



THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH
as
AN ASCETIC CHURCH



FR. TADROS Y. MALATY

Egyptian Monasticism

Monasticism & Martyrdom:

Monasticism is “Egypt’s greatest gift to the world” and one of the sweetest fruits we have obtained from the persecution era against the Egyptian Church. Eusebius states the many Christians fled from the populated parts of Egypt to the surrounding deserts the persecution ceased but they preferred to settle there permanently to lead an angelic life, devoting themselves to prayer and praising God as monks.

On the other hand, every time any wave of persecution was quietened, some Christians who longed for crowns of martyrdom, fled to the desert as if it were an arena of martyrdom, subjecting themselves a daily mortification and self denial. No wonder our deserts were peopled by numerous hermits in the fourth century, when the peace of church was established. Instead of the “blood of martyrdom” they submitted themselves to a “martyrdom of conscience”, which consisted of a struggle against demons, carnal desires and other sins.

For example, St. Anthony the Great, the father of monasticism desired to be martyred, but as God did not plan to be so, he suffered the “martyrdom of conscience”, as St. Athanasius states. “When the persecution finally ceased and Bishop Peter of blessed memory had suffered martyrdom, he left (Alexandria) and went back to his solitary cell, and there he was a daily martyr his conscience constantly fighting battles of faith. For he practiced a zealous and more intense ascetic life...”

Even in the second century amidst the severe waves of persecutions. Clement of Alexandria and Origen spoke about asceticism as a daily practice of martyrdom.

At the end of his “Exhortation”, Origen raises the question: What is it for us to be prepared for martyrdom, if in the end; martyrdom is not imposed on us? He does not hesitate to say that, if the preparation has been fervent enough, it could be a true unbloody martyrdom. The same teaching is often formulated by St. Cyprian .But already St. Clement of Alexandria

had not hesitated to say that everyone could make his death martyrdom provided that he prepared for it with the fitting dispositions. He states: (If martyrdom consists of confessing God, every person who conducts himself with purity in the knowledge of God, who obeys the commandments, is a martyr in his life and in his words.)

St. Cyprian the Martyr, states that church is beautiful by two ways of martyrdom. It is obtained in periods of persecution, while the white or green martyrdom in the periods of peace.

It is worthy to note that while the whole church in the fourth century was in danger of secularization, for Christianity had been adopted as the state religion and the Emperor's palace was opened widely to the clergymen, the Egyptian Church attracted the whole church towards the desert, i.e. towards the inner life, to practice heavenly life, despising every earthly glory.

MONASTICISM & THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ATTITUDE:

It is not without cause that the monastic movement started in Egypt, for the Egyptian church was and still has a strong eschatological attitude, not only in her worship but in all aspects of her life. Due to this attitude many believers fled to the deserts not to escape from their responsibilities, but rather to struggle against darkness in order to discover the kingdom of God that dwells within their hearts. They became monks for one purpose, to attain the heavenly kingdom, which is not far from them. Fr Isaac the Syrian says "if you are pure, heaven is within you, within yourself you will see the angles and the Lord of angels". And of St. Pachomius it is recorded, "In the purity of his heart he saw the Invisible God as in a mirror"

The chronicles frequently describe the lives of the desert fathers as a paradise. And indeed the anchorites attempted to become as innocent as Adam, by the elimination of all vices and passions. To carry the analogy further, some of them received their food from an angel or a bird. The wild beasts obeyed them. The desert was not only a restoration of the original paradise, but also an anticipation of the future one. In a sense, the monks lived both before and after history, that is, removed from the temporal

World of sin, living in the presence of Christ whom they saw spiritually and conversed with⁷.

On hearing of the Egyptian hermits, one of the Gaulians (of France) said,” We Gaul ought not to be forced to live like angels⁸”St. John Cassian who visited Egypt described the Egyptian monks as heavenly men or angels living on earth.

A BIBLICAL REALITY:

The beginning of the monastic movement is intimately connected with the history of biblical asceticism, which was inherent in Christian teaching since early time. Whereas at the start individual asceticism was practiced without involving separation from home and family or absence from the Church community and city life, the representatives of the monastic movement retired from the world and sought silence and solitude away from human habitation⁹.

Monastic life in its essence is an evangelic life. For the Gospel advises us, for what does man profit, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?! “Mat. 16:26. In other words, one thing has supreme value for the believer: the soul, besides which the whole world is insignificant¹⁰. Monasticism stresses the same idea.

St. Anthony, the Patriarch (father) of monastic life, inspired this way of life within the church, on hearing the words of the Gospel, “ Go sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come, follow me... “He devoted all his life not to create a new method of life, nor to teach others ascetic life, but to fulfill the Gospel’s commandment. Usually his spiritual life possessed nothing except the Gospel, written not on papers but within his soul.

It is noteworthy that the ascetic practices of those Egyptian monks were not an end in themselves. Their deep desire was to die to themselves, to their “old man ‘~, so that the “ new man “, who is the dwelling of Christ Himself would be free in them. Asceticism is an exercise not only to control the body but rather to awaken the spirit to be fully receptive to the Divine Logos, completely ready to follow Christ at the first suggestion and to practice deep unity with Him. For this reason, we hear of one of the Egyptian fathers who told St. Cassian: “Excessive fasting brings about the same evil as gluttony

If we go back to the Jewish monastic movement at Qumran, on the shores of the Dead Sea (200 B.C - 200 AD.), we can say it was also biblical, based on Isaiah 40:3. They went to the desert to prepare the way of “Him “as it is written: “ In the wilderness prepare the way ... make straight in the desert a highway for our God 12’7 In their desert retreat, the Jewish monks hoped not only to escape the wickedness of Jerusalem but also pursued a most perfect observance of the law of Moses and strict levitical purity. “ To seek God with all their heart and all their soul and do what is right and good before Him, as He commanded by hand of Moses and all his servants the prophets¹³ “.

MONASTICISM & CHRISTIAN LIFE:

Jesus’ advice to the wealthy young man to sell all that he possessed, give to the poor and to follow Him (Mk. 10:21; Mt. 19:21; Lk. 18:22) was to become the hall mark of Christian monasticism. The life of our Lord Jesus Himself was a model of chastity, poverty and obedience to the Father, the principal basis of monasticism.

In fact “monastic life ‘ in the early ages was just a perfect Christian life. The monk lived in the desert, far away from the cares of business, family and from any clerical function. It was a lay Christian movement. Even the coenobitic movement aimed to create a typical Christian family, without any interference in the clerical ministry.

MONASTICISM & PHILOSOPHY:

The founders of Egyptian monasticism were not philosophers of the Hellenistic world, but they were simple believers, untouched by Greek ideas. They preferred to be absorbed in practising the Lord’s commandments than to be engaged into philosophical ideas and arguments. But through their simplicity they attracted many philosophers to throw down all their philosophical experiences and to start their lives as pupils of those simple monks.

St. Arsanius, the Philosopher and tutor to the princes Arcadius and Honorius, who lived in the palace of the Emperor Theodosius I, went to Scetis (in Wadi-El-Natroun), to live as a monk, guided by the counsels of those simple monks.

Someone asked St. Arsanius, “Abba Arsanius, 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 peasant¹⁴ “.

St. Arsanius also said,” We indeed get nothing from our secular education, but these Egyptian peasants acquire the virtues by hard work¹⁵ ~‘.

As a natural reaction some of the monks were bitter enemies to Origen, and played a serious role in the problem of Organism.

Gradually, the monks became more sympathetic towards philosophical education.

MONASTICISM & CHRISTIAN LITERATURE:

Although the monks were not interested in writings, but the monastic movement created a certain type of Christian literature: monastic rules, ascetical treatises, collections of spiritual sayings of the Desert Fathers, hagiographic and edifying writings.

The more important ascetic writings are:

1. **The “Apophthegmata Patrum “**, i.e. the” Sayings of the Fathers “. This literature grew up in the fourth century among the monks in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, first in the oral form, then in written memorials of the tradition, in Coptic, Syriac and Greek, and later in Latin. The words and deeds of the pioneers of monasticism and of other celebrated spiritual teachers were recorded for the edification of later generations of monks¹⁶.

It is broadly divided into different modes of arrangement: by alphabetical order of the names of the speakers, and by smaller collections of different subjects.

No document brings us nearer to the earliest monks than these sayings. No other source is quite so alive¹⁷.

2. **The” Historia Monachorum “**: It is biographical in form. It purports to record an expedition by seven visitors to see the hermits; and the date of the expedition purports to be about 394-5 A.D. The author claims to be

one of the seven visitors. The Latin text claims to be by the hand of Refines, but he was certainly not one of a party of visitors to Egypt in that date. Many manuscripts, including the Sync, attribute it, but very doubtfully to St. Jerome¹⁸.

3. “Biographies: These are divided into two groups: biographies of individual hermits and collections of short biographies. We have biographies of St. Anthony (written by St. Athanasius), St. Paul the Hermit, St. Pachomius with Theodore, St. Shenouda etc

4. “Lausaic History” of Palladius, bishop of Helenopolis, composed in 419/420 A.D., a source for the history of the monks. It gives a strong impression of being by the hand of one who knew some of the people of whom he wrote. In some manuscripts it is headed: “The Life of the Holy Fathers “. At quite an early period it was called “Paradise of the Fathers “, but the word “ Paradise “ became a Greek word for any description of the Egyptian monks¹⁹.

5. The books of ethical divinity, such as those of Evagrius and St. John Cassian for the study of the early Egyptian monks. These books aim to help monks to practise a virtuous and contemplative life.

FORMS OF MONASTICISM:

Monasticism took three chief forms, all of which had appeared in Egypt in the third and fourth centuries, and all of which are still to be found in our Church today.

1. The Monachism:

The anchorites or hermits lived in complete isolation, and only when they needed a counsel did they visit the “ abbot “. Each hermit organized his own prayer, clothing, food and work.

Some hermits entered into the inner deserts and settled there for tens of years, seeing no human being. St. Mary of Egypt is one of the few women who behaved thus and is considered as one of those hermits who are called Pilgrims “, for they usually had no certain cells but lived homeless, wandering in the wilderness.

2.The Cenobitic System:

Under this system, founded by St. Pachomius in Upper Egypt, the monks lived in a community inside the walls of the monastery, in association with each other, and governed by an abbot and by rules. Even through this system Christian monasticism never lost its yearning for monarchical seclusion).

3.The Communal System; or Semi-eremitic life. It is a middle way between monarchical and the cenobitic system. The mode of St. Anthony's life described by St. Athanasius was really semi-eremitic in character, for the monks lived in separate caves or cells and assembled occasionally for divine service or spiritual conferences. Thus, St. Anthony prepared the way to the communal order.

In Nitria and Scetis the communal order was established by St. Amoun and St. Macanus the Great. There, the ascetics lived not in absolute isolation, but in cells built as such a distance that they could neither see nor hear one another.they gathered for common prayer on Saturdays and Sundays.

THE DEVELOPEMENT OF THE MONASTIC FORMS

Undoubtedly the various monastic forms or orders did not appear according to previous church plan, but they came to light as a natural love flamed highly in the hearts of many early Christians.

1.In the Apostolic age, many believers practised asceticism, seeking the perfection of the Gospel. They prevented themselves from every earthly pleasure, but without withdrawal from their family or community.

2.The eschatological attitude of the church flamed the believers' longing for their Bridegrooms's advent. On this account some believers preferred to live in virginity and devote all their time to worshipping, as a spiritual preparation for the heavenly wedding feast. In the gospel and in St. Paul, both exalting the positive Christian value of marriage, virginity also finds its first justification, as an effort to realize immediately and totally the reality that marriage offers an image and a partial realization, the union of Christ and the Church, of the Word of God and the human race redeemed from sin by the cross of our Lord Jesus²⁰.

In the second century, Christian virgins were to be seen in Smyrna and Corinth, walking in the liturgical processions behind the clergy, and in front of the widows. Many communities of virgins were found in Alexandria and many towns in the world from the second century. Treatises concerning virginity represented a vital part of the writings of the Fathers through out the first three centuries.

3. Some virgins and ascetics felt that they were in need not only to live as virgins and had no family responsibilities, but also a certain spiritual atmosphere. Women lived together in a house to assist each other spiritually. Men preferred to leave the cities and live in simple huts in villages. They were called “ uiro~Xatot “- devotees -, as the wordCmonk~was unknown.

St. Anthony’s sister was admitted to a community of virgins “ Parthenon “, while he himself lived at first in a hut near the Nile.

Some Christians felt thirsty towards the angelic life, escaping to the deserts. As an example, under the reign of Emperor Antonius Pius (138-161) a certain Frontonius decided to reject the world and was able to persuade seventy others to follow him to the desert²¹. St. Paul, the First Hermit, lived in the desert more than ninety years (c. 25Q - c. 341 A.D), but it was St. Anthony the Great who is considered the father of the monastic family, for the following reasons:

A. His intimate relation with the leaders of the church opened the gates of the Church towards monasticism. Some of those leaders were St. Athanasius, and St. Didymus the dean of the School...

B. After about twenty years of complete isolation, his cave was opened not only to those who longed for the monastic life, but also to the Greek philosophers and to the rulers... On this account St. Hilarion of Palestine said to him, “ Peace to you, pillar of light, giving light to the world²² “.

C. He was an active member of the Church. Besides his unceasing prayers on behalf of the whole Church, he visited Alexandria in the period of persecution to serve and encourage the confessors in the court, and assisted St. Athanasius in his struggle against Arianism.

4. While the “ anchoric “ order was flourishing, the hermits themselves were aware that it was not fit for all those who desired the monastic life.

Moreover, these ways of life had its disadvantages, for some ascetics exaggerated in their ascetic practices and were misguided. Anyhow, these feelings led to the appearance of the two other monastic forms: the Communal and the Cenobitic.

THE INTEGRATION OF THE THREE MONASTIC FORMS:

The appearance of these different forms of monasticism opened the way to angelic life before many believers, every one chose the form that fitted his character and abilities.

It is worthy to note that the pioneers of these forms were not prejudiced to their own orders, but praised other orders.

St. Anthony the anchorite, in his speech to Zechaeus, one of St. Pachomius disciples, praises the cenobitic order, saying that it was inspired by God, and that he was pleased with it. He added, “ All of you are become as abba Pachomius. I tell you, it was a great ministry he undertook in the assemblage of so many brethren, and he goes the way of the Apostles²³

St. Pachomius - a younger contemporary of St. Anthony - opened his monasteries to the hermits who lived in the deserts of his area. He had many discussions with them concerning spiritual life.

He also praises St. Anthony as the perfect pattern of the anchoretic life, saying:

In our generation in Egypt I see three chapter-heads given increase by God for profit to all who understand:

The bishop Athanasius, Christ’s champion of the faith even unto death, and the holy Abba Anthony, perfect pattern of the anchoretic life and this community, which is the type for all who desire to gather souls according to God, to take care of them until they become perfect²⁴ “.

The founders of the communal order were in close contact with St. Anthony, and encouraged some of their disciples to live as anchors. They also were in contact with the Pachomian monasteries. St. Macanus of Alexandria visited St. Pachomius and remained in his monastery of Tabennisi for forty days.

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1 - ST. PAUL OF THEBES

St. Paul of Thebes is considered the first hermit. In the year 374 or 375 A.D. St. Jerome wrote his biography depending on Amathus and Macanus, Disciples of St. Anthony, the first of these buried his master¹.

St. Paul a native of the lower Thebaid in Egypt was highly skilled in both Greek and Egyptian learning. Being about sixteen years old, he came into a rich inheritance, upon the death of his parents. During the persecution of Decius (250 A.D.) the young~ man fled to the desert, as his brother-in-law threatened to betray him. After the persecution ceased, he so enjoyed by his life of solitude and contemplation that he remained there until his death, about the year 341 A.D.

ST. ANTHONY'S VISIT

When the blessed Paul, already one hundred and thirteen years² old, was leading a heavenly life on earth, and Anthony at the age fo ninety was dwelling in another place of solitude the thought occured to the latter that no other monk more perfect than himself had settled in the desert. However, in the stillness of the night it was revealed to him that another one more worthy than he dwelt in the deeper recesses of the desert and that he ought to go out and visit him.

At the break of dawn, the venerable old man, supporting his weak legs with a sturdy staff, without delay started to go - whither he did not know...

Through the divine Providence, St. Anthony reached the cave of St. Paul after a couple of days. There he found a spring of water and two palm-trees, but the door was already closed. St. Anthony sank to the ground in front of the door and lay there until the sixth hour or longer, begging and imploring for admition, saying

“Who I am, whence, and why I come, you know.
I know that I am unworthy to behold you,
nevertheless, I will not go away until I see you.
You welcome beasts, why do you refuse a man?
I asked, and I have found;

I knock that it may be opened to me.
But if I do not succeed, I will die here before your door.
Certainly, then, you will bury me when I am dead...

A HOLY MEETING

As St. Anthony stood unmoved, the door was opened, and the blessed Paul welcomed him with tears of joy. They embraced each other, greeted one another by name and joined in thanksgiving to God.

After the holy kiss, the blessed Paul sat down beside St. Anthony and said:

“Behold the man whom you have sought with so much fatigue, his limbs decayed with age, his gray hair unkempt.

Behold you see a man soon to return to dust. But, truly “ Love endures all things “
1 Cor. 13:7.

Tell me, therefore, I pray you, how fares the human race?.. Are new homes springing up in the ancient cities? What government directs the world?

Are there still some who are ensnared by the horror of demons?

THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE

While they were speaking about God’s wonderful works until the sunset, a raven alighted upon a branch of a tree gently swooping down and laid a whole loaf of bread before them.

See “, said the blessed Paul, “ the Lord, truly loving, truly merciful, has sent us our meal.

For many years, I have always received a half of a loaf every day.

Now, in honour of your arrival, Christ has doubled the rations of His soldiers ...

A dispute arose as to who should break the bread? The blessed Paul, as host urged St. Anthony, while the later felt that St. Paul had the right to break the bread because of his seniority. At length it was arranged that each would seize the loaf on the side nearest to himself, pull towards him and keep for his own the part left in his hands. This traditions is still alive

in the Coptic Church when the clergy receive a piece of the holy bread (eulogiun).

ST. PAUL'S REQUEST

On the third day St. Paul spoke to St. Anthony thus:

I knew long since, brother, that you were dwelling in these regions; for a long time, God had promised you to me for a companion.

Since the hour of my falling asleep now draws night ; and because I have always longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ (Phil 1:23), having finished my course, and there remains for me a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:7,8). Therefore, you have been sent by the Lord to bury my poor body, yea to return earth to earth “.

On hearing this, St. Antony with tears and groans, implored him not to forsake him, but to accept him as a companion on that journey.

His friend answered.: “ You ought not seek you own interests (Phil 2:21) but those of others.

It is indeed expedient for you to lay aside the burden of the flesh and to follow the Lamb (Rev 14:4), but it is also expedient for the rest of your brethren that they may be more instructed by your example.

I pray you, hasten, if it is not too much to ask you to bring me back the cloak that Bishop Athanasius gave you, to wrap my poor body.

St. Jerome, the historian of the blessed Paul, comments that this holy man asked this favour not because he cared much whether his poor corpse was clothed or naked, but because he wanted to spare St. Anthony the grief of witnessing his death.

St. Anthony was astonished to find that St. Paul had heard of St. Athanasius and his cloak, for he entered the desert in the reign of Pope Dionysius the 14th.

Then weeping silently, St. Antony once more kissed the eyes and hands of the blessed Paul and set out on his return to his monastery.

As he reached his dwelling place, two disciples who had been serving him

for some time hurried out to meet him and inquired, “ What delayed you for so long, father?

Woe to me a sinner “, he replied, “ I do not deserve the name of monk! I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, and I have really seen Paul in Paradise! “

Then he closed his lips, beat upon his breast, and brought out the cloak from his cell. When his disciples asked him to explain the matter more fully he said, “ There is a time to keep silent, and a time to speak ~‘.

He then went out without taking even a little food, and returned the same way he came, longing for him alone, thirsting to see him, having eyes and thoughts for none but him.

On his way, St. Anthony saw St. Paul, shining in snowy witeness, ascend to Paradise amid a host of angels and the choirs of prophets and apostles, Immediately, St. Anthony fell on his face, threw sand upon his head, groaned and wept,

“Why do you cast me from you, Paul?

Why do you go without a farewell?

Have you made yourself known so late only to depart so soon?

St. Anthony traversed the rest of the way with such great speed that he seemed like a bird flying. Justly so, for, when he entered the cave, he found the lifeless body in a kneeling position with his head erect and hands raised towards heaven. At first, thinking that he was alive, he began to pray by his side, but when he did not hear the sighs which usually come from one in prayer, he fell upon his face, weeping, for he realized that even the lifeless body of the saint rendered by its attitude dutiful homage to God unto whom all creatures live (Rome 4:8).

HIS BURIAL

Having wrapped up the body and carried it out beyond the entrance, chanting hymns and psalms, St. Anthony began to lament that He had no implement for digging the ground. While he was thinking of this matter, two lions came rushing from the wilderness .When he first saw them, he was frightened, but turning his thoughts to God, he waited without alarm, as if he was looking at doves. They came straight to the corpse of the saint,

Stopped short, wagging their tails, and dropped down at his feet roaring aloud as if to make it known that they were mourning in the only way possible to them. Then they began to scratch the ground with their paws vigorously scooping away the sand, they dug out a space that would hold the corpse of the blessed man. Straightaway, they picked up their ears, lowered their heads and came to St. Anthony and began to lick his hands and feet as if they were begging for a blessing from him. He buried the blessed body.

On the next day St. Anthony left the cave, held St. Paul's tunic which, in the manner of plaited basket, the holy man had woven for himself from the leaves of the palm Athanasius used to wear this tunic on the solemn feasts of Easter and Pentecost

Through this story which was told by St. Jerome, we can say that St. Anthony, as the father of monastic family received the blessing of the complete eremitic. Life from the blessed hermit to deposit it within his monk's heart. Again as the heavenly creatures and departed faithful sent their representatives angels and apostles to venerate this saintly life on the departure of St. Paul the visible church also sent St. Anthony for the same reason

2- ST. ANTHONY

St. Anthony, generally considered the Patriarch (father) of the monastic family, was born about 251 A.D., of well-to-do parents in Coma (Kemn-el-Arouse) in Middle Egypt.

He was eighteen years of age when his parents died, leaving him guardian of his younger and only sister, called Diou. One day, about six months later when he entered the church he was struck by the reading of the Gospel in which our Lord speaks to the rich young man, "If you would be perfect, go sell all you have, give to the poor and come, follow me" (Mat. 19:21). He took this advice seriously, as a personal invitation addressed to him by God.

He sold about 300 acres of fertile land, gave most of it to the poor keeping back only a little for his sister. Placing his sister in the charge of a community of virgins, he was now free to devote his life to asceticism under the guidance of a holy man living near Coma. This was the custom of young ascetics from the beginning, namely to study under a master or guru in order to learn the principles of spiritual life, prayer and fasting.

After a while, St. Anthony left to strike out on his own in the western desert, and took shelter in an abandoned tomb carved in the side of a mountain. An obliging friend locked him in an empty vault and brought him bread from time to time. In his solitude he was fighting off the temptations of the flesh and the attacks of demons.

He was about thirty-three when he left this retreat to move to the east bank of the Nile to the "Outer Mountain" at Pispir (Vita 12) where he lived in complete solitude. After twenty years, his reputation attracted followers who settled near him, and wished to copy his holy life. They broke down the door of his retreat and St. Anthony became their leader, teaching them constantly by word and example the ascetic life³. Five years later, he again retired into solitude in the Inner Mountain (Mount Qolozum).

Anchortism did not make St. Anthony a contemplative unconcerned with the fate of his brothers; it made him a spiritual father beyond all

others⁴. He escaped from the cares of the world but not from love. Thus he was obliged to visit Alexandria during the persecution against Christians, engineered by Maximin Daja in 316. His purpose was to offer himself for martyrdom, if the Lord willed it. He spent his time “ ministering to the confessors in the mines and in the prisons “ (Vita 46). But to his grief it did not please God that he should die a martyr, and when the persecution ended, he returned to his cell, to be a” daily martyr to his conscience, ever fighting the battles of the faith

Again he visited Alexandria to support Pope Athanasius against heresy (Arianism) in 352. Pagans and Christians alike rushed out to greet the holy old man, but he soon returned to the desert, for he felt like a fish out of water, in the towns⁵.

From every part of the world people came to him even to the innermost part of the desert, seeking cures of the body, mind and soul; and, as they had done at Pispir, monks came to him for his sympathy and practical advice.

In 356 A.D., he died at age of one hundred and five, and his place of burial was never to be revealed by the two monks, Macanus and Amatas who buried him. He left his few possessions to his friends, a sheepskin and a cloak to Pope Athanasius, another sheepskin to St. Serapion, a hairshirt to SS. Macarius and Amatas.

His monastery at Pispir produced many giants including SS. Hilarion of Gaza, Macarius of Scete, Amoun of Nitria and Paul the Simple.

His life was written by the great St. Athanasius, and was very influential in spreading the ideals of monasticism throughout the Christian world.

According to St. Athanasius, St. Anthony was a man of “divine wisdom” of grace and urbanity, although he never learned to read or write.

AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS

St. Anthony had a very high degree of practical wisdom. Once two philosophers came to him, thinking they could experiment with him. When he met them, he said through an interpreter:

“Why, philosophers, have you gone to so much trouble to come to a foolish man?” When they said that he was not foolish, but very wise, he said to them: “If you come to a foolish man, your trouble is to no purpose: and if you think that I am wise, make yourselves what I am, for one ought to imitate the good ... I am a Christian.”

Again a philosopher asked him: “Father, how do you hold up deprived as you are of the solace of books?” “My book, philosopher, is nature and thus, I can read God’s language at will.”

HIS SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE:

St. Anthony was tempted by the thoughts of his property, of anxiety about his sister, the companionship of his kind, greed of money and fame and the delights of luxurious life.

As he lived in solitude he was tempted by “accidie” (despondency), his soul fell into a weariness and confusion of thought that he began saying 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?” “And after a little while rising up, he began to walk in the open air, and he saw someone, as it might be himself, sitting and working; and again sitting down and making a plait of palm-leaves, and then rising once again to pray. Now it was an angel of the Lord sent to the reproof and warning of St. Anthony. And he heard the voice of the angel saying, “Do this and you will be saved”. At these words, he was filled with joy and courage .. .

As he brought victory over the temptation of his own thoughts and despondency, he was attacked by devils from without, even as Satan in the wilderness attacked the Lord into whom he could find no entry⁹. This stage of training comes to its climax when St. Anthony goes out into one of the tombs and shuts himself in, to be so assaulted that his friend finds him unconscious, and carries him to the village church believing him to be dead but he wakes up in the night and insists on being taken back to the tomb,

Where he challenges the demons' attack and they cannot penetrate his defense. Then at last his urgent prayer is answered, and the quiet light of Christ disperses the demonic fantasies, complaining, "Where were you? Why did you not appear from the beginning to cease my pains?" he hears the reply, "I was here Anthony, but I waited to see you struggle. Because you have remained firm and have not yielded, I will always be your helper, and I will make your name known everywhere¹⁰ ".

HIS LONG-SUFFERING:

Here, I quote a story concerning his behavior, mentioned in the Apophthamata "(the Sayings of the Fathers) which declares his long-suffering for everybody:

It happened that temptation fell upon a brother in the monastery of Abbot Elias. and they cast him out; and he came to the mountain, to Abbot Anthony. After he had been with him for some time, Anthony sent him back to the community whence he had come out. But when they saw him, they again drove him away, and again he made his way to the Abbot Anthony, saying, " They would not receive me, Father ".

Then the old man sent to them saying:

"A ship was wrecked at sea, and lost all the cargo that it carried, and with hard toil was the empty ship brought at last to land. Is it you wish to sink on land a ship that has come safe from sea?

They recognised that it was abbot Anthony who had sent him back and straightway they took him in¹¹ ".

WITH DIDYMUS THE BLIND:

St. Jerome wrote to Castrutius, a blind man of Pannonia, to comfort him in his blindness. He told him the following story¹².

"The saintly Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, had summoned the blessed Anthony to that city to confute the heretics there. Hereupon Didymus, a man of great learning who had lost his eyes, came to visit the hermit and the conversation turned to the holy Scriptures, Anthony could not help admiring his ability and eulogizing his insight. At last he said, " You do not regret, do you, the loss of your eyes'?" At first Didymus was

ashamed to answer, but when the question had been repeated a second time and a third, he frankly confessed that his blindness was a great grief to him. Whereupon Anthony said, " I am surprised that a wise man should grieve at the loss of a faculty which he shares with ants and flies and gnats, and not rejoice rather in having one of which only saints and apostles have been thought worthy ".

MONASTIC TYPES

St. Anthony represented two types of monasticism. One of these was that of hermitism, the eremitical life, where each monk lived in solitude. The other was a modification of the way of hermitism, in which the monks had individual dwellings - a cell, a cave or some other shelter - yet sufficiently near one another to make fellowship possible. They might even have over them a fellow - monk as a kind of director (an abbot). Such a collection of monks was known as a " Laura "13•

HIS WRITINGS:

1. LETTERS:

He carried on a correspondence with monks as well as with emperors and high officials.

St. Athanasius states that the fame of St. Anthony reached emperors, for when Constantine and his sons Constantius and Constans heard about these things, they wrote frequently to him as to a father and begged him to write back. However, he did not make much of the documents nor did he rejoice over the letters. When the documents were brought to him, he summoned the monks and said, "Do not be astonished if an emperor writes to us, for he is a man; wonder, rather, that God has written the law for men and has spoken to us through His own Son (Heb. 1:2). He did not wish to accept the letters, pleading that he did not know how to answer them. But, when the monks urged that emperors were Christians, he permitted the letters to be read, lest they should take offense on the ground that he had willfully disregarded them. And he wrote and answered, commending them to worship Christ and advising them in the interest of their salvation not to think highly of the things of the world, but rather to remember the judgment to come, and to know that Christ is the true and eternal King They were glad to receive his letter.

b. He also wrote a letter to Balakius, and imperial officer, who bitterly persecuted Christians because of his zeal on behalf of the detestable Arians. And since he was so barbaric as to beat virgins and strip and flog monks. St. Anthony sent him a letter containing the following message, “I see wrath coming upon you. Cease, therefore, persecuting Christians, lest the wrath overtake you, for it is even so imminent.”

c. Seven other letters addressed to various monasteries in Egypt survive in versions.

d. A small but interesting letter addressed to the archimandrite Theodore and his monks reports a private revelation regarding the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. It is reproduced by bishop Amoun, a contemporary of St. Athanasius.

2. SERMONS

There is a collection of twenty Sermons ad filios suos monachos and one “Sermo de vanitate mundi et resurrectione mortuorum” extant in Latin. None of these seem to be genuine. The only discourse of St. Anthony’s we possess is found in his biography.

HIS TEACHINGS AND SAYINGS²⁰

Here I quote some teachings and sayings of the holy father, through which we can acknowledge the concept of monasticism from its founder.

+ Someone asked abbot Anthony, “ What shall I do that I may please God? “. The old man replied, “ Pay attention to what I tell you:

Wherever you go, let God be ever before your eyes; Whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy scriptures;

And in whatever place you abide, do not easily leave it.

Keep these three things and you will be saved.

+ Abbot Pambo asked Abbot Anthony, “ What ought I to do? “And the old man answered, “ Be not confident of your own righteousness; do not worry about the past; and control your tongue and your stomach “.

± 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.

As a fish must return to the sea, so must we to our cells, lest it befall that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.

+ He who wishes to live in solitude has escaped from three wars: hearing, speaking and seeing; yet against one thing shall he continually battle, that is, his own heart.

+ There be some that wear out their bodies with abstinence; but because they have no discretion, they be a great way from God.

+ Obedience with abstinence gives men power over wild beasts.

+ Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of Heaven ... Without temptation no one can be saved.

+ I saw all the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, "What can get us out from such snares? Then I heard a voice saying to rue, "Humility! "

+ I do not now fear God, but I love Him, for love casts fear out of doors.

+ "That with our neighbor there is life and death "; for if we do good to our brother, we shall do good to God; but if we scandalise our brother, we sin against Christ.

+ The fathers of old went forth into the desert, and when themselves were made whole they became physicans, and returning again they made others whole; but if it should come to pass, that any of us go into the desert, we offer a cure to other men before we be cured ourselves; and our infirmity returns upon us, and our last sins are worst than our first; for which cause is it commanded us "Physican, look first to yourself!

+ + +

1. St. Jerome: *Vita S. Pauli* 1.
W. H. Mackean: *Christian Monasticism in Egypt to the close of the fourth century*, London 1920, p. 67.
2. Sozomen : H.E. 1:13.
3. St. Anthony's discourse to the monks (*Vita AntonO* 16-43) is perhaps the first rule proposed to an embryonic monastery. He says: *The Scriptures are really sufficient for our instruction, yet it is well for us to encourage each other in the faith, and to employ words to stimulate ourselves. Be you, therefore, like children and bring to your father what you know and tell it. While I, being your senior, share with you my knowledge and my experience ...*
Let us increase our zeal. The whole of man's life is very short measured by the ages to come, so that all our time is as nothing to eternal life
4. Louis Bouyer: *The Spirituality of the N.T. & The Fathers*, 1960, p 315.
5. *Vita AntonU* 53.
6. *Ibid* 72 f.
7. Socrates: H.E. 4:23.
8. Helen Waddell : *The Desert Fathers*, London 1974, p 123.
9. *Vita Antonii* 6,7.
10. *Vita AntonO* 10.
Derwas I. Chitty: The Desert A City. p.3.
11. Helen Wadell 11, p. 135.
12. Letter 68:2. (*N. & P.N. Frs, Series 2, v.6*
13. K. S. Latourette: *A Hist. of Christianity*, N.Y. 1975, p 226.
14. J. Quasten : *Patrology*, vol 3, p 150 f.
15. *Vita AntonO* 81. *The Fathers of the Church*, v. 15.
16. *Vita Antonü* 86.
17. Jerome : *De Vir. Illust.* 88.
18. P.G.40:1065.
19. P.G40:961-1102.
20. Helen Waddell : *The Desert Fathers*.
Benedicta Ware, p 1-7.
Palaguís The Deacon : Apophthegmata (trans. from Greek
Paschasius : Apophthegniata (Trans~.from~ Greek).

3- ST. PACHOMIUS

HIS BOYHOOD

About 290 A.D., Pachomius was born in Upper-Egypt, of pagan parents, but he hated paganism from his boyhood.

He related this strange story: Once a pagan priest without any reason was very agitated on seeing him with his parents, coming to the temple. He cried saying, "Take him away; I feel he is an enemy of our gods. Take him away from our temples and celebrations!"

Long before he was converted to Christianity he was seeking virtuous life and longed for chastity. As he told his disciples: on one occasion his father asked him to carry some food to their laborers in the field. On his way he was confronted with demons appearing as horses. They tried to kill him. He looked towards heaven and wept, and suddenly they escaped. because he arrived late to the field, he had to spend the night there. A beautiful daughter of a laborer tried to entice him to her bed, but he rebuked her, saying; "I can't commit this sin. Do I look a dog² to sleep with my sister!?"

HIS CONVERSION

The Roman Emperor, Maximin, ordered the prefect of Egypt to send some of the troops based in Egypt to put an end to a revolt in Ethiopia. The troops were selected ... among them was Pachomius. On their way, they had to stop at Latopolis (Esna) in Upper-Egypt. There, Pachomius was impressed by the characteristics of the natives who brought them food and drinks.

Pachomius, asking what it meant, was told that Christians were merciful to strangers and to all men, even to their enemies. Again he asked, "What would a Christian be?" and was told, "They are men who bear the name of Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God, and do good to all men, hoping in Him who made heaven and earth and us men".

Hearing of such grace, his heart was filled with fear of God and with joy. And withdrawing apart in the camp he stretched out his hands to heaven to pray and say:

“O God, the Maker of heaven and earth, if indeed You, the only true God will to release me from this affliction, I will serve your will truly all the days of my life, and loving all men, I will serve them according to your commandments “.

Before reaching Ethiopia, the troops were ordered back because the revolt was quelled. Back in “Chenoboskion” he was baptized (about 307 A.D.) after spending some time as a catechumen.

WITH PALAEMON, THE HERMIT

Pachomius spent three years moving from one village to another, helping the needy and comforting the afflicted, even though his heart was flamed by God’s love, desiring to devote every moment to prayers and giving hymns. Many peasants loved him and followed him, leaving behind their villages.

However, he decided to be a disciple of a hermit named Palaemon, who lived in Kasr-El-Sayad. St. Palaemon refused to open the door of his cave to Pachomius advising him against monasticism. However, because of Pachomius’ persistence the hermit received him kindly.

Under the guidance of St. Palaemon, Pachomius practiced a severe order of asceticism. As Pachomius was overcome by sleeping, once St. Palaemon said to him. “Wake up, Pachomius, lest you will be tempted by the devil; for many had died (spiritually) because of too much sleep.”

FOUNDER OF THE CENOBITIC SYSTEM

Although Pachomius was very happy with this angelic life under the guidance of Palaemon the hermit, he was sad as many believers longed for this way of life but couldn’t practice it. Anyhow, he did not cease from praying on their behalf.

One day when Pachomius had wandered far in search of wood, he came upon the deserted village of Tabennesis on the banks of the Nile near where the river forms a bend north of Thebes. An angel of God appeared to him and guided him to the way by which his thoughts towards those believers, who longed for the monastic life and couldn’t, might be fulfilled. The angel gave him the rules of this new community inscribed upon a brass tablet. These rules could be observed even by ordinary Christians.

On his return to his cave, he related every thing to his spiritual father “ Palaemon “, who was very pleased, saying that it is God’s will that a monastery would be established with this order. Really, the wonder is that a very old hermit, who had spend all his life under the anchoric order and had never heard about this new form of monasticism did not oppose his disciple, but blessed him, helped him to build a little lodge then went back to his own place, declaring his sincere desire to help him in establishing this new order.

St. Palaemon apologized to his disciple that he could not live under the coenobitic order, asking him to exchange visits once a year until the moment of his departure from this world was very soon.

Soon some anchorites living in the area came to visit St. Pachomius, erecting cabins nearby. By 315 St. Pachomius had a small group of disciples, who would eventually number in the thousands.

When Tabennesis proved too small for the growing number of monks, St. Pachomius found it necessary to start other communities, beginning at Pabou not far away.

A WISE LEADER

1. Pachomius was a successful abbot, for he taught his disciples more by his behavior than by his words. Some of his disciples tell us that they were attracted by his example, saying, “ We used to think that all the saints were made by God from their mother’s womb so holy and unalterable ..., now we see the goodness of God in the case of our father, that from pagan parents he has become so God-fearing, and is clad in all the commandments of God ... Let us die and live with this man; for he guides us rightly unto God3 “.

I give here some examples of his interest to teach his monks through his behavior:

Once while walking, one of the young monks asked him not to carry his own food, since he was carrying enough for both of them. The abbot refused, saying: “ It is written that the Lord is like His brethren in every thing, how can I, the weak one, distinguish myself from my brethren and not carry my food?!... It is written also, that he who desires to be great has to be a servant .

b. While he was collecting the harvest on an island, he asked his disciple Tadrous (Theodore) to unfold a mat to lie on, for he was very sick. Tadrous tried to put a carpet under it, but he objected, he also objected when the same disciple tried to give him a couple of dates. Tadrous asked him why he was refusing, and the abbot replied that he was afraid of the last judgment, for perhaps there was a monk more sick and in more need of the carpet and those dates. He concluded his speech that they must present themselves as examples to the monks in everything.

c. While he was sick, a good soup was offered to him. He poured water upon it until it was spoilt, saying: "Do you not know how to cook? ". After eating he sprinkled water on Tadrous' feet. When he was asked about the cause of these actions, he replied that he spoilt the food lest he gets used to good food when he is sick, and he sprinkled the water, so that at the last judgment if he will be accused that he let his disciple wash his hands he will reply I also washed his feet ".

2. As a military man, St. Pachomius was firm, but he obeyed the rules more than he gave orders to others. As an instance, once an abbot called Tanaseh asked Tadrous to exchange St. Pachomius' humble clothes for new ones, for it was cold and it was unfit for their leader to meet the guests with these cloths. At night when abbot Pachomius did not find his humble robe he asked Tadrous about it, but the latter replied, " Take this new robe ". As the Abbot repeated his demand thrice and refused to put on the new one, Tadrous wept for his father was trembling from cold. What is wonderful, is that St. Pachomius felt great sorrow that he did not obey his disciple Tadrous, who was in charge of clothing. For seven years he used to ask God's forgiveness because of this transgression.

3. St. Pachomius was a successful abbot, for he opened his heart with sincere love before opening his monastery. He dealt with his followers as a father and not as a president of ruler.

Once Abbot Pachomius was fasting for fifty days, weeping and praying unceasingly on behalf of ten monks whose thoughts were defiled. One of the abbots begets him to cast those monks away, for he would die for their sake ... St. Pachomius replied to him, " O wicked abbot, how do you dare to say: cast them away?! Do you not hear that Mosses put himself down on behalf of his disobedient people?!...

ST. PACHOMIUS & PRIESTHOOD

St. Pachomius preferred to invite priests of the neighboring churches to celebrate the liturgies of Eucharist so that no monk would seek ordination. Even if a priest wished to be a monk he did not perform the priestly duties. St. Pachomius was eager to guard the lay character of monasticism, as he was afraid of the fire of vainglory, that it might be flamed among the monks. According to him, “ The beginning of the thought of love of command is ordination⁴”.

It is noteworthy that St. Pachomius worked eagerly with his monks for the building of a church in a deserted village. At the beginning all the monks used to go there every Saturday and Sunday. St. Pachomius used to act as a reader.

Serapion, bishop of Dandra who loved St. Pachomius. spoke to Pope Athanasius on his visit to the monastery of Tabennesis concerning the ordination of St. Pachomius as a priest over all his monasteries. As St. Pachomius escaped, the Pope said to the monks:

Say hello to your father, and tell him that as he fled from the temporary vainglory, which causes jealousy, grief and envy, and he chose the eternal glory with Christ ... now, I will not ordain him, nor speak to him in this matter ... But I hope that I can see him when I return, God willing

WITH A ROMAN MAN

The Pachomian monasteries embraced monks from different nations: Libyans, Nubians, Syrians, Greeks, Romans, Cappadocians, Ethiopians etc. To each nation was accorded a special ward, under the leadership of a fellow citizen who acted for the abbot.

Once a Roman person, who spoke Greek and not Coptic, wanted to take a counsel from St. Pachomius, but refused any interpreter, for he did not want anybody to know his secrets. St. Pachomius excused himself for a while, entered his cell, and wept before the Lord, saying, “O Lord, Almighty, if I can’t profit those who are coming from overseas, because of my ignorance of their languages, why did You permit their coming here?!

May I hope in your abundant grace and great mercies, o Gracious and Merciful Lord, that You grant me to know their tongues so that I can speak to them for the profit of their souls!

After this prayer he met the man and spoke fluently with him in Greek.

HIS MIRACLES

St. Pachomius was granted by grace to heal the sick, exorcise evil spirits, prophesy, see visions, know the secrets of monks and see the souls of the departed rising to Paradise.

HIS DEPARTURE

St. Pachomius succeeded in establishing many monasteries occupied by thousands of monks, as well as a convent which embraced four hundred nuns under the guidance of his sister, Mary. Some bishops and priests who became jealous of this success assembled in a church at Esna and called the Saint intending to kill him, but God delivered him.

That same year the plague spread in Upper-Egypt, and eventually reached his monasteries. About one hundred monks and some abbots died. The Saint moved from one monastery to another until he himself became sick for forty days. He called all the responsible abbots and asked them to imitate him; to be awake, to be kind to everybody, to be long-suffering and humble and to act unceasingly for the salvation of every soul. Then he departed to the Lord.

4- ST. AMOUN

St. Amoun was a contemporary of St. Anthony the Great and the third founder of the Egyptian monasticism with St. Anthony and St. Pachomius.

He established a monastery in the village of *Nitria*, where thousands of his disciples lived under the communal order, which was close to the coenobitic order. Hundreds of them - after a period of training in this monastery - passed to *Cellia* to live as hermits. In other words he embraced two orders of monasticism the communal or coenobitic and the anchoritic. This is in marked contrast with the ideal of St. Pachomius, or St. Basil, for whom coenobitism is a lifelong vocation

HIS MARRIAGE

Amoun was born about 275 A.D. When he was a young man of about twenty-two (297 A.D.) he was constrained by his uncle to marry. Unable to resist the pressure of his uncle, he thought it best to be crowned and take his seat in the nuptial chamber and undergo all the marriage rites

When all the guests had gone, he took a book containing the epistles of the Apostles and read to his wife St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, explaining to her the Apostle's admonitions to married persons (1 Cor. 7 :10 f). He explained the advantages of Chastity, described the liberty and purity of a life of continence, and affirmed that virginity places a person nearest to the Deity. So she was convinced by the grace of God she said to him: "I too am convinced my lord ; and what further commands have you now ?

"I command," he said, "that each of us lives alone in future."

She could not endure this saying: "Let us dwell in one house, but in different beds. Having taken this resolution, they retired together to *Nitria*, lived together in a hut as ascetics, without regard to the difference of sex. After eighteen years (c. 315 A.D.) she herself came to recognize the excellence of monastic life she asked her husband that they should live

apart for the good of the progress of their spiritual life, saying to him: "It is unsuitable for you, who practices chastity to look upon a woman in so confined a dwelling.." This agreement again was satisfactory to both, and so he left her in the hut with its field of balsam and went out and settled in the inner part of the mountain of Nitria, where he built himself two domed cells, coming back to visit his blessed wife twice a year

Disciples joined him and he became their leader

NITRIA

Amoun's settlement was on the edge of the Western Desert where it forms a low promontory northward into the Delta near the village of Pernoud or Nitria, and about nine miles south-west of the town of Damanhour (Hermopolis Parva)

The geographical point was completely obscured until Evelyn White clarified the real position of Nitria in his History of the Monasteries of Nitria arid of Scetis " published in 1932

- Some scholars think that Nitria is the same area of Wadi-el-Natroun because of the similarity in the name. In fact, close to Pernoudj or Nitria there are natron lakes which were exploited commercially in classical times. But forty miles to the south across the desert, far more extensive natron deposits are found in the long depression known today as the Wadi-El-Natroun.

2 - Nitria was the gateway to the desert ; it was a village where a pagan temple existed as it appears in the biography of St. Macanus the Great Wadi-el-Natroun is the desert of Scetis

3 - No monasteries survived in or near El-Barnougi, but the four famous monasteries survived in Wadi-el-Natroun

4 - The word " Scetis " is sometimes used in some texts to cover Nitria " as well, but not vice versa

CELLIA

While St. Anthony was visiting St. Amoun, The latter told the former

that the number of the monks had increased, and asked his counsel concerning those who wanted more complete solitude. After the customary ninth-hour meal they walked slowly into the desert. At sunset, St. Anthony stopped and said, " Let us pray and plant a cross here, that those who want to build cells may build here, so that those who also come from yonder to visit them, can take little food at the ninth hour and then come and that those who go from here may do the same, and remain undistracted during their visits to each other

Thus the second Nitrian settlement of the Cells or Cellia was founded, where some six hundred anchorites were dependent on Nitria for food, but had their own priest and church.

PALLADIUS' DESCRIPTION

Palladius as an eye-witness gives us a brief description of Amoun's order in Nitria and Cellia, saying:

On the mountain live some 5000 men with different modes of life each living in accordance with his own powers and wishes, so that it is allowed to live alone, or with another, or with a number of others.

There are seven bakeries in the mountain, which serve the needs of these men and also of the anchorites of the great desert 600 in all

I penetrated the innermost depths of the desert. In this mountain of Nitria there is a great church, by which stand three palm-trees, each with a whip suspended from it. One is intended for the solitaries who transgress, one for the robbers if any pass that way, and one for chance comers; so that all who transgress are whipped the appointed number of lashes and are then released

Next to the church is a guest-house, where they receive strangers who have arrived, until they depart of their own accord, without limit of time

-even if they remain two or three years. Having allowed them to spend one week in idleness, the rest of their stay, become occupied with work either in the garden, or bakery or kitchen. If the guest should be an important person, then they would give him a book, not allowing him to talk to any one before the < sixth » hour.

In this mountain there also live doctors and confectioners. And they manufacture wine for sale. All these men work with their hands at linen manufacture, so that all are self-supporting.

At the ninth hour it is possible to stand and hear how the strains of psalmody rise from each habitation so that one believes that one is high above the world in Paradise

They occupy the church only on Saturdays and Sundays.

There are eight priests who serve the church so long as the senior priest lives, no one else celebrates, or preaches, or hears confessions, but they all just sit quietly by his side.

ST. AMOUN'S FAME

In a lovely conversation between St. Amoun and St. Anthony, the former said, "I have experienced more toils than you, why has your name been magnified among men above mine?" St. Anthony answered, "Because I love God more than you do"

In spite of the thousands of monks who abode in Nitria under St. Amoun's guidance, he did not gain the same fame of St. Anthony Perhaps because his monastic rule was between anchorism and cenobitism. The whole world was astonished upon discovering that St. Anthony was dwelling for many years in the innermost desert struggling against devils. St. Pachomius took the opposite attitude, creating a new mode of monasticism. St. Amoun's order was truly attractive, but it was between the Antonian and Pachomian orders

HIS LIFE

The Church documents gives us no details of St. Amoun's life and struggles as they do for the other founders of the monastic rules. Perhaps it was because of his shyness. Palladius gives us the following brief account^{10~}

The blessed Athanasius the bishop in his book "*Life of Anthony*" told a marvelous story about this man; how he came to the bank of the canal Lycus with his disciple Theodore, and fearing to remove his clothes lest he should see him naked, he was found on the other side

having been carried across by angels without using the ferry. Such then was the life of the blessed Amoun and such was his perfection that the blessed Anthony saw his soul carried to heaven by angels. I crossed this canal once in a ferry, but with fear ; for it is a canal leading from the great Nile

HIS TEACHING AND BEHAVIOR

1- St. Amoun, whose mind was totally absorbed in the kingdom of Heaven, was anxious not to lose any moment in earthly discussions. It was said that when he had anything to sell, he would say the price just once and silently accept what was given to him in peace. Just as when he wished to buy something, he gave the price he was asked in silence and took it adding no further word

2 - He was eager for men's salvation through practical repentance. Sozomen relates that once some wicked parents, having brought to St. Amoun a son, who had been bitten by a mad dog, and was nigh unto death, besought him in their lamentations to heal him. He said to them: "Your son does not require my healing, but if you are willing to restore to your masters the ox you have stolen, he will be healed immediately

And the result was even as had been predicted, for the ox was restored and the malady of the child removed

3 - The *Apophthegmata Patrum* mentions, the following story:

A brother came to Scetis to see Abbot Amoun, and said to him, "My father is sending me out on an errand but I am afraid of fornication. The old man answered," " Whatever the hour when the temptation comes upon you, say " God of all virtue, by the prayers of my father save me from it ". So one day when a young girl closed the door upon him, he began to cry out with all his might, " God of my father, save me ", and immediately he found himself on the road to Scetis¹⁴

- 1 - Palladius : His. Laus. 8 Sozomen : H.E. 1: 14 Pg 67 900f Socrates : H.E. 4: 23 Pg 72 : 509f; Chitty : The Desert A City p 29
- 2 - Socrates:H.E.4:23.
- 3 - Ibid.
- 4 - Derwasi.Chitty,p11,12.
- 5 - Now El-Barnougi.
- 6 - The Greek name. Many countries and villages in Egypt had two names Coptic and Greek.
- 7 - This implies that Nitria was near the rich fields of the Delta
- 8 - Certainly about 356 A.D. a letter of Theodore the Tabennesiate is addressed” To the beloved brethren the priests and deacons and monks in the Mountain of Nitria (Epistula Ammonis 32 Halkin : Susidia Hagiographica 119 Brussels 1932 p 118).
- 9 - Palladius: His. Laus.7 : 2- 5
- 10- Ibid8.
- 11 - Vita Antonii 60.
- 12 - Cf. Benedicta Word : Sayings of the Desert Fathers p 19.
- 13- Sozomen:H.E.1:14
- 14 - Benedicta Ward p 27

5- ST. MACARIUS OF EGYPT

St. Macarius the Great (c. 330 - c. 390 A.D.) was the founder of monasticism in the desert of Scetis. He started his ascetic career in a village, moved to another village to escape enrolment in the clergy. There he was falsely blamed for the pregnancy of a girl; when he was cleared, he fled and came to Scetis.

He was greatly influenced by St. Anthony the Great and visited him at least twice. Socrates called him "the chosen vessel," and Palladius states that he was counted worthy to possess such great discernment that he was called the 'aged youth.' He received the grace of healing and forecasting the future.

At an advanced age he was exiled to an island in the Nile by the Arian Bishop Lucius, who felt authorized to do so by an edict of Emperor Valens. He died shortly after his return to the desert.

Now, I will give more details of St. Macarius ' life and character

HIS MARRIAGE

Macarius, the young man, who was loved by the priests and the people of his village, was ordained a Reader (Aghnustus). His parents obliged him to marry, as they hoped that he would be ordained a priest. After the wedding ceremony had been performed he fared illness, asking his father to accompany the camel-drivers who used to bring natron from Wadi-elNatroun... As God saw his sincere desire for virginity and asceticism, He sent him a Cherub, who appeared to him in a vision while he was sleeping in Wadiel-Natroun. "God tells you," said the Cherub,"that He grants you and your (spiritual) children all this mountain, that you may devote all your time to worshipping. Many leaders will come forth in this wilderness Awake, and remember what I have said ; if you will live perfectly I will appear to you and declare God's words to you.

It is said that the Cherub accompanied St. Macarius almost all his life

On his return to his village he found his virgin wife had a fever, then she died.

ST. MACARIUS, THE ANCHORITE

According to the counsel of a recluse, St. Macarius dwelt in a hut far from the village, practicing his ascetic career for about ten years. When he was forty years old he was unwillingly ordained a priest. Shortly after he moved to another village as he felt unworthy of priesthood and the honor his people had for him

According to some texts, it seems that he fled before the ordination. He was ordained afterwards in Scetis.

Again he left the second village, escaping to the desert of Scetis. He himself relates the cause of leaving this village

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 labor 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 has 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 that people would disturb me, I got up and fled here to Scetis⁴

MONASTERIES OF SCETIS

Macarius’ original settlement is thought to have been somewhere in the region of the surviving Monastery of Dier-El-Baramous (Monastery of the Roman brothers towards the western end of the valley.

As numbers increased, he seemed to have moved to slightly higher ground beyond a low ridge at the eastern end, near the monastery that now bears his name.

By Cassian’s time there were four congregations or “ Ecclesiae in Scetis of which the third is now represented by the twin monasteries of Abbot Pishoy and of the ‘ Syrians ‘ (Monastery of the Virgin Mary) while the fourth, that of St. John the Short, has been deserted for a number of centuries, though its site is known

HIS SOLITUDE

St. Macarius who eagerly desired eremitic life, chose Scetis because of its distance from the country. He believed that the desert was the most suitable place for monasticism. This idea can be clearly seen through his conversation with abbot Pambo and the brethren in the Mountain of Nitria. As he was seized with a desire to go and to see what lay in the desert, he fought it for five years then went, and found an oasis with a lake 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. His body trembled, for he believed they were spirits. Seeing him shaking, they said to him,“ Do not be afraid, for we are men “. Then he said to them,“ Where do you come from, and how did you come to this desert ? “. They replied, “ We come from a monastery, having agreed with each other to remain here, from forty years ago. One of us is Egyptian and the other a Libyan “... Then he

asked them “ How can I become a monk ? “ They replied, “ Unless a man renounce all things of his world, he cannot be a monk “. He said

But I am weak, and I cannot do as you do”. So they said to him,“ If you cannot do as we do, sit in your cell and weep for your sins “. He asked them, “ When the winter comes do you not become frozen ? and when the heat comes do not your bodies burn ? They replied “ It is God

who has made this way of life for us. We do not freeze in winter and the summer does not harm us “. He concluded this story, saying “ So I told you that I have not yet become a monk ; but I have seen monks Forgive me, my brethren

St. Macarius ascertains that the desert of Scetis would lose its quality of monasticism when it will be civilized. “When you see a cell built close to the Marsh, know that the desolation of Scetis is near ; but when you see trees, know that it is at the doors ; and when you see children, take up your sheep-skin, and go away

Even in the desert of Scetis, St. Macarius used to flee from the crowd of people. Palladius tells us that he made a tunnel running under the ground from his cell for half a stade and finished it off at the end with a cave, and if ever a crowd of people troubled him, he would leave his cell secretly and go away to the cave and no one would find him. Now one of his zealous disciples told us this, and said that he used to recite twenty-four prayers on his way to the cave and twenty-four as he returned.

When abbot Isaiah questioned him saying “ Give me a word “ he answered, “Flee from the men”. Abbot Isaiah said to him, “ What does it mean to flee for me?”. The old man replied “ It means to sit in your cell and weep for your sins.”

Abba Aio also questioned him “Give me a word”. Abba Macarius said to him “ Flee from men, stay in your cell, weep for your sins, do not take pleasure in the conversation of men, and you will be saved “Again he gave a counsel to the brethren of Scetis when he dismissed the assembly, “ Flee my brothers ! “ One of them asked him, “To where could we flee to beyond this desert ? “ He laid his finger upon his lips saying;’ This is what I would like you to flee from

When abbot Moses complained that many brothers visited him, saying

I should like to live in quiet prayer and the brethren do not let me “, the old man replied, “ 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

MAN OF LOVE

saint Macarius discovered the true concept of anchorism - that it was not merely an isolation from men, but a sincere desire for unity with God, the Lover of men The true hermit flees bodily from men but practically he loves everybody

Saint Macarius, the successful leader of hundreds of ascetics, could have created a community of love through himself as an example and through his preaching The” History of Monks of Egypt “translated by Rufinus of Aquileia mentions a strange story “They say that once a certain brother brought a bunch of grapes to the holy Macarius, but he who for love’s sake thought not of his own things but of the things of others, carried it to another brother, who seemed more feeble, and the sick man gave thanks to God for the kindness of his brother, but he too thinking more of his neighbour than of himself, brought it to another, and he again to another, and so that same bunch of grapes was carried around all the cells, scattered as they were far over the desert, and no one knowing who first had sent it, it was brought at last to the first giver But the holy Macarius gave thanks that he had seen in the brethren such abstinence and such loving kindness and did himself seek sterner discipline of the life of the spirit¹⁰

This spirit of love and kindness is a natural reflection of Saint Macarius’ love towards them, for it is said that “ he became a god on earth, because just as God protects the world and bears the sins of men so would abbot Macarius cover the faults which he saw or heard as if he did not see or hear them

I refer here to some practical examples of his loving-kindness:

A - Once some brethren told him that Saint Macarius of Alexandria excommunicated two brothers at Scetis for they had fallen into sin He said,

It is not the brothers who are excommunicated ; it is Macarius' ~ for he loved him) '2 Hearing that he had been excommunicated by the old man

Abbot Macarius fled to the marsh Then Abbot 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

B - When Abbot Macarius was in Egypt¹¹ a thief went into his cell when he was away Macarius came back to his cell and found the thief loading his things onto a camel So Macarius went into the cell, picked up his things and helped him load them onto the camel When the loading was finished, the thief began to beat the camel to make it get up but in vain Seeing that it did not get up, Abbot Macarius went inside his cell, found a small hoe there, picked it up and put it onto the camel saying, " Brother the camel wants to have this " Then the old man kicked it, saying " Get up " At once the camel got up and went forward a little, because of his command Then it lay down again and refused to get up until it was completely unloaded ; and then it set off

C - Abbot 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 "

D - He also said that when Abbot 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 ?

HIS ASCETICISM

He was said to be in a continual ecstasy and to spend a far longer time with God than with things sublunary.

Socrates, the Church historian, relates, Going on one occasion to the holy father Macarius about mid-day, and being overcome with the heat and thirst, I begged for some water to drink " Content yourself with the shade ", was his reply, " for many who are now journeying by land, or sailing on the deep, are deprived even of this " Later discussing with him the subject of abstinence, " Take courage my son ", said he

for twenty years I have neither eaten, drunk, nor slept to satiety ; my bread has always been weighed, my water measured, and what little sleep I have had has been stolen by reclining myself against a wall

The following stories are mentioned in the " *Apophthegmata Patrum* concerning his asceticism

- Some Fathers questioned Abbot 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 burns up his body

2 - The brethren came one day to Abbot Macarius at Scctis and they found nothing in his cell except stagnant water So they said to him

Abbot, come up to the village, and we will get some clean water for you " The old man said to them, " Brothers, do you know so and so's bakery in the village ? " and they said that they did The old man said to them, " I know it, too Do you know so and so's field, where the river runs ? " They said " Yes " The old man said to them, " I know it too So when I want to, I can go there myself, without your help "

3 - They told of Abbot Macarius 'visit to the brethren He had laid this rule upon himself " If there is wine, drink some for the brethren's sake but for each cup of wine he would drink no water for a day And the

brethren, eager to give him some pleasure, would bring him wine And the old man would take it joyously, to torment himself thereafter But his disciple knowing the reason said to the brethren :“ For God's sake do not give it to him, for he brings unto his body torments thereafter in his cell” When they heard that, they did not offer him wine anymore

STRUGGLING AGAINST DEVILS

The “*Apophthegmata Patrum*” refers to Saint Macarius' conflict against devils

1 - When Abbot 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” Abbot Macarius asked what was that He said,“ Your humility Because of that I can do nothing against you

2 - Another time a demon approached Abbot Macarius with a knife and wanted to cut his foot But, because of his humility he could not do so and he said to him, “ All that you have, we have also ; you are distinguished from us only by humility ; by that you get the better of us

3 - On one such occasion lodging in the deserted pagan temple at Terenouthis, and using a mummy for his pillow, the demons tried to play pranks on him, calling out as though addressing a woman So and so come to the bath with us “ Another devil replied from the mummy “ I cannot come, I have got a stranger on top of me “ The old man, unperturbed, began to beat the mummy, saying “ Awake and go into the darkness, if you can “ Then the demons fled away ashamed crying out “You have conquered us”

4 - St. Macarius, wishing to comfort the brethren, told them that the devil would escape from their place (the desert of Scetis) He tells the following story:

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 away 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

WITH THE PAGANS

St. Macarius and his monks were in contact with the Christians and pagans who lived in the nearest villages and countries. Collectors of natrons would come with their camels from Terenuthis, and act as middlemen for the anchorites’ products of rope, baskets and mats. The monks of Scetis would also go at harvest-time and hire themselves out to work in the fields. They might also, from time to time, take their wares up to the market in the Delta

The “Apophthegmata Patrum “stated how he led some pagans to the true faith. Once he was going up to Nitria from Scetis. His disciple walking ahead, met a pagan priest and cried out,” Ai ai, demon, where are you running? “. The priest turned and hit him with a club and left him half dead, then went on with the club and met Macarius, who just said,” Save you, save you, you weary man “. The pagan in amazement asked, “What good do you see in me, that you talk to me like that?

“I saw you toiling”, said the old man,” and don’t you know that you are toiling in vain? “. The priest said, “And I was pricked to the heart at your greeting, and knew that you are on God’s side. But another bad monk met me and insulted me, and I beat him to death “. Taking Macarius by the feet, he said,“ I will not let you go unless you make me a monk “~.

The “ Apophthegmata Patrum “mentions the following conversation which occurred between St. Macarius and a skull of pagan high-priest

St. Macarius said, “Walking in the desert one day, I found the skull of a dead man, lying on the ground. As I was moving it with my stick the skull spoke to me. I said to it, “Who are you? “. the skull replied, “ I was high priest of the idols and of the pagans who dwelt in this place ; but you are Macarius, the Spirit bearer. Whenever you take pity on those who are in torments, and pray for them they feel a little respite “. The old man said to him, “ What is this alleviation, and what is this torment ? “. He said to him, “As far as the sky is removed from

the earth, so great is the fire beneath us ; we are ourselves standing in the midst of the fire, from the feet up to the head. It is not possible to see anyone face to face, but the face of one is fixed to the back of another Yet when you pray for us,each of us can see the other's face a little. Such is our respite “. The old man in tears said, “ Alas the day when that man was born ! “. He said to the skull, “ Are there any punishments which are more painful than this ? “. The skull said to him, “ There is a more grievous punishment down below us “. The old man said, “ Who are the people down there ? “. The skull said to him “ We have received a little mercy since we did not know God, but those who knew God and denied Him are down below us “. Then picking up the skull, the old man buried it

HIS MIRACLES

1 - Palladius states that, “ aReport was prevalent concerning him that he raised a dead man, in order to persuade a heretic who did not acknowledge that there was a bodily resurrection. And this report was current in the desert

2 - St. 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, during our midday 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

3 - It was said of St. 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

4 - A man of Egypt had a paralytic son. He brought him to the cell of St. 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

ST. MACARIUS AND TWO WOMEN

St. Macarius lifted up his eyes towards heavens, talking to his God :“ I wonder if there exist among all people anybody who loves you as I do ?. Is there anyone who fasts, prays and serves you as I do ? “.

In such arrogance, St. Macarius who surpassed many others in his spiritual gifts, and who converted the rough wilderness into another heaven, decorated with glittering stars that lit the entire world, had been tried by devil

However, God the lover of mankind, did not wish to leave him in his thoughts, so it was revealed to him to go to a certain house in the city There he could learn a lesson in humility

St. Macarius was wondering who could be that hermit who lives in town, and superseded him in spiritualities. To his surprise a lady answered the door.

She knelt down before him, and called another lady. The two women brought some water to wash his feet, and some food to eat but he said” I won’t let you wash my feet nor will I touch your food, until you tell me your story. I came to you by a divine revelation bearing the difficulties of travelling, so do not hide anything from me

One of the women answered “Saint, we are not sisters, but we are both married to two brothers. We longed for virginity, but God’s will did not permit us. We pray and fast together, and follow the word of God and help each other. We have a common living, sometimes I breast her child and she does the same to mine. Whatever we have at home is never mine or hers; we just fulfill our needs and give the rest to the poor

Soon St. Macarius got the message; he left the women beating his chest saying

“Woe to me, woe to me, I have no love as those two women have The love of the laymen superseded the asceticism of monks

HIS SAYINGS

* If in desiring to rebuke anyone you are yourself moved to anger, you satisfy your own passion ; but in saving another do not lose yourself

* St. Macarius was asked “ How ought we to 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 upon me “. And if the conflict grows fiercer say, “ Lord help me “. Because He knows very well what we need, He shows us His mercy

* Do not sleep in the cell of a brother who has a bad reputation

* If we keep remembering the wrongs which men have done us, we destroy the power of the remembrance of God. But if we remind ourselves of the evil deeds of the demons, we shall be

invulnerable “

* Do no evil to anyone, and do not judge anyone. Observe this and you will be saved

* One day when St. 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, St. Macarius marvelled. So the brethren said to him “What is this saying, Saint, 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

* St. Paphnutius, the disciple of St. Macarius ; repeated this saying of the old man, “When I was young with other children, I used to eat blueberries and they used to go and steal the little figs. As they were running away, they dropped one of the figs, and I picked it up and ate it. Everytime I remember this, I sit sown and weep

* “ 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 th~ demons

HIS WRITINGS

Neither Palladius nor Rufinus know of any literary works of Macarius but later manuscripts attribute quite a number of writings to him; sayings, letters, prayers, homilies and treatises

Until today no answer could be given to the question who was the real author of the famous fifty-seven Spiritual Homilies attributed to him?

L. Villecourt was the first to discover in them traces of Messalianism The Messalians, whose name is derived from the Syriac “Mesallein” (praying men), arose in the second half of the fourth century at Edessa and in the neighboring parts of Mesopotamia and were condemned in 431 by the Council of Ephesus. Under the protection of a great name, their works were preserved as the homilies of Macarius the Egyptian, an attribution made as early as 534 A.D., the date of the Syriac Ms and 12175 in the British Museum

These homilies have a pre-eminent position in the history of early Christian mysticism and have

proved a source of inspiration to modern mystics.

1 -Socrates:H.E.4:23.

2 -Hist.Laus.17.2.

3 -Sozomen:H.E.3:14.

4 - Benedicta Word p. 105 106

5 - The two Roman brothers Maximius & Domadius

6 - Evelyn White History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis ch. 7

7 - Cassian's Collectione 10 2

8 - This story illustrates the belief that monastic life dates back long before St. Nilacarius generation

9 - Palladius His. Laus. 17 :10

10 - Waddell : The Desert Fathers p 80.

11 - This means that it happened before his going to Scetis

12 - Palladius : His. Laus. 17 5

13 - Socrates H.E. 4 : 23

14- Bendicta p 110 f; Waddell p 101-102

15- Palladius 17 :11

16 - J. Quasten : Patrology vol 3

6- ST. SHENOUTI

St. Shenouti, next to St. Pachomius, was the most important representative of Egyptian cenobitism. He was an Abbot of the famous White Monastery of Atripe in the desert of Thebes for more than sixty-five years (383-451 or 466 A.D.); he ruled over 2200 monks and 1800 nuns, as Besa his disciple and successor informs us.

He is called "Archimandrite," i.e. "the Head of Anchorites," for he used to practice the eremitic life from time to time, and encouraged some of his monks to withdraw to the desert after a few years of coenobitic life, without completely severing connections with the monastery.

Whereas St. Pachomius saw in the coenobium the culmination of monastic excellence, St. Shenouti sees in it a period of transition and formation to prepare mature souls for the more ascetic solitude of anchorites.

In 431 A.D., St. Shenouti accompanied St. Cyril of Alexandria to the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus.

Nevertheless, his name is absent from European literature of the time concerning the "Fathers of the Desert," because of the following reasons:

1- He started a deliberate movement to purge Coptic literature of every element of the Hellenic culture. Nobody was permitted to speak Greek in his monasteries; and in his preaching and writings he used only the Sahidic Coptic language. For many centuries no western Father wished to translate any of his works.

2- Contrary to other Egyptian monastic orders all his monks were of purely Coptic origin. No foreign person could be admitted to his communities.

HIS BOYHOOD

Before the birth of St. Shenouti, St. Athanasius foretold the important role that St. Shenouti was to have in Egyptian monasticism and in aiding the church to flourish and spread.

St. Horesius, one of the Pachomian monks also on his meeting with St. Shenouti's mother told her, "God bless the fruit of your womb and grant you a son, who will be like Amber, with its sweet smell that will spread throughout the whole world."

Anyhow, Shenouti was born in Shenlala, a village near Ikhmim in Upper Egypt.

Before he was ten years old, his righteous parents asked their shepherds to teach him how to take care of the sheep and sent him back home before nightfall. The boy used to give his food to some shepherds and spend all his day in fasting, then he returned with one of the shepherds halfway home.

Then his father discovered that he left with the shepherds early everyday but he returned late at night, he followed him secretly to see him standing near a well in the road praying for a long time. The next day he accompanied his son not to the shepherds but to his uncle Pegol, founder of the White Monastery

WITH HIS UNCLE PEGOL

In the White Monastery, Shenouti's father asked Abbot Pegol to bless the boy, but the Abbot held the boy's hand, put it on his head, saying, "I am in need of this boy's blessing for he is a chosen vessel of Christ who will serve Him faithfully all his life."

The remarkable progress of this boy, attracted Abbot Pegol and all the monks. One of the elders saw his fingers, in one day, alight like candles when he stretched out his hands in prayer

In 383 A.D., Shenouti succeeded his uncle Pegol as an Abbot of the White Monastery, setting out a severe order of monasticism.

HIS MONASTIC RULES

St. Shenouti's coenobitic order differs from that of St. Pachomius, and is more strict than it

Its main outlines can be summarised in the following points

1 - The novice spent a probationary period in certain houses outside the walls of the monasteries and not inside them as in the Pachomian order

A written undertaking was signed by the novice before he became a monk, and was recited by him before the brethren in the church. The signed and witnessed undertaking was kept in the monastery archives

I promise before God in this holy place, as the word that my mouth promises is my witness. I do not wish to stain my body in any manner. I do not wish to steal, I do not wish to take false oaths, I do not wish to do evil secretly. If I transgress that which I have promised, I do not wish to enter the kingdom of heaven, for I see Him, God, before whom I have pronounced the formula of the covenant. Let Him annihilate my soul and body in the gehenna of fire, for I will have transgressed the formula of the covenant I have pronounced

There is no mention of the classical promises of poverty, chastity and obedience, although these were implied in the cenobitic pursuit of perfect morality

2 - Every monastery was ruled by an Abbot, who in return was the subject of the Archimandrite, as the Abbot of all monasteries

Four general assemblies were held yearly where all monks, even the anchorites were present, to discuss the position of these institutions

3 - Concerning worship, short prayers were recited by every group of monks before the beginning of their work

Private prayers consisted of psalms and Church hymns, which were recited in the cells under the guidance of the spiritual father

Common prayers were also performed by monks who assembled four times daily for this purpose, in the morning, noon, sunset and at night They assemble¹ and departed in complete silence, thinking only of the prayers they have recited

Besides that the Eucharistic liturgy was performed weekly. The families and all people who dwelt near the monasteries were permitted to visit the monasteries on Saturdays, attend the Vespers service, hear the sermon and participate with the monks in the Eucharistic liturgy on Sundays. The monks fed these multitudes and St. Shenoute himself preached them

4 - He established two schools in the White Monastery and encouraged the monks to be educated. Since he believed that education is the effective

Weapon against pagan customs, he felt responsible for the establishment of schools in the nearest villages

POLITICAL LEADER

St. Shenouti lived in one of the most critical instants in Egyptian history, when a great gulf was created between the Egyptians and Byzantine people. The Egyptian peasants lived almost as slaves, worked hard to the advantage of the Byzantine tyrant rulers or the aristocratic class

In spite of his great zeal to practice the eremitic life he had taken himself over to plead for the oppressed in the courts, and if he failed he would write to the Emperor himself.

Thus he pushed his people not to surrender to oppression, but to struggle till the end. He created Egyptian nationalism or Coptism. For this reason he used the Coptic language in his preaching and not the Greek

In a general meeting he stirred up the multitude saying

The hearts of those rulers are filled with wickedness, counterfeits injustice and covetousness. They have one aim ; to collect money at the expense of the poor who are the victims

Who can enumerate the sufferings which the people bear by those rulers ?

I know someone who finds no food to eat nor to feed his animals

I think they want to make Egyptians their slaves, put the yoke on their shoulders

SOCIAL REFORMER

According to St. Shenouti worship is correlated to social life, and religion is practical love and piety.

St. Shenouti with his thousands of monks were not isolated from the Egyptian community. For example when some thousand people were captured by the Blemye invaders of Upper Egypt, he met the leaders of those invaders and convinced them to take the spoils and leave the captured people. He opened his monastery to those captured people to settle there for three months. All the monks devoted their time to their service, seven

monks who were doctors used to treat the Wounded. During this period ninety-four people died and were buried in the monastery, while fifty-two babies were born. Eight thousand and five hundred "Ardab " of wheat were consumed, besides the great amount of lentiles, oil, beans, etc... We can imagine what was the number of those guests who lived in the monastery for this long period, and how the monks believed in practical love as above any monastic canon or rule

HIS PREACHING

We have seen that St. Shenouti opened his monasteries to the people on Saturdays and Sundays. He used to explain to them the Holy Scriptures giving special interest in uprooting heathen custom.

His eloquence helped him in overcoming the pagans of Ikhmim Sometimes he used violence, as he stirred up the multitudes in wrecking the ancient pagan monuments and temples

HIS ASCETIC STRUGGLE

St. Shenouti used to practice severe ascetic actions. For example, Besa his disciple told us that" On the holy week Shenouti made a cross and tied himself upon it for the whole week. He did so as if he wished to suffer with his Master... He used to be fed with bread and salt for many days, and spent many nights in praying

HIS TEMPTATIONS

St. Shenouti underwent many demonic temptations, but which by faith and righteousness he conquered

Once a devil appeared to him in the shape of an angel, saying to him

Hail, oh struggling saint... The Lord has sent me, for you are righteous and have struggled too much. You have experienced enough toils and ascetic actions in this wilderness, now go to the countries to guide men

St. Shenouti replied to him modestly, " If you have been sent by the Lord, stretch out your hands in a shape of the Cross, the sign of your Lord Jesus

On hearing these words the devil fled away as he could not bear the name of the Saviour and His Cross.

HIS MIRACLES

I mention some miracles which are attributed to St. Shenouti:

1 - Once as the saint knew that the wheat would not suffice and there was no money to buy some, he assembled twenty monks in church and prayed. Then God blessed the wheat so that it sufficed and surpassed all need.

2 - Once while all the monks were assembled together at night in the winter, three revered men, who looked like angels, entered and participated in worshipping, then departed. When the monks asked their Abbot Shenouti about those three whom he accompanied to the outer door, he replied, " They are John the Baptist, Elijah the Prophet and his disciple Elisha ; they came to comfort us and strengthen us, for they also lived in the wilderness like us

3 - It is said that when an ambassador of the Emperor Theodosius the Little asked him to accompany him to bless the Emperor he excused himself because of his multitude of responsibilities. As the ambassador threatened him that he would use violence, he entered the church and prayed. Suddenly he was borne to the Emperor by a cloud, blessed him and brought from him a message to his ambassador signed by his seal

4 - It is also related that on his return to Egypt from Ephesus after attending the Ecumenical Council, the sailors who did not know him refused to accept him on the ship where St. Cyril of Alexandria was on board. While the ship was sailing St. Cyril saw St. Shenouti and his disciple Besa borne on a cloud. He cried, " Bless us, our father, O Saint, the new Elijah !

I have to mention that this Saint who was granted to perform great miracles had his own weakness. According to Besa his disciple, St. Shenouti after returning from Ephesus visited the monastery of Amoun at Nitria. There he was astonished how the monks ate meat ; he began to condemn them secretly in his mind. The brother who was in charge of the kitchen ordered one of the monks to put his hand inside the pot while the food was boiling and bring a piece of meat. St. Shenouti was astonished how the monk's hand was not injured and believed that holiness does not depend on the kind of food one eats

HIS WRITINGS

St. Shenouti is the most outstanding Christian writer in Coptic. According to Besa, he left a great number of letters and sermons, most of the former - addressed to monks and nuns - deal with monastic questions, others combat the practices of pagans and heretics. His sermons are spirited and predominantly eschatological in character

In addition, several apocalypses and visions are attributed to him.

HIS SAYINGS

* It is of great benefit to visit the places of martyrs and saints to pray and to be sanctified by receiving the Holy Communion in Christ's fear But he who visits these places to enjoy pleasures, to eat, drink, play commit sins and to be drunken... he angers the Lord who says : " My House will be called a house of prayer, but you are turning it into a robber's den " Mat 21:13

Therefore whoever comes to the feasts of martyrs to spoil the Lord's Temple, falls under condemnation and is cursed instead of attaining the blessing of the Martyr's prayers

* After receiving the Holy Communion, one has to hurry to one's cell joyfully and in peace

Nobody must speak with his neighbour before or after the assembly except if there is a necessity for the congregation's benefit... Thus we preserve the innumerable graces we attain

1 - Quasten **V.** 3 p. 185

2 - Atripe is situated on the West bank of the Nile by the modern Suhag facing Panapolis or Ikhmim

3 - H. Leclercq & H. Marrou Dictionnaire d'archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie vol 2 p3116.

J.A. N4ohler p 61

5 - I. Quasten Patrology vol 3.

EARLY MONASTICISM AMONG WOMEN

Monasticism, in all its forms, was adopted by women, for they were not any less than men in their love towards God. The Gospel states that many women followed our Lord Jesus Christ to his cross and to his tomb earnestly desiring to devote their lives to worship him

According to St. Luke, our Lord Jesus Christ praised Mary-Martha's sister-who preferred to sit down by the Lord's feet to listen to His divine words, than to wait on Him like her sister. He said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful; and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10 41, 42)

Thus Mary is the first Christian person who is counted as a living example of true monastic life, i.e., the life of contemplation

St. Mary, the Theotokos, was presented to those who lived in " the houses of the virgins " at Alexandria, as the great model of the virgins She was depicted by the virgins as " the virgin of virgins " and their patroness

COMMUNITY OF VIRGINS

Since the first century, many women preferred to live in virginity, not despising the conjugal life but devoting all their lives to their spiritual Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Those holy virgins played a vital role in the early Christian church, and had a special place in the hierarchy of the early church. As well as worshipping God, they also tended to the welfare of the widows, orphans, the elderly and the sick

Communes of virgins were called “ parthenons St. Anthony had entrusted the care of his sister to one of those communes

Some virgins lived in their houses. One of those virgins is St. Amoun’s wife. About 297 A.D., Amoun was compelled by his uncle to marry. He lived with his wife for eighteen years as a brother and sister. Not only did she love the chaste life of virginity but she also recognized the excellence of the solitary way. She asked him to leave her in the house and go on to

build himself a cell in the mountain of Nitria, coming back to visit her twice a year

It is worthy to note that one of the charges leveled against early Christians was that they persuaded young girls to refuse marriage. Sometimes persecutions rose because of the refusal of a Christian virgin to be married to a nonbeliever who happened to be a ruler or nobleman. One of those virgins was Theodora of Alexandria, who was martyred during the Diocletian persecution

WOMEN’S CONVENTS

The first monastic community in the world for women was founded in Alexandria by St. Syncletica who has been considered the “ Mother of nuns ‘ ‘. Her biography and teachings have been preserved by St. Athanasius the Apostolic. Though she intended to live a solitary life many young women were attracted by her spirituality and her teaching and ended staying with her. She lived till the age of eighty and never failed to lead her daughter nuns by her words or her example even when she was downtrodden by cancer in the last three and a half years of her life. It was with tears that St. Athanasius wrote about her terminal sufferings and he likened them to the sufferings of Job. But three days before her death she had a vision of heaven and she left this life in an ecstasy

St. Pachomius was the founder of two women’s convents. One was in Tabennesis, near Dandra, in Upper Egypt, comprised of some four hundred nuns and administered by his sister Mary. It was in this convent that St. Theodore’s (Tadros) mother decided to stay when her son refused to see her. It was then that she herself chose monasticism, saying, “ I shall not only see him one day among the brothers, but I, too, shall gain my soul. “ The other convent was founded across the Nile from Tismenae.

The rules inscribed by St. Pachomius were the same for men as they were for women,except for the domestic side,where monks for instance would take care of the building of monasteries while sewing was left to the nuns

St. Palladius refers to this fact, that apart from the priest and deacon no man went across to the Pachomian women's convents, and the priest and deacon went to the nunnery only on Sundays.~

St. Palladius also tells us about a certain ascetic called, " Elias who had a great concern for the virgins... He showed compassion on the order of women ascetics and, as he had income and property in Athribe⁵ he built for them a large monastery. He looked after them, providing them with every refreshment, gardens, household utensils and everything their life required

NUNS IN THE DESERTS

The angelic life of the desert fathers attracted even Coptic and foreign women, who put on the attire of monks and lived in cells as if they were men, struggling for the perfect life, not less than many famous abbots such as St. Hilaria, St. Anastasia and St. Appolinaria

Some foreign abbesses came to Egypt and visited its desert to be guided by the Coptic monks, like St. Melania who was able to visit Egypt in 374 A.D., and her granddaughter Melania the younger who visited it in

418 A.D.

We also cannot ignore St., Mary of Egypt who was converted in Jerusalem. For forty-eight years, she dwelt in the desert beyond Jordan seeing nobody, except St. Zosima twice in the last two years of her life

EXAMPLES OF NUNS AND FEMALE HERMITS⁶

1 - Abbess Sarah

Many abbesses were bestowed with the grace of true leadership and spiritual discernment. They guided many nuns and sometimes gave counsel to them as well as to monks. Some of their sayings were treasured by the desert Fathers.

One of those abbesses was Sarah, she lived in Pelusium, and her sayings were mentioned in the **"Apothegmata,"** from which I quote the following texts

- It was said about Abbes Sarah that for thirteen years she was fiercely attacked by the demon of lust; and she never prayed deeply that the battle should cease, but all that she used to ask of God was, "O God, grant me strength!"

- Once the same spirit of lust attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and maintained the rigor of her fasting and went up to the roof to pray. Then the spirit of lust appeared to her in a bodily form and said to her, "Sarah, you have overcome me." She replied, ' It is not I who have overcome you, but my Lord Christ!"

- It was mentioned that for sixty years she lived beside a river and never lifted her eyes to look at it.

- Once some monks of Scetis came to visit Abbess Sarah. As she offered them a small basket of fruit, they ate the bad fruit and left the good. So she said to them, "You are true monks of Scetis."

- Another time, two old men, great anchorites, came to Pelusium to visit her. When they arrived, one said to the other, "Let us humiliate this old woman." So they said to her, "Be careful not to become deceived saying to yourself, 'Look how anchorites are coming to see me, a mere woman.'" But Abbess Sarah said to them, "According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts."

- She also said to some brothers, " It is I who am a man (struggling violently against sin), you who are women (brides of Christ)."

Among her other sayings mentioned in the *Apothegmata*:

- "When I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, I place death before my eyes before lifting up the other foot."

- "It is good to give alms for men's sake; even if it is only done to please men; through this one can begin to seek to please God."

- "If I asked God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should be doing penance at the door of everyone. But I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all, while I am far from all of them."

2 - St. Hilary-The Eunich⁸

Zeno, the good emperor (474-491) was once very depressed, due to the fact that his older daughter (18 years) had been lost for a long time and his other daughter, Theopesta was possessed by an evil spirit. She was sent to the elders in Scetis to pray for her

When Theopesta arrived at Scetis, many monks assembled for prayer requesting God's mercy, and after a few days, they asked St. Hilary, the Eunuch to take her in his cave and pray for her. He refused at first, but under pressure he eventually accepted the princess in his cave and began praying till morning. The Lord granted her complete healing and all the monks were pleased because they loved the emperor for his goodness

The emperor, the empress and the court were pleased at the arrival of the princess and the emperor immediately sent to the monks of Scetis inviting St. Hilary to the palace in order to receive his blessings. With many tears St. Hilary accepted

St. Hilary was warmly received in the palace; and soon afterwards, the emperor and his wife asked him secretly; " Our father, why did you embrace and kiss our daughter all night ?" St. Hilary promised to tell them if they would promise not to prevent him from returning to his cave ! With this he said to them " I am your daughter Hilaria."

Immediately they embraced her, asking her to stay with them in the palace. But she told them that she was more happy in her monastic life than in her former life

Three months later, she reminded them of their promise, and how she had asked them not to tell anybody about her true identity, for nobody in the desert knew her as a woman except her spiritual father" Pomei "who had guided her for three years. She then went and lived in a cave for five years

The disguised monk returned to Egypt bearing a message from the emperor to the ruler of Alexandria, Stating that he should provide the monks with wheat and oil every year. Also many buildings were established in Scetis by emperor Zeno

St. Hilary lived in the cave for another five years. She preferred the desert to her parents' palace

3- ST. MARY OF EGYPT (9)

On my visit to the Holy Trinity Monastery at Jordanville, N.Y., I was thrilled to see the icon of St. Mary of Egypt occupying the principal place in the hail. In Paris there is a small chapel in the cathedral of “ Notre Dame “ carrying the same of the same Saint. Also in the museum of arts in Philadelphia, there is a wonderful icon for this Egyptian ascetic

IN THE WILDERNESS

At the beginning of Lent, the gates of the monastery by the river Jordan were opened, and the monks were going out singing their psalms. They crossed the river and scattered far and wide in different directions to spend the whole period of fast in the desert thinking of nothing except the fatherhood of God, devoting most of their time to the deepest fellowship with our Saviour. On palm Sunday, they were accustomed to return to the monastery. Abbot Zosima went far and deep into the desert. He was contemplating the divine grace which helped him to live in one of the monasteries of Palestine, from his childhood till his early fifties... He was on and of with thoughts of pride asking himself, “ Is there a monk on earth who could be of help to me and show me a kind of asceticism that I have not achieved ? Is there a man to be found in the wilderness who has surpassed me ?

Suddenly an angel appeared to him and led him to the monastery by the river Jordan, where he witnessed ascetic practice and angelic life. He was humiliated in his own eyes

On the 20th day of his spiritual journey, and while he was praying, he caught sight of something that looked like a human form, with long silver grey hair

Is it an illusion? “

Is it a ghost?! “

Is it the deceit of the devil ? He turned his sight and realized that it was a human form, naked, its

skin was dark as if burned by the heat of the sun He was overjoyed, hoping to find one of the holy hermits of the wilderness, who devoted all their lives to fellowship with the true friend Jesus Christ, our Savior. He ran in pursuit of that figure but it began to run away from him. When he approached it, he shouted, "why did you run away from me, O servant of God Wait for me, in God's name, I tell you. Why do you flee from such an old man as me?" As he said these

words he saw as if the human figure had fallen into a hole among the rocks He knelt down and began to cry as a child, and the echo of his crying filled all the desert." For Jesus' sake forgive me Abbot Zosima,for I cannot turn towards you I am an woman and I am naked Throw me your cloak so that I may cover my body and turn to you and ask for your blessing !" He was astonished for she knew him and called him by his name He threw his cloak,she picked it up and covered her body Then she turned to Abbot Zosima and said, " Why did you wish, Abbot Zosima,to see a sinful woman ? What do you wish to learn or hear from me ? He threw himself on the ground and asked for her blessing,but she bowed down before him saying, " Abbot Zosima, it is for you to give blessings You have been blessed with the grace of priesthood, and for many years you have-been standing before the holy altar and offering the sacrifice of the Divine Mysteries ". But with tears he said to her, " O honourable mother, I see that you have died to the world God granted you wonderful graces, for you have called me by name and recognized that I am a priest though you have never e%1 me before I ask you to give me your blessing for God's sake,for I need your prayers." In face of his supplications she was obliged to say, "Blessed be God who cares for the salvation of men and their souls." He answered, " Amen

They rose up Then she asked him, " Why have you come man of God, to see such a woman who is naked and devoid of every virtue ?! !" Then she asked him about the Christian peoples, the shepherds, and the kings Abbot Zosima said, " By your holy prayers, O mother, Christ has granted peace to all But I beseech you to pray for the whole world and for me the sinner.

She replied, "You who are a priest, Abbot Zosima pray for me and for all, for this is your calling But as we must all be obedient, I will gladly do what you ask." Then she turned to the east and raising her eyes to heaven and stretching out her hand she began to pray for a long time

This is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, who opens the hearts of all men, so that, even he who is in the desert and does not see anybody, eagerly desires the salvation of all the world Though she was in the desert, she was not in isolation from the church, but she was a living member, asking for all her brothers

IN EGYPT

Waiting for a long time, he looked up at her while she was praying then he fell on the ground weeping and repeating many times" Lord have mercy ". He could see the woman's feet rising about a cubit from the earth as if she was flying He doubted if she was a spirit or if her prayers were hypocritically said At this moment she turned round towards him,lifted him up and crossed her body saying to him" May God,O abbot Zosima, protect us from the evil one and from his snares, for his struggle against us is fierce !" Hearing and seeing this,he importunately asked her to tell him her story and how she had come to the wilderness, saying

"I beseech you,for the sake of Christ our Lord who was born of the Virgin hide not from me,your servant,who you are,and whence and when and how you have come to the wilderness Tell me everythin~,that the mighty works of God be made manifest for you shall not tell me these things for the sake of vainglory or for some other purpose but in order to disclose the truth to me,who am sinful and unworthy I believe that God for whom you live and whom you serve, le'1 me into this wilderness to show me His ways concerning you It is not in your power to resist the plans of God..." She replied, "I am much ashamed, my father, to tell you about my disgraceful life Forgive me for God's sake I am not running away form vainglory as you have thought, but your ears cannot hear my wickedness You will run from me as if from a snake." " I will tell you everything's ,in order that you may pray unceasingly for me,that I may find mercy in the day of judgment.." Then she started to tell her story with tears... running down her cheeks " My motherland was Egypt When I was 12 years old I rejected my parent's love and went to Alexandria." When I remember how I lost my virginity there at the very beginning and gave myself up to sensuality, I become ashamed It is better to recount about all this briefly, so that you should know about my passion and my love for pleasure When I was about 17 years, I lived like a fire of vice that burns people I seduced many, not for the sake of gain, but often when they wished to pay me, I refused the money I did not believe in God, but I used to say, " I shall do just as I like, and no one will stop me "Once I saw a large crowd of Libyans and Egyptians running towards the sea I asked one of them, where these men were hurrying to He replied, they were journeying to Jerusalem for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross of Our Lord which was to take place in a few

midday. At last I came out of the church and stood by the icon of the Theotokos the Virgin, the place where I had made my vow. I shouted from my heart “ Glory to God who accepts the repentance of sinners through Thee, O Loving Lady. What more can I say, ‘I who am so sinful? It is time for me, O Lady to fulfil my vow, Now lead me by the hand upon the path of repentance! Then I heard this voice, and believed that it was for me,“ If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest.“ Having heard this voice, I went and cried to the Theotokos, O Lady, forsake me not 7’ With these words I came out of the entrance of the church and hurriedly set off on my journey. One of the pilgrims glanced at me and gave me three pieces of silver. I took them and bought three loaves of bread which I took for my journey... I passed the gates of the city and went on my journey, in tears. At sunset I reached the Church of St, John the Baptist which stood on the banks of the Jordan. I passed all night weeping in the church. In the morning I partook of the Holy Mysteries and went out to the shore and crossed to the other side. I found myself in the wilderness and all then up to this day I have been estranged from people, I have been living here cleaving to my God Who delivers all those who turn to Him, from all that defiles them and from all temptations that are stirred against them. Abbot Zosima asked her, “ O lady, how many years have passed since you began to live in this wilderness ?“

- About forty seven, I think

- Have you lived all these years without suffering, because of the change that occurred in your life ?

- You are asking me Abbot Zosima, about things that I tremble to speak about. If I call to mind all the hardships that I have overcome, all the terrible thoughts that have troubled me, I fear that I may come under their influence once more

- Don’t hide anything from me, my lady

- Believe me, Abbot, I spent seventeen years in this wilderness fighting wild beasts. At first, life was

extremely hard in the wilderness. I used to yearn for my past life, my friends, the good time we had spent together and for all the food and drink and the fine things I used to have in Egypt. Here in the wilderness, it was hard to find even a drop of water to drink. I grieved sorely and was faint from thirst and hunger, and from the heat of the sun. Life was unbearable. I was often sick and I almost died. As the memories of my old life persisted in attacking me, I flung myself on the

ground and, in tears, I begged the Lord to help me... How can I tell you about the thoughts which urged me on towards trust once more? They were like a fire in my miserable heart which seemed to burn it up completely and roused in me the desire for pleasures. Finally I felt great peace in my soul the Lord gave me what I wanted. I had mourned much for my wicked past and I was finally comforted by God... As Abbot Zosima heard her quoting extracts from the Scriptures, he asked her

- And where did you learn the Holy Scriptures?

- I have not seen a human face since I crossed the Jordan, except yours today... I have not learned from books, but the Word of God Himself alive and acting, gives man knowledge, and this is the end of my story. As I asked you at the beginning, I now also beseech you by the Incarnate Word of God, to pray the Lord for me as I am a sinner. Having said this

she bowed her head for a moment, in meditation, then turned to Abbot Zosima again saying:

I beseech you, holy father, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour, to tell nobody of what I told you until I am set free from this earth and now depart in peace. Next year in Lent, do not cross the Jordan as is the custom in the monastery. Stay there in the monastery, for even if you wished to go out, it would be impossible for you to do so. On Holy Thursday, wait for me on the banks of the Jordan with the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ in a sacred vessel." Then she disappeared in the depths of the wilderness. Abbot Zosima, falling upon his knees, and prostrating himself upon the earth on which her feet had stood, gave glory and thanks to God, and again crossing that wilderness, he returned to the monastery on the same day that was assigned for the return of the monks. For a whole year he kept silent, not daring to tell anyone of what he had seen. He prayed God to see her again. That year seemed very long to the saint who wished if it could be shortened into one single day. When Lent began, he was very ill and lay in bed with fever, then he remained in the monastery as she had told him. On Maundy Thursday he took the life-giving Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; and put into a basket some figs and dates and a small quantity of lentils that had been soaked in water. Having reached the bank of the Jordan he sat down waiting for her. He waited for a long time. Then he began to doubt that his unworthiness might have prevented her from coming or that she had come and not finding him, she had gone back. Then he raised his eyes to heaven and began to pray asking God that he might see the face of the ascetic by

God's will. After praying, he saw her coming on the surface of the water towards him, and when he wanted to prostrate himself before her she cried to him while still walking on the water, "What are you doing Abbot? You are a priest and you are carrying the Divine mysteries !!" With joy and peace, she asked him to bless her and took part in the holy Communion. She raised her arms towards heaven and sighed with tears, saying, "O Lord, now let Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for my eyes have seen Thy salvation." She then looked towards the father and said, "Forgive me, Abbot for I have another favour to ask, go back now to the monastery and may the Grace of God preserve you. Next year come again to the same place where you first met me. Come and you will see me again for such is the will of God." He answered her, "I long to go after you in the wilderness following your example." He asked her to take the small amount of food that he had brought her. She touched the lentils with the tip of her fingers and took three grains, put them in her mouth saying that the grace of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to keep the nature of the soul undefiled, and again she asked him to pray for her. Then she crossed the Jordan passing over the water, and disappeared in the wilderness, and he went off sighing sorrowfully. Another year passed, and he again went into the wilderness. He reached the same spot but he saw her dead body lying on the sand. Zosima felt very sad and knelt down beside her, weeping for a long time, praying the psalms that are suitable for such occasions... After a little while, he began to wonder where he should bury her body. But he noticed something written on the sand near her head, "Abbot Zosima, On the night of the Lord's passion, Maundy Thursday, I went to my Saviour. Bury the body of humble Mary in this very place. let dust return to dust and pray the Lord for me..." Father Zosima was astonished how she returned to this place after her partaking of the Divine Communion last year on the same day at the same hour and died, and how her body remained without decay throughout the whole year. At that moment a lion came out of the wood, licked her feet and began to dig a hole large enough to bury the body. The father washed her feet with his tears, calling on her to pray for all, and then he covered the body with earth

- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept, Melbourne 1978, p.65-67
- 2 - Derwas Y. Chitty The Desert, A City London 1977, p. 2
- 3 - Palladius His. Laus. 33.2
- 4- Ibid29:1.
- 5 - The present Atripe, St. Shenute had established a monastery of nuns nearby and Elias may have been their confessor

- 6 - I have already written a small book, St. Mary of Egypt “ in English and Arabic, Alexandria, 1974

- 7 - Benedicta Ward The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Oxford, 1975, p. 192. Owen Chadwick Western Asceticism, London, 1978, p. 62, 87, 121. Wallis Budge The Paradise of the Holy Fathers, London, 1907
- 8 - A.J. Wenainck Legends of Eastern Saints, Vol. II, Leyden 1913. The legend which probably goes back (in Coptic) to the sixth century, is valuable for the picture of Scetis that it gives us. The story of St. Hilary is a verified, historical fact, accepted by many ancient and contemporary historians, in spite of what appears in it as fictitious elements. Her feast day is January 29 (Coptic Synxarium Tubah 21)
- 9 - St. Sophronius (7th century) The life of St. Mary of Egypt, translated by the Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y.

The life of St. Mary of Egypt, translated by the Monastery of the Veil of the Virgin Mary, Paris
 Lydia Kesich They walked with God

EGYPTIAN MONASTICISM

AND

THE CHRISTIAN WORLD

The rise of monasticism in Egypt has been the most profound spiritual revival that ever happened in all the history of the Church . People from everywhere and of all ranks of society were drawn to the Egyptian deserts to practise angelic life under the guidance of the Egyptian fathers . The monasteries became swarmed with monks from different nations Greeks ,Romans ,Cappadocians ,Libyans ,Syrians ,Nubians ,Etheopians and others

In the fourth and fifth centuries ,Egypt had come to be regarded with great reverence throughout Christendom ,it had also gained the reputation of being the land of piety .Its monastic leaders were regarded as the prototype of Christian monks in all the world

Pilgrims came to visit and pay homage to its many saints .Writtings of the pilgrims ,experiences are among the most interesting of the early

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church literature

The spirituality and rules of Egyptian monastic systems had a profound effect on both eastern and western church life

What follows is only a brief account of the effect of Egyptian monasticism on the whole christian world

St. Athanasius, Pope and doctor, who came to sit at St. Anthony's feet, was greatly responsible for the introduction of the monastic movement into the Roman religious life during his exile in Trêve (336-337). In 339 A.D. he was forced to flee to Rome together with two monks, Ammonius and Isidore, whose simplicity and holiness impressed all.

2. St. Athanasius wrote his book *Vita Antonii* about 357 A.D., as he felt an obligation to become the historian of St. Anthony and he hoped by this work the western church would follow St. Anthony's example of holiness.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus rightly called this book "rules of monastic life in narrative form"³.

This biography was soon translated into Latin twice. This played an important part in introducing the idea and the ideals of monasticism to the west.

It was the same book that St. Augustine, the father of North African monasticism, read at a decisive moment of his conversion. He never visited Egypt, but he was inspired by this book and described it as having shattering effects on him and on many of his contemporaries.

3. The Pachomian rules of Coenobitism had an extraordinary influence on all subsequent monastic legislation. It was translated into Greek by St.

Palladius in his *Lausaic History*, and translated into Latin by St. Jerome. St. Basil, the founder of the Byzantine monasticism, visited

Egypt (in 357-358 A.D.) and was profoundly impressed by what he saw

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there of the Pachomian monasteries. He made use of it in the formation

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of his monastic rules. But he left that the Pachomian monasteries were too large, veritable *deserts* over which the abbot was the administrator. Rather, the monastery should be small enough so that the superior could be a father to his monks.

The rules of Fr. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550 A.D.), who is known as being "the Father of Western Monasticism," reminds one of its Egyptian counterpart in many passages.

Fr. Benedict of Aniane (c. 750 A.D. - 821 A.D.) is known to have made use of the Pachomian rules in his great reform.

4. St. John Cassian (360 A.D. - 435 A.D.) who searched the world for perfection, found it only in the humble and simple monks of Egypt.

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-the home of sanctity

John Cassian, born and raised in Southern Gaul of rich parents, who educated him well, decided to undertake a pilgrimage with his friend Germanus to the Holy Land. It was in Bethlehem that they took monastic vows, within the cave of Nativity. In the presence of the Bethlehem community they took an oath to visit Egypt and return back⁹. Soon after arriving in Egypt (c. 385 A.D.) they were convinced they had known

nothing of perfection before Egypt. It was apparently obvious that to leave Egypt would do great injury to their souls. St. Cassian stayed seven years in Egypt, where he was much influenced by Evagrius Ponticus.

We next hear of him as a deacon of the Church of Constantinople where he was sent by St. John Chrysostom on an embassy to Pope Innocent I. After this he seems to have established himself permanently in the West. About 415 A.D. he founded two monasteries near Marseilles; there he wrote his famous two books *The Institutes* and *the Conferences*. These books dealt with the life, habits, wisdom and institutions of Egyptian monasticism. *The Institutes* "counsels the perfection of the outer man, sets out the ordinary rules for monastic life and discusses the eight chief hindrances to a monk's perfection. It was taken as the basis of many Western Rules. It was written for beginners in monastic life. *The Conferences* recount his conversations with some great leaders of Coptic monasticism, concerning the inner man of contemplation.

5. Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) who occupied a central place in the

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history of Christian spirituality, lived as a monk for two years in Nitria then fourteen years in the cells

Following the Origenist line, he is, nevertheless, an original thinker and founder of the science of Christian spirituality. He was the first Egyptian monk to write extensively on spirituality and asceticism.

From 553 A.D. onwards he was condemned several times by the Chalcedonian Churches for his Origenistic views.

Palladius stayed with him and admired him. Cassian and Germanus visited the Cells when he was there, and although Cassian does not mention him by name, his works depend on Evagrius with certain modifications, to fit the western mind.

Evagrius also influenced Byzantine thinkers such as John Climacus, Hesychius, Maximus the Confessor, Dorotheus, Simeon the New Theologian and also various Syrians

6. St. Jerome (342-420) and Rufinus (345-410 A.D.) were just two of many fathers that thought of gaining knowledge of monasticism by flocking to Egypt.

St. Jerome, the most outstanding spiritual guide of the Roman virgins is known to have said, "Let us, monks, take the lives of Paul, Anthony, Julian, Hilarion and Macarius as examples which we must follow."

St. Jerome accompanied St. Paula (347-404 A.D.), a Roman widow and a mother of five children of noble birth, in his trip to Egypt. They stayed a long time at Nitria, visited the Scetis and met St. Macarius the Great. From 386 A.D. she settled permanently in Bethlehem, where she founded a convent of nuns and a Monastery of monks.

St. Rufinus Tyrannius was born near Aquileia in north Italy; he went to a school in Rome where he became friend with St. Jerome. About 372 A.D. he went to Egypt, where he met St. Melania the Elder and visited the monks of Nitria. He also visited Scetis and the Cells and met personally many of the Desert Fathers. With St. Melania he founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives. He translated into Latin the now famous work

History of the Monks of Egypt

7. Palladius (c. 365 A.D. - 425 A.D.) bishop of Helenopolis in Bithynia and historian of early monasticism. Probably a native of Galatia, he spent several years with the monks of Egypt, where he was

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pupil of Evagrius Ponticus. His famous "Lausiac History", composed about 419 A.D., is the most valuable single writing that survives on the

history and lives of early Egyptian monks

8. Mar Eugenius (Eugene or Awgin) became a disciple of St. Pachomius. After he left Egypt, he went to Nisibis in Persia, built a monastery in the mountains between 336 and 345 AD. He translated St. Pachomius' rules of cenobitic life to Persian and Syrian about the middle of the fourth century.

According to the Chaldean tradition, seventy Egyptian monks helped St. Eugene in building several monasteries

at Nisibus •12

9. St. Hilarion of Palestine (c. 291-371 A.D.) .the founder of the anchoritic life in Palestine .went to Alexandria to study .During his stay he was converted to Christianity .and under the influence of St. Anthony retired for a short time to the Egyptian desert as a hermit .In 306 he

returned to his own land .where he settled in the wilderness south of Majuma .near Gaza .to live a life of extreme asceticism

10. St. Epiphanius (3 15-403 A.D.) ,bishop of Salamis in Cyprus .A native of Palestine .who had been instructed in monasticism in Egypt .About 335 A.D. , he founded his monastery at Besanduk near Eleutheropolis in Judaea

11 . The” dialogues of Sulpicius Severus . written in Southern Gaul about 430 A.D., by a traveller named Postumian .He recalled in the book what he had seen when he visited Egypt in 399 A.D. This was a very favourable view of Egyptian monasticism

12 . Etheria (Egaria), was only one of the many women to gain instruction in Monasticism .Prabably she was a Spanish abbess or nun in the fourth century .visited Egypt .the Holy Land .Edessa .Asia Minor and Constantinople

13 . St. Melania the Elder (c. 342-410) .a Roman lady of aristocratic descent and great wealth .at the early death of her husband adopted ascetic life .Around 372 A.D. she left Rome for Egypt and Palestine .She was accompanied by Rufinus of Aquileia .and she remained for six months in Nitria

With Rufinus she founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives

14 . St. John Chrysostom stayed in one of the Pachomian monasteries in Upper Egypt from 373 to 381 A.D. 14 He was deeply affected by Coptic monasticism as his words declare [And now ,should you come unto the desert of Egypt .you will see this desert become better than any paradise There you behold thousands of choirs of angels in human form .and Christ’s kingdom shines forth in its brightness .Heaven is not so glorious with the varied choir of the stars .as the wilderness of Egypt .exhibiting all around the tents of the monks¹⁵ .]

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- 3. Oratione 21: 5
- 4. Confessions8:6:14.
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- 12. Coptic Church Review vol 1 no 4 p 163
- 13. Cross : Dict of the Christian Churchp 648
- 14. Coptic Church Review vol 1 no 4 p 163
- 15- lnN4att.hom8:6.

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The Monastic Movement

in the

Coptic church to-day

Usually when the Coptic Orthodox youth get deep religious feelings they are attracted to monastic life more than to preaching . It is due to our monastic education which has penetrated into all aspects of Church life even in its worship . Our church has an ascetic attitude not only within the boundaries of the monasteries and convents but through all its life . In fact we cannot separate the Orthodox Church life into monastic and preaching aspects for we reject dualism , believing that monastic and preaching are but one integral biblical life . True monastic life witnesses to evangelic life and widens the hearts of men to preach even through their worship , love and behaviour.... On the other hand the true preaching life attracts the preacher and those whom he serves to practise - by the grace of God 'and ascetic life according to their own measure

One of the remarkable aspects of the Coptic Orthodox Church to-day is the continuous increase of those who are eager to join monastic life besides the increase in the numbers of the priests and virgins. Now monasteries and convents are absorbed in construction and developement . We hope that many true monastic leaders may be created by God's grace and our monastries will flourish as they were in the fourth and fifth centuries

At present , however , these are in Egypt ten monasteries and six convents . The monasteries are scattered in the diverse desert regions , but the convents are within the cities

The ~en monasteries are

- The Monastery of St. Anthony the Great , in the Eastern desert near the Red Sea

2 - The Monastery of St. Paul the Hermit , in the same desert , in the South East of the former monastery

3-6 - Four monasteries in the Western desert , in Wadi-el Natrun St. Bishoy Monastery ,where His Holiness Pope Shenouda III has established

