Prayer Before Studying Theology:
O good Shepherd, seek me, and bring me home to your fold again. I am like the man on the road to Jericho who was attacked by the robbers, wounded and left half dead. You who are the Good Samaritan, lift me up, and deal favorably with me according to your good pleasure, until I may dwell in your house all the days of my life, and praise you for ever and ever with those who are there.

<div align="right">--Jerome</div>

The Desert Fathers on Prayer, Compunction and Spiritual Direction
- **The *Apophthegmata patrum***

<u>The Need for a More Disciplined Life of Prayer and Deeper Devotion to God:</u>

In the beginning of the fourth century, one finds a new interest in retirement to an intensive life of prayer and self-discipline. In a sense this kind of spiritual drive may simply have previously existed but have expressed itself in other forms: singleness (the order of virgins), the martyrs and confessors, etc.

One popular theory is that the rise of the Egyptian ascetic movement (the "desert fathers") coincides with the decline of persecution and the replacement of the "church of the martyrs" with a church that increasingly coincided with the society as the "official religion" of the Empire. The ascetics therefore emerge as a movement which aimed to transcend the social domestication of religion and they inherited the charismatic authority of the earlier martyrs by practicing a white (i.e. bloodless) martyrdom (see Stewart, p. 31 [VIII]), which involves a recognition of the nearness of death and judgment and a dying to self through which one can be transformed and transfigured by divine love.

The movement's origins, however, preceded the end of persecution (270's to 290's) and claim to rest upon the radical call of the Gospel itself; cf. *Life of Antony* 2-3 (Gregg tr., p. 31).

The Call of the Gospel to Renunciation and Radical Discipleship
- On the need to relativize traditional family relationships in order to respond to Jesus' call to discipleship, see Mk 3:21,31-35; 10:29-30; Lk. 9:59-62; Stewart, pp. 16-18 and 5 (VII).
- Note also the need to leave one's former place and break with one's past (*xeniteia*=being a stranger and an exile) in Stewart, p. 7 (II); compare Heb. 11:13-16; 1 Pet. 1:1,17; 2:11.

- This is not to say, however, that faithful people cannot make an impact by living peculiarly Christian lives in the secular world; note the edifying stories of devout people in secular life in Stewart, pp. 7-8 (IV).

The Meaning and Nature of Askesis

Askesis is a Greek word meaning "practice," i.e. some training regime that helps one to attain a goal.

- *Askesis* is used already in the first century B.C. to denote the training of mind and body to attain a higher way of life (see, e.g. Musonius Rufus on *askesis* as necessary to attain a philosophical life="a life above nature and beyond common human living").
- The idea of accepting certain self-imposed limitations in order to attain a higher and more faithful pattern of life is also found within the Jewish and early Christian traditions.
  - Thus, for example, fasting and afflicting the body (e.g. wearing sackcloth and ashes) are disciplines undertaken to promote repentance, strengthen one in the face of temptation, etc.
    - See e.g. Zech. 7:1-5; Lev. 23:26-32; Est. 4:15-16; etc.
  - One might also think of the limitations accepted by the Nazirites (abstaining from drink, cutting of hair, etc.).
    - See Num. 6:1-8; Jdg. 13:4-5; 16:17.
  - Many of the directions concerning prayer and worship rest upon a broadly similar assumption, namely that body and soul are connected in such a way that the disciplined disposition of the body is necessary if the soul is to become disciplined and be properly disposed.
    - In regard to the idea of withdrawing from certain ordinary social responsibilities, see
      - Mt. 19:12 and 1 Cor, 7 on giving up marriage for the sake of prayer and of the Kingdom of Heaven and
      - Mt. 19:21 on giving up property/resources.

The early ascetics argued that the person who desired to be saved needed to progress through a process which included:
  (1) faith;
  (2) compunction (*katanuxis*; see Acts 2:37), i.e. a being pierced to the heart by the consciousness of one's sin and of the nearness of death and judgment, leading to the fear of God;
  (3) mourning (*penthos*) for one's sins, sometimes with tears (p. 38 [LV]); compare Mt. 5:4; James 4:8-9 (mourning); Lk. 7:38; Acts 20:19;
  (4) repentance (*metanoia*=change of mind and an active desire for amendment of life)—note the prevalence in these stories of people repenting of and doing penance for sexual immorality, having sacrificed during persecution, etc.;
  (5) withdrawal (*anachoresis*) from what is familiar and from old/received patterns of life

- Detachment/letting go (Chryssavgis, p. 69) and renunciation are necessary to do the will of God in place of one's own will and attain purity of heart.
    - Detachment is contrasted with appropriating/using material things as though they were one's own (Chryssavgis, p. 70).
- The need for withdrawal from traditional roles/responsibilities was particularly acute for women.

(6) training (*askesis*)=a pattern of life that includes self-examination, renunciation of one's own will, simplicity of life, practice of the spiritual disciplines, so that one might not succumb to temptation through negligence and lack of preparation, but rather turn away from sin and the corrupted life of the old self toward Christ and the will of God (see Syst. Ser. 11 in Ward, "Traditions," p. 67)

(7) the goal: prayer without ceasing (see 1 Thess. 5:17) and unbroken inner communion with God in Christ in all times, places and activities (for prayer as hard work, see Ward, "Traditions," p. 61)

The Structure of Early Ascetic/Monastic Life: Three Early Models:
In the early development of the ascetic tradition in the late third and early fourth century, we find three forms of life:
(a) people retiring to a solitary life of prayer and spiritual disciplines on the outskirts of a village, supporting themselves by the keeping of a small garden and perhaps by making some simple crafts (e.g. weaving baskets);
(b) people living together in a house in a city, engaging in a common business (e.g. buying and reselling textiles or basic household goods) and spending time in prayer and mutual encouragement in the Christian life;
(c) persons who had no fixed place or property but moved about (were itinerant) and lived by begging from those they encountered in the cities and villages they passed through;

By the end of the fourth century/beginning of the fifth century, there was an increasing tendency to repudiate these three earlier forms of the ascetic life and prefer for ascetics to be grouped together in an enclosed community (*coenobium*) under the direction of a leader (abbot), following a common rule of life (="cenobitism"/ "cenobitic monasticism"). There were a variety of reasons why this trend emerged and reshaped the Western ascetical tradition:

(1) Earlier models of ascetical life lacked quality control and permanence.
For example, in regard to (c), if a person claims to be a Christian ascetic, how do you that that is actually what they are? If they live alone and are inclined to wander around, how do you know that they are not simply a beggar, a con man, or even a criminal seeking to evade the law?
In regard to both (a) and (c), is there any guarantee that simply by living alone one can learn how to pray or better practice the spiritual disciplines? Perhaps living alone is just a sign of an anti-social character (stubbornness and unwillingness to learn from others, be corrected by others or serve others). Perhaps in living alone one will simply

become lazy and lukewarm in their devotion and there will be no structure or incentives in place that can challenge them and help them overcome these limitations.

- In the East, this concern led to the practice of "spiritual fatherhood," i.e. one taking up the ascetic life receives some sort of apprenticeship/ mentoring in the ascetic life by a well respected, older ascetic.
- In the West, it led to the requirement that persons live together under a rule under the direction of an abbot. (This also happened in the East but generally with less emphasis on uniform structure and less fear of solitary asceticism.)

In regard to (b), there is something odd about being an ascetic and yet owning a house and running a small business in the midst of a big, bustling, noisy city. Shouldn't renunciation of the world and one's possession mean precisely that?

Finally, in regard to (a), (b) and (c), won't such unregulated, independent, self-made ascetics end up clashing with the local clergy, competing with the latter or usurping their authority? If there are two unrelated types of spiritual authority in a parish--one institutional and one charismatic/non-institutional--there is bound to be trouble.

- Note that ascetics came to be viewed as an inspiration and conduit to the divine to whom people could turn in time of need. In this way, those who had renounced secular careers gained a new social power/prestige and often served as powerbrokers who could resolve disputes:
  - The more Antony seeks to withdraw physically from the world, the more he is visited as a holy man, divine power being available through him so that he can play certain new functions in the village and toward enquirers.
  - Athanasius, writing after Antony's death, likewise represents himself as the authority on Antony and uses this to garner support from the monks for his pro-Nicene theological position and his own episcopal career.

If the ascetic community was to function well and persist over time, it was argued,

- all must renounce their claims (e.g. to individual possessions and to control over their individual lives) and
- follow a single set of standardized, relatively impersonal norms (the monastic rule), which the community leader (abbot) is to implement and maintain.
  - Those who wish to join the community must agree to abide by the rule, not contesting the abbot's interpretation of it (lest self-will and stubbornness should create division within the community).
    - Note that vows are for life, after an appropriate process of instruction and probation.
  - After all, it was argued, if the point of asceticism was to devote one's full time and attention to God, could time and effort be saved by organizing together as a community to
    (1) do more efficiently the routine work of preparing and cooking food, eating, cleaning, and generating an income (e.g. by weaving baskets) ;
    (2) praying together in a more disciplined way (regular schedule during the day) and

> (3) having more opportunities for mutual encouragement, exhortation and mutual correction (a more accountable lifestyle as a prerequisite for the pursuit of Christian perfection).

This was the form that eventually became normative in Western monasticism, which is the form of asceticism that is most familiar to us.

The fourth century Egyptian Desert Fathers represent an intermediate stage in this development. They were mostly solitaries ("anchorites") like (a) above, although they increasingly moved from the outskirts of towns to desert settlements in the Egyptian Delta region (Nitria and Scetis), the desert being the archetypal adverse environment--a place of greater loneliness/deprivation/challenge (cf. Christ's temptation in the desert after his baptism).

There was, however, a practice of seeking spiritual guidance from local holy men who were more advanced than oneself in the spiritual life. This could take the form of either a simple enquiry or of living near the holy man/woman as his/her disciple.

The ascetic movement essentially founded an alternative society
- where value was rooted in things other than the things that the broader society valued (wealth, priesthood, etc.; see Chrysavggis, p. 21, top) and
- generally apart from any formalized line of transmission for religious authority (as, for exists, in certain forms of Buddhism).

Status and leadership were instead established charismatically by
- the example of one's life (detachment and devotion to Christ) and
- a reputation for having received discernment or prophetic insight from the Spirit.
    - The immediate breakthrough of supernatural powers into the natural realm is basic to understanding the significance and drama of the ascetic life; trying to make sense of life without this would have seemed a form of insanity to the ascetics.
        - Note the power ascribed to the prayer (intercession) of a righteous man (cf. James 5:16-18) in Stewart, p. 7 (I).
        - Note the relatively common references to a devout monk
            - seeing a vision and hearing a voice (Stewart, p. 32 [VI]) or
            - receiving an edifying interpretation of a vision or visions that had symbolic content (Stewart, pp. 5-6 [XI]).

The life of the holy man (*abba*) or woman (*amma*) thus teaches a lesson, even without the use of words (see Poemen in Ward, "Pastoral," p. 84; for the use of "father" to denote persons who preceded one in the faith, see Lk. 1:55; Jn. 6:31, 49; 1 Cor. 10:1).
More specifically, the holy person's life teaches by displaying the fruit of the Spirit, most notably including
- a genuine humility (see Louf, p. 60 and Ward, "Pastoral," pp. 84-85)

- care for the weak (see Barsanuphius and Poemen in Corcoran, p. 447 and Abba Moses in Ward, "Pastoral," p. 83)
    - Note the value ascribed to various works of mercy and charity
        - giving alms to the poor in Stewart, p. 13 (top) (XI) and *passim*
        - burying the dead in Stewart, pp. 8-9 (V), 42 (II-III)
        - assisting the blind (pp. 9-10 [VI])
- a gentleness and forbearance in dealing with other's weakness (which contrasts with one's very severe attitude toward oneself), out of love waiting for the opportune time to administer correction so that the weak and erring person might be restored and saved (see PE IV,48,1-11 in Louf, p. 54)

"A saintly life is more educative than a sermon" (Cassian, *Conferences*). For this reason, it is not surprising that those who sought isolation became, for this very reason, a kind of tourist attraction and an object of pilgrimage.

The *Apophthegmata patrum*: The Sayings of the Fathers

A variety of enquiries were put to these holy men and women about various aspects of the spiritual life and their answers and narratives about their lives were transmitted in Greek and Coptic and formed the basis for various lives and collections of sayings. The *Apophthegmata patrum* contains accounts of the spontaneous short, pithy sayings by tested and proved persons about how one might break with sin, avoid succumbing to temptation, and find eternal life. (The assumption here is that no one can be saved without passing through temptation and that temptations increase in severity with one's advance in the Christian life, so that even the most advanced persons remain in need of spiritual guidance in order to correctly understand the nature of temptations and discern God's presence in the midst of this struggle.)

The *Apophthegmata* exist in a variety of forms, e.g.
- the alphabetical collection (organized alphabetically by name of the holy man being quoted, i.e. running from Abba Antony to Abba Or);
- the systematic collection (organized by topic, e.g. prayer, fasting, temptation, compunction, etc.);
- the anonymous collection, etc.

The enquiries which they report are generally
- answers to questions posed by others (rather than a conversation that the ascetic initiates),
- do not concern abstract philosophical or theological topics (or even the nuances or contested interpretations of Scripture), and
- do not aim to teach a precept or a method. (More conceptual and exegetical approaches appear later with Evagrius.)

Instead the questioner reveals to a trusted and experienced ascetic the dynamics of his inward life (*exagoreusis*= "manifestation of thoughts") and asks questions regarding
- the persistent thoughts or reasonings (*logismoi*) introduced into the mind (esp. by the powers of evil to tempt one) and

- the passions, sicknesses (unbalanced and excessive emotions) and disordered movements which affect the soul.
  - The emotions are seen as good gifts that can be put to destructive use when they are oriented toward the wrong object/goal or become so forceful that they overstep the bounds of reason/justice.

If the ascetic judges the questioner to possess
- a sincere desire to know God's will.
- a detachment from all selfish desire, and
- a willingness to be obedient to spiritual direction,

the ascetic will offer a short, pithy answer (*apophthegma*). (Sometimes the questioner or would-be disciple must first demonstrate their sincerity, e.g. by fulfilling the ascetic's request to plant a stick in the ground and water it!)

The answer is directed to the specific situation of the person who can receive it and reveals (unveils, brings to light) hidden motivations and aims to heal these by connecting them with Christ's grace.
- For the hiddenness of the motives which must be unveiled, see Poemen 152, "Does he who know he is losing his soul need to inquire? Hidden thoughts are to be questioned, and it is the elders' task to test them; as for visible flaws, there is no need to inquire but to remove them right away." The aim here is to be proactive, so as to avoid falling into temptation; cf. Amélineau 189, 6 in Louf, p. 47.)
- Note the occasional prudential use of dissembling to bring the hearer to his senses in Stewart, pp. 3-4 (IV), 11 (VIII), 11-12 (IX) and compare Cassian's later discussion of this topic.

To be able to answer in this way, the ascetic must have had prior experience of temptation and trial, which is the raw material through which the Spirit acts directly to bring discernment: "For the true guide of the soul is the Holy Spirit and the function of the human director is to help individuals recognize where the Spirit is leading" (Bryant, p. 568; see continuation of quotation there). Experience of temptation and testing is thus a normal prerequisite for discernment ("the ability to read hearts") but never sufficient in and of itself (apart from the direct action of the Spirit) to bring about spiritual insight/discernment. (Cf. Cassian's comment in *Inst*. II,3,5 about inexperienced abbots who want to be a father or director before they have even become a disciple.) The very brevity and pithiness of the answer is essential to its nature and function, taking the focus off the speaker (all the more since the speaker did not initiate the discussion). (Cf. the description of the spiritual guide as a "bearer of the Spirit" and Barsanuphius' remark in Letter 652, "The fathers say nothing in vain, but everything they utter is for the salvation of the soul.")

The word then become more than mere teaching or instruction but takes on a dynamic, quasi-sacramental character.
- The word pierces the heart of the hearer (just as Scripture pierces the heart in Ward, "Traditions," p. 63).

- o This experience is not painless (see Ammoes 2 in Ward, "Traditions," p. 66), <u>which is</u> precisely <u>why obedience and the willingness to renounce one's own will are necessary if one is to learn to see things one doesn't want to see or to deal with things one doesn't want to deal with</u> (see Nau, 641 in Louf, p. 40).
- The person who does arrive, however painfully, at this kind of self-knowledge will have an increased receptivity to the Spirit (as obstacles are torn down), thus laying that foundation from which all other virtues arise.
    - o No amount of effort in the Christian life will be profitable unless it is rightly guided and aims with understanding at the correct goal (cf. Ward, "Pastoral," p. 87); falsely placed self-confidence is deleterious to one's spiritual health.
    - o By contrast, <u>the soul that has</u> arrived at self-knowledge and <u>learned to abandon wrong motives/goals/interpretations and overcome the disordered movements of the passions (*apatheia*) is able to arrive at an inner stillness (*hesychia*) which allows for undistracted prayer</u>, being a person "of one thought" (*monologistos*), <u>which is necessary if one is to pray without ceasing</u> (p. 38 [LII]) and to become so open to the action of God that one continually burns with prayerful desire for God ("the prayer of fire"). Prayer offered in humility and dependence upon God (cf. pp. 22 [IV], 23-24 (VII), 26 [IV], 37 [XL]) drives back the powers of darkness and allows one to rest in communion with God (cf. pp. 27-28 [IX]).

The Role of Holy Women in Counseling the Weak and Erring Toward Salvation
Cf. pp. 14-16, 30-31 (VI) and even 3 (IV).
See further
- Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives and Stories of Early Christian Women*, New York: Paulist Press, 2001.
- Lucio Coco (ed.) and Alex Sivak (tr.), *Meterikon: I detti delle madri del deserto*, Milan: Mondadori, 2002