at Scetis had fallen into sin and that Abba Macarius of Alexandria had excommunicated them. Some brethren came and told Abba Macarius the Great of Egypt about it. He said, 'It is not the brothers who are excommunicated; it is Macarius (for he loved him).' Hearing that the old man had excommunicated him, Abba Macarius fled to the marsh. Then Abba Macarius the Great went out and found him eaten up by mosquitoes. He said to him, 'So you have excommunicated some brothers; and yet they live apart in the village. I myself have excommunicated you and like a pretty young girl to the utmost privacy of her chamber, you have fled here. I have summoned the two brothers, and have learnt from them what

happened, and I have told them nothing has happened. Examine yourself, then, my brother, and see if you have not been the sport of the demons, for you have lacked perception in this matter. But repent of your fault.' Then the other asked him, 'Please give me a penance. 'Faced with his humility, the old man said, 'Go, fast for three weeks, eating only once a week.' For it was his usual custom to fast for the whole week.

22. Abba Moses said to Abba Macarius at Scetis, 'I should like to live in quiet prayer and the brethren do not let me.' Abba Macarius said to him, 'I see that you are a sensitive man and incapable of sending a brother away. Well, if you want to live in peace, go to the interior desert, to Petra, and there you will be at peace.' And so he found peace.

23. A brother came to see Abba Macarius the Egyptian, and said to him, 'Abba, give me a word, that I may be saved.' So the old man said, 'Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead.' The brother went there, abused them and threw stones at them; then he returned and told the old man about it. The latter said to him, 'Didn't they say anything to you?' He replied, 'No.' The old man said, 'Go back tomorrow and praise them.' So the brother went away and praised them, calling them, 'Apostles, saints and righteous men.' He returned to the old man and said to him, 'I have complimented them'. And the old man said to him, 'Did they not answer you?' The brother said no. The old man said to him, 'You know how you insulted them and they did not reply, and how you praised them and they did not speak; so you too if you wish to be saved must do the same and become a dead man. Like the dead, take no account of either the scorn of men or their praises, and you can be saved.'

24. One day when Abba Macarius was going down to Egypt with some brethren, he heard a boy saying to his mother, 'Mother, there is a rich man who likes me, but I detest him; and on the other hand, there is a poor man who hates me, and I love him.' Hearing these words, Abba Macarius marvelled. So the brethren said to him: 'What is this saying, Abba, that makes you marvel?' The old man said to them, 'Truly, our Lord is rich and loves us, and we do not listen to him; while our enemy the devil is poor and hates us, but we love his impurity.'

## **ABBA MOSES**

---

*Moses, called the Robber or the Negro, was a released slave who lived as a robber in Nitria; late in life he became a monk and was trained by Isidore the Priest. He was ordained priest and became one of the great fathers of Scetis. On the advice of Macarius he retired to Petra; he was martyred with seven others by barbarian invaders.*

1. It happened that Abba Moses was struggling with the temptation of fornication. Unable to stay any longer in the cell, he went and told Abba *Isidore*. The old man exhorted him to return to his cell. But he refused, saying, 'Abba, I cannot.' Then Abba *Isidore* took Moses out onto the terrace and said to him, 'Look towards the west.' He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. Then Abba *Isidore* said to him, 'Look towards the east.' He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba *Isidore* said, 'See, these are sent by the Lord to the saints to bring them help, while those in the west fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are.' Then Abba Moses, gave thanks to God, plucked up courage and returned to his cell.

2. A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba 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 ran 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.

3. Another day when a council was being held in Scetis, the Fathers treated Moses with contempt in order to test him, saying, 'Why does this black man come among us?' When he heard this he kept silence. When the council was dismissed, they said to him, 'Abba, did that not grieve you at all? 'He said to them, 'I was grieved, but I kept silence.'

4. It was said of Abba Moses that he was ordained and the ephod was placed upon him. The archbishop said to him, 'See, Abba Moses, now you are entirely white.' The old man said to him, 'It is true of the outside, lord and father, but what about Him who sees the inside?' Wishing to test him the archbishop said to the priests, 'When Abba Moses comes into the sanctuary, drive him out, and go with him to hear what he says.' So the old man came in and they covered him with abuse, and drove him out, saying, 'Outside, black man!' Going out, he said to himself, 'They have acted rightly concerning you, for your skin is as black as ashes. You are not a man so why should you be allowed to meet men?'

5. Once the order was given at Scetis, 'Fast the week.' Now it happened that some brothers came from Egypt to visit Abba Moses and he cooked something for them. Seeing some smoke, the neighbours said to the ministers, 'Look, Moses has broken the commandment and has cooked something in his cell.' The ministers said, 'When he comes, we will speak to him ourselves.' When the Saturday came, since they knew Abba Moses' remarkable way of life, the

ministers said to him in front of everyone, 'O Abba Moses, you did not keep the commandment of men, but it was so that you might keep the commandment of God.'

6. A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.'

7. Abba Moses said, 'The man who flees and lives in solitude is like a bunch of grapes ripened by the sun, but he who remains amongst men is like an unripe grape.'

8. The magistrate heard about Abba Moses one day and he went to Scetis to see him. They told the old man. He got up and fled to the marsh. Some people met him and said to him, 'Old man, tell us where the cell of Abba Moses is.' He said to them, 'What do you want with him? He is a fool.' So the magistrate went back to the church and said to the ministers, 'I heard people talk about Abba Moses and I went to see him, but there was an old man going into Egypt who crossed our path and we asked him where Abba Moses' cell is, and he said to us , "What do you want with him? He is a fool."' When they heard this, the clergy were offended and said, 'What kind of an old man was it who spoke like that about the holy man to you?' He said, 'An old man wearing old clothes, a big black man.' They said, 'It was Abba Moses himself and it was in order not to meet you that he said that.' The magistrate went away greatly edified.

9. At Scetis Abba Moses used to say, 'If we keep the commandments of our Fathers, I will answer for it on God's behalf that the barbarians will not come here. But if we do not keep the commandments of God, this place will be devastated.'

10. One day, when the brethren were sitting beside him, he said to them, 'Look, the barbarians are coming to Scetis today; get up and flee.' They said to him, 'Abba, won't you flee too?' He said to them, 'As for me, I have been waiting for this day for many years, that the word of the Lord Christ may be fulfilled which says, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."' (Matt. 26.52) They said to him, 'We will not flee either, but we will die with you.' He said to them: 'That is nothing to do with me; let everyone decide for himself whether he stops or not.' Now there were seven brothers there and he said to them, 'Look, the barbarians are drawing near to the door.' They came in and slew them. But one fled and hid under the cover of a pile of rope and he saw seven crowns descending and crowning them.

11. A brother questioned Abba Moses saying, 'I see something in front of me and I am not able to grasp it.' The old man said to him, 'If you do not become dead like those who are in the tomb, you will not be able to grasp it.'

12. Abba *Poemen* said that a brother asked Abba Moses how someone could consider himself as dead towards his neighbour. The old man said to him, 'If a man does not think in his heart that he is already three days dead and in the tomb, he cannot attain this saying.'

## **ABBA SERAPION**

---

1. One day Abba *Serapion* passed through an Egyptian village and there he saw a courtesan who stayed in her own cell. The old man said to her, 'Expect me this evening, for I should like to come and spend the night with you.' She replied, 'Very well, Abba.' She got ready and made the bed. When evening came, the old man came to see her and entered her cell and said to her, 'Have you got the bed ready?' She said, 'Yes, Abba.' Then he closed the door and said to her, 'Wait a bit, for we have a rule of prayer and I must fulfil that first.' So the old man began his prayers. He took the Psalter and at each psalm he said a prayer for the courtesan, begging God that she might be converted and saved, and God heard him. The woman stood trembling and praying beside the old man. When he had completed the whole Psalter the woman fell to the ground. Then the old man, beginning the Epistle, read a great deal from the apostle and completed his prayers. The woman was filled with compunction and understood that he had not come to see her to commit sin but to save her soul and she fell at his feet, saying, 'Abba, do me this kindness and take where I can please God.' So the old man took her to a monastery of virgins and entrusted her to the Amma and he said, 'Take this sister and do not put any yoke or commandment on her as on the other sisters, but if she wants something, give it her and allow her to walk as she wishes.' After some days the courtesan said, 'I am a sinner; I wish to eat every second day.' A little later she said, 'I have committed many sins and I wish to eat every fourth day.' A few days later she besought the Amma saying, 'Since I have grieved God

greatly by my sins, do me the kindness of putting me in a cell and shutting it completely and giving me a little bread and some work through the window. 'The Amma did so and the woman pleased God all the rest of her life.

2. A brother said to Abba *Serapion*, 'Give me a word.' The old man said to him, 'What shall I say to you? You have taken the living of the widows and orphans and put it on your shelves.' For he saw them full of books.

3. Abba *Serapion* said, 'When the soldiers of the emperor are standing at attention, they cannot look to the right or left; it is the same for the man who stands before God and looks towards him in fear at all times; he cannot then fear anything from the enemy.'

4. A brother went to find Abba *Serapion*. According to his custom, the old man invited him to say a prayer. But the other, calling himself a sinner and unworthy of the monastic habit, did not obey. Next Abba *Serapion* wanted to wash his feet, but using the same words again, the visitor prevented him. Then Abba *Serapion* made him eat and he began to eat with him. Then he admonished him saying, 'My son, if you want to make progress stay in your cell and pay attention to yourself and your manual work; going out is not so profitable for you as remaining at home.' When he heard these words the visitor was offended and his expression changed so much that the old man could not but notice it. So he said to him, 'UP to now you have called yourself a sinner and accused yourself of being unworthy to live, but when I admonished you lovingly, you were extremely put out. If you want to be humble, learn to bear generously what others unfairly inflict upon you and do not harbour empty

words in your heart.' Hearing this, the brother asked the old man s forgiveness and went away greatly edified.

## **GLOSSARY**

---

**ACCIDIE:** despondency, depression, listlessness, a distaste for life without any specific reason.

**AGAPE:** the primary meaning is 'love'. In the Apophthegmata it is also used to mean the meal taken in common after the celebration of the Liturgy. The Agape can, however, also refer to the Liturgy itself. It is also used in these writings to mean a love gift, or a loan.

**APATHEIA:** the state of being unmoved by passion; this involves control of the passions rather than their destruction.

**APOPTHHEGM:** the memorable saying of an 'old man'. 'Give me a word' is a key phrase in the desert tradition. The 'word' is not an explanation or a consoling suggestion; it is a word given in order to create life and bring the one who receives it to God and salvation. It is a word that is truly life-giving if it is not discussed or argued over, but simply received and integrated into life. These apophthegms were always given to individuals to fit their own needs and circumstances and this should be remembered when using a collection such as this.

**CELL:** a hut or cave where the monk lives alone or with a disciple. These buildings were scattered about the desert out of earshot of each other. A group of such cells is called a lavra.

**CENOBIUM:** a monastery where monks or nuns live the common life.

**HESYCHIA:** stillness, quiet, tranquillity. This is the central consideration in the prayer of the desert Fathers. On the external level it signifies an individual living as a solitary; on a deeper level it is not merely separation from noise and speaking with other people, but the possession of interior quiet and peace. Thus it is possible to use the term of many who do not actually live the hermit life. It means more specifically guarding the mind, constant remembrance of God, and the possession of inner prayer. Hesychasm is the general term and hesychast is the noun used to describe the person seeking to follow this way of prayer. **METANOIA:** repentance, interior sorrow for sin. It also means the action by which such sorrow is expressed, usually a prostration. It is also used of a deep bow which is a means of greeting someone with respect. It has in later writings the meaning of conversion of life, and particularly the conversion of monastic life.

**MELOTE:** sheepskin. A monastic cloak made of sheepskin, also used as a blanket for the monk to sleep on. It could be used for carrying a monk's few possessions.

**OLD MAN:** *Geron* in Greek, *Pater* in Latin (hence *gerontikon* or *paterikon* for collections of the Sayings of Old Men). It is the name given to monks who are recognized as being spiritually gifted.

**SYNAXIS:** the liturgical office said by monks in common, usually on Saturday and Sunday. It is also used here of the individual rule of prayer which a solitary follows.

**WORK:** used in the Apophthegmata in two senses: either as manual labour, or as spiritual exertion. These two are seen as one, but the idea of interior 'work' predominates for the monk.