

# THE FORGOTTEN DESERT MOTHERS



sayings, lives, and stories  
of early christian women

LAURA SWAN

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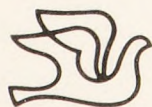
# THE FORGOTTEN DESERT MOTHERS

SAYINGS, LIVES, AND STORIES  
OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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The icon on the cover is entitled *Eight Righteous Women*, written by a monk of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts.

### Back Row (L-R)

*St. Photini*: The name given by the Eastern Orthodox tradition to the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at the well, as told in John 4:1-30. Tradition teaches that she was later martyred.

*St. Melania of Rome*: Melania the Elder (see p. 114).

*St. Eudoxia Samaritan*: A prostitute who converted to Christianity and was martyred.

*St. Pelagia the Penitent*: One of the "desert harlots"; after her dramatic conversion, she journeyed to the desert, where she remained until her death.

### Front Row (L-R)

*Macrina*: Monastic founder from the Eastern Provinces (see p. 128).

*Mary of Egypt*: A desert ascetic whose observance was rather severe.

*Mary Magdalene*: Close friend and companion of Jesus as well as the first witness of the Resurrection (Luke 24 and John 20).

*Mary of Mesopotamia*: The niece of the monk Abraham, who raised her. She followed him into the ascetic life, was seduced by a monk and fell into deep despair. Her uncle sought her out and helped her to receive God's gracious healing and return to the faith. She also became a desert dweller.



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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN I was pursuing graduate studies in theology, I found much of my own religious understanding to be deeply challenged. My studies continually called me to reflect upon my own life experience and understanding of God as the starting place for doing theology. As a strong thinker and avid reader, I had presumed that good theology was strictly rational: If my thinking was clear and I conformed my behavior to rational thought, I would be on the right track.

During my graduate studies I witnessed death, suicide, and changing relationships. I felt a growing awareness of a call to the monastic life. All of this caused me to question my understanding of life and how it *should* be. Transition came upon transition, waves swept over and carried me forward. In this journey, I found myself clarifying values and making choices that moved me inward and closer to God.

I came to know the desert intimately, and all its painful stripping and intense silence. With time, as I learned to listen deep within, what had seemed barren was transformed into abundant simplicity. The deafening silence and the apparent absence of God revealed the idols I held

## *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

dear. God yearned to strip away all my false gods so that I might encounter the authentic I AM.<sup>1</sup> My interior journey was toward inner simplicity...toward fertile soil from whence my truest self might emerge.

I was hardly prepared for the inner revolution that would result when I began to confront the possibility that my own experience had value and meaning. Absolutes crashed down, certitudes faltered, and I questioned everything I believed. I began to discover my inner voice, to listen to my own values, desires, and passions. I was invited to listen to my feelings, emotions, and inner stirrings for the wisdom they contain. I discovered the freedom to stop hauling around the dead wood that had burdened me, the *shoulds* and the *oughts*, the quiet tyrant within that tells me I am not good enough. I was beginning to discover that God's simple abundance is truly abundant.

During this season of transition and inner turmoil, I was introduced to the voices of people from nondominant cultures and differing experiences. I was challenged to stretch my thinking and to recognize the ways in which I am both oppressor and oppressed. I learned to notice those whose voices and life experiences were missing as I read theology and church history.

It was during my period of initial formation in my monastery that I first encountered the desert ascetics. The stark imagery in the stories of these urban and desert dwellers who sought fiery, passionate relationships with God captured me. Unfortunately, with rare exception, the stories were about men. I grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of information on the women who had also dwelt in the desert.

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I began to pursue and collect traces of these women's stories. It often felt like the sleuthing work of Sister Frevisse or Brother Cadfael in the medieval whodunits I enjoy. I found myself tracking down clues, following strands of evidence, and reading the shadows of texts to find these women. Clues often took the form of rare scholarly material, frequently in footnotes and asides.

Women's history has often been relegated to the shadow world: felt but not seen. Many of our church *fathers* became prominent because of *women*. Many of these fathers were educated and supported by strong women, and some are even credited with founding movements that were actually begun by the women in their lives.

Early church histories frequently make brief mention of women dwelling in the desert, living as urban solitaries, or residing in or near monastic communities. Palladius, in his *Lausiac History*, estimated that the women outnumbered the men two to one, yet it is the stories of the men that are preserved and told.

Ancient Christian hagiography can be difficult and heavy reading, even for the most courageous souls. Its writers were more concerned with capturing the heart and essence of the person rather than with historical fact. The stories were written to teach moral concepts and to encourage the hearer. Detailed accounts helped the biographer to highlight teachings, honor the saint, and make the story worth hearing. To assist our twenty-first-century hearts and sensibilities, I retell many of these stories, cutting out the most heavy handed elaboration. Where it is helpful or interesting, I include translated

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excerpts from the original texts to allow the ancient storytellers to be heard.

*The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* was conceived, nurtured, and matured in community. Members of my monastic community introduced me to some of the forgotten voices of the early Christian movement and encouraged me on my pursuit of the many shadow voices that were lurking, waiting to be heard. The Daughters of Christ the King, eagerly seeking to receive the wisdom of the desert and monastic cell, challenged me to make my research available in the form of a book. Karen Barrueto and Billie Mazzei patiently read and made suggestions as I worked on the manuscript. The Timberland Regional Library System put the world at my fingertips. They were amazing in their capacity to locate obscure sources for me.

I live in the most ideal situation for a writer. I dwell in the midst of creative souls who encourage others to pursue their own visions, dreams, and passions. I am among women who know beyond any shadow of doubt that women are created fully and completely in the image and likeness of God. I have discovered that such a strong feminine atmosphere affirms and nurtures the gifts of men as well as those of women. I am privileged with interaction among retreatants, guests, and audiences whose questions keep me probing and searching. Their energy and exuberance for life—and for the things of God—keep me on the quest.

*Laura Swan, O.S.B.  
Lacey, Washington*

## Chapter One

# THE WORLD OF THE DESERT MOTHERS

CHRISTIANITY is a living, emerging, and growing religious movement. Every generation and every culture engages with and interprets the core message and person of Jesus of Nazareth: *We are not stepchildren; we are all born of God!* As the Jesus movement spread throughout the provinces of the empire, every individual and every community wrestled with the meaning this message had for their lives. Diverse expressions—rooted in the gospel message—emerged. The ebbs and flows of growth and renewal, along with individual geniuses who inspired others to the new way of life, supported this diversity. Differing forms of the eremitic and monastic lifestyles emerged side by side. The developments were amorphous and varied.

Christianity was initially a home-centered faith. The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the diaspora of the Jewish community, and the experience of increasing alienation from mainstream culture resulted in domestic

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dwelling becoming the places for community meetings.<sup>1</sup> The local believers gathered in homes for the Lord's Supper and baptism, for worship and for meetings. There was no ordained priesthood as we understand it today. Women presided over their homes, a sphere of authority men would have recognized and honored. Given that the Eucharist, in part, evolved from the Seder, women often would have overseen the breaking of the bread. Sharing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was deeply experiential. Discussion about this most central celebration of belief came later, evolved in systemized fashion, and is called *theology*.

The early believers were concerned with the imminent return of Christ, and with seeking and preparing converts for this longed-for day. The early baptismal statement, quoted by Saint Paul in his letter to the Galatians, "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—for all are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28) deeply shaped the minds of the first followers of the Way. Success varied, especially when there were clashes over authority, leadership, cultural differences, and the understanding of the nature and role of women and slaves. Although never lived out perfectly, oneness in Christ was a deeply held value.

Both women and men were involved in evangelization and works of mercy to the poor, orphans, and prisoners. Women held leadership positions: Ancient tombstones reveal a history of women bearing titles such as *ruler of the synagogue*, *deacon*, *presbyter*, and *honorable woman bishop*.<sup>2</sup> Yet there were struggles in these attempts at integration. Women and slaves shared in the work of evangelization, catechesis, and the building

of faith communities. Some of these faith communities were culturally Jewish, others Greek or Roman, while some emphasized the prophetic gifts.

In the fourth century, Christianity gained acceptance and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. With this transition, leadership within the Christian movement became increasingly public. Social mores required that women remain in the home and out of the public sphere. Despite Galatians 3:28, pressure began to build for women to be removed from public leadership, in conformity with custom.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of this, the believing community was lively and accepting. Women were in positions of leadership, preaching, teaching, and living as ascetics. The church was not yet organized as it is today. Leaders were called forth from the community to serve as teachers, preachers, and in prophetic roles. Prophetic utterances and charismatic healing gifts abounded. Some bishops supported women as prophets and ascetics, while others tried to control and minimize their influence. The prophetic role tended to be outside the increasingly regulated life of the church. It was much easier for bishops to monitor and influence teachers than they could those who claimed to be prophets speaking in the name of God.

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES**

The marginalization of Christianity resulted from societal resistance and persecution by the Roman Empire. Women were deeply attracted to the Christian movement, in which they could exercise freedom they did

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not have in the dominant culture. These were among the numerous factors that affected the development of the eremitic and monastic traditions.

Persecution, martyrdom, and a deep desire for meaning fueled Christians' ardent passion and their willingness to pay a high price to follow Christ. This influenced their spirituality, their search for a challenging and personally fulfilling spiritual journey. They followed the Jewish custom of praying several times a day, and some began to pursue intense lives of prayer. Fasting, voluntary poverty and deprivations, silence, and deep prayer became a way of living a continuous martyrdom once the persecutions ended.

The desire to be like Christ and to live as one in Christ led to experimentation in community living. Some lived in solitude on their family estates or rented small rooms on the edge of their villages. Others began to live together in small groups, frequently in the homes of the wealthy, whose dwellings were usually made up of a series of buildings that could easily accommodate followers and the inevitable guests. Although prayers were shared in a dedicated sacred space within a complex, most urban monastics frequented local churches as well. Customs began to emerge among ascetics and loosely formed monastic communities; along with reflections on the gospel, these customs developed into rules, which in turn became guides for their common life. A monastic and ascetic culture began to emerge.

Christian monasticism began in the home. The first communities usually included relatives, dependents, and household slaves.<sup>4</sup> This inclusiveness had a deep impact upon monastic and desert spirituality. Life was



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centered around times of communal prayer, private prayer, services in local churches, the study of scripture and the writings of the leaders of the movement, and service to the poor. Some experienced a call to move away from the common life toward solitude.

Although monastic communities and solitaries could be found in most cities of the empire, a movement began toward small villages and the desert. Urban Christianity tended to be composed of the middle and upper classes—households often became Christian at the lead of the matriarch and/or patriarch—but desert ascetics and community members were often from the unlettered, rural peasant culture. Urban and literate ascetics were less common, although often more famous. Peasant ascetics preferred a slower and quieter life in the small towns and deserts they were familiar with. Urban ascetics were drawn to the desert for privacy and quiet.

Factors that influenced this movement to the countryside included epidemics, political corruption, social instability including crime, restrictive laws, heavy taxation by the government, persecutions, and later the theological debates within Christianity. Many disciples experienced a conflict between the growing power associated with the institutionalization of the church and the pursuit of holiness. Christianity's move from the margins of society and from the home to the dominant strata of society and the public basilica left some believers feeling that Christianity was compromised. Some felt that the church was in danger of losing its prophetic character and of becoming secularized, and that convenience and political expedience motivated some conversions.

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As Christianity moved into the mainstream, the movement toward the desert and the monastic life increased. Many women had found in Christianity a freedom that enabled them to break with their culture and exercise leadership that they could not in Roman society. In a home-centered, marginal movement, women could preside at meetings in their homes and serve as evangelists, apostles, and teachers.

Unfortunately, women who had played significant roles in the ministry and leadership of Christianity found their participation dwindling as Christianity merged with the larger society and its male leaders grew increasingly uncomfortable with women in public roles. As leadership opportunities within mainstream Christianity decreased, the desert and the monastery offered women a greater sense of physical and spiritual autonomy.

The movement toward desert and monastery occurred at several different levels. As ascetics physically moved away from Roman society, they also began to disengage from its culture. Trappings that revealed their social class, such as fine clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles, were dropped in favor of the common and simple. The ascetics sought to “disappear” by becoming one with other seekers.

The ascetics favored dark or natural colored clothing like that of the poor, and concealed or cropped their hair. Women favored monastic garb and often veiled their heads, frequently choosing to dress as males. They sought to minimize their sexuality as part of their ascetic practice. This was also practical: They were less apt to be bothered by others, especially robbers, if they appeared to be eunuchs.

Christians disapproved of the custom of bathing for several reasons. It was a public activity, and the public baths sometimes mixed the genders. Many Christians associated the public baths with lewd behavior, inappropriate for believers. Some felt that it was inappropriate to see someone else's nude body. Many believed that bathing stirred sexual passions—presumed to be the demon of fornication—and would cause avoidable problems. They did daily battle against their own hormones!

## ENTRANCE TO THE DESERT OR MONASTERY

Those who decided to dedicate themselves to the ascetic life sought a spiritual elder. An *amma* or *abba* was someone seasoned in the ascetic life, who was known to have reached a level of maturity and wisdom and had experience in teaching by example, exhortation, story, and instruction.

The ritual of receiving the monastic garb and often the monastic tonsure occurred at the beginning of the amma-disciple relationship. The disciple usually moved into the elder's home, monastic community, or desert cell. A simple coarse mat, a sheepskin, a lamp, and vessels for water and oil were the common contents of the ascetic's home. Usually the ascetic would eat one simple, often vegetarian, meal a day. Sleep was kept to a minimum, both as an ascetical practice and to leave more time for prayer.

A deep spiritual bond formed as the amma taught—more often by example than by words. The disciple prayed as the amma prayed. The disciple worked with the

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amma, weaving baskets, rope, and cloth, and distributing alms to the poor as the amma did. Ascetics were committed to supporting themselves completely by the work of their own hands; the rejection of Roman social status included rejecting unearned wealth from the labor of slaves and servants.

As the ammas honored and valued silence, talk was kept to a minimum. The desert ammas recognized that our words reveal our heart and cautioned their followers to be wise about what they said. Their silence enabled them to receive, savor, and ponder the life-giving word.

The amma journeyed and struggled alongside her disciple but maintained the detachment necessary for discernment. Communication was open and honest. The disciple shared her heart's struggles, and the amma did not hide her own humanity. The knowledge and wisdom to deal with unruly or false passions was learned by long, hard living. These women were aware of the necessity of self-understanding and the importance of taking responsibility for one's own actions.

The desert way of amma and disciple was one of hard work, a lifetime of striving to redirect every aspect of body, mind, and inner world toward God. These ammas were "practiced in peeling back the layers of silence, pierced to the core the hearts of fellow seekers and laid bare for them the voice of the living God."<sup>5</sup>

The desert ammas dedicated time each day to their studies as well as to prayer. The prayerful attitude that permeated the day as well as the seven times specifically dedicated to prayer that would evolve into the Divine Office were the nourishment of their day. The Eucharist was less frequent, usually only on Sundays.

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Some who dwelt in complete solitude would go months and years without receiving the Eucharist.

They cultivated simplicity in their lifestyle, including simplicity in their emotions and in their attitudes. They sought to be mindful and intentional about their actions: They were attentive to *how* they washed clothing and utensils and *how* they spoke to one another. Mindlessness was the enemy of the inner journey.

The desert ammas cultivated solitude in order to intensify their inner journey to their goal of union with God. Solitude could be found in the city as well as in the desert. It was not uncommon for these women to move between their monastic communities and the desert.

The cell—whether in a monastery or the desert—was important to their spirituality. The cell was the place of spiritual combat, the place where one faced one's truest self and deepened awareness of one's sin and woundedness. If the ascetic could not find God in the cell, then she would not find God elsewhere. The true ascetic remains—then and now—within the cell in mind, body, and spirit, and perseveres there until she attains true unity with God.

Ascetics often owned books. Codices of the scriptures, especially in Coptic, the vernacular of Egypt, were developed. Secular as well as sacred writings were read.

Books in the desert often came to be stored in churches near monasteries; undoubtedly most of these early books—and collections—were of holy Scripture or lectionaries designed for public or private reading. But they were later joined by collections of homilies, doctrinal statements such as

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encyclical letters from the archbishop of Alexandria or canons from the ecumenical councils, lives and sayings of the saints.<sup>6</sup>

Texts from the fathers in Coptic and Greek, letters of Athanasius and others during the christological controversies, and the writings and sayings of other monastics would have been found in many monastic communities.

A later catalogue of Coptic texts from the library of the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Egypt shows numerous copies of *Lives, Martyrdoms, and Sayings* of the desert Fathers as well as other monastic writings, such as homilies. Tradition mattered to the ancient monks. What the saints of old had said and lived was worth reading about and hearing again: the saints continued to offer instruction, guidance, consolation, precepts, and edification. Theirs was holy wisdom, passed on to new generations.<sup>7</sup>

For example, the ascetics Juliana and Melania were noted for their large and varied collections of books.

It might seem that the desert ascetics and monastics were isolated from the local and universal church, but the contrary was true. People came for spiritual direction and counseling. Bishops often involved the ascetics in heated theological debates. Monastics and hermits—when opportunity came their way—were evangelistic in seeking to convert nonbelievers to Christianity. Some adhered to orthodox and others to heterodox positions. They understood themselves as defenders of the true faith. Surviving letters and treatises reveal people deeply concerned with the development of Christianity and theology.

## THE AMMA AS PILGRIM

The ammas sought out remote geographical locations, often those with hostile environments. Chosen sites were characterized by the presence of strong winds, wild animals, lack of water and foliage, and little access to basic necessities. The desert ammas felt they were doing battle in the wilderness. The desert refined their inner strength and resolve and deepened their sense of utter dependence on God. It was a place of death—the place to die to the false self and false supports, bury old ways and attitudes—and it was the realm of the spiritual and demonic. The desert ascetics believed that close proximity to the forces of nature quickened their spirit in prayer.

The ammas went to places such as the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Persia, and present-day Turkey. They were found all around the Mediterranean world, northward into Gaul and later Ireland and Britain. Favored sites were often within a day's walk of a small village in order to maintain some contact outside the community. Caves, ruins of old buildings, family tombs, islands, coastal headlands, and the fenlands of the North were common sites. Communities of seekers might spring up around a desert elder, near a cathedral, or often on a family estate.

Desert ascetics believed that the greatest enemies of the inner journey were hurry, crowds, and noise. The desert was a place for quieting the inner noise that kept them from hearing the whispers of God. In the desert, spiritual testing and transformation was expected and engaged. The lack of comforts and material distractions,

and isolation from the complexity of human society led to growth in spiritual insight.

The ammas sought to draw close to heaven. To be forgotten by society was to become like the angels, and they strove to limit their contact with others to only the most necessary relationships. They considered themselves aliens awaiting the heavenly city, and removing distractions supported their desire to continuously gaze toward heaven. Unfortunately for us, they were too successful—sources for their lives and sayings are limited.

## THE AMMA AND RELATIONSHIPS

Although ammas yearned for solitude, most also had relationships with other persons. There were colleagues, followers, and friends, some of whom were deaconesses, some who lived in monastic communities. Some ammas were themselves ordained deaconesses. Their history is also the history of the early monastic movement and the development of the diaconate.

Many ammas began their ascetic journeys in monastic communities and later moved into the desert. Some were solitaries attached to a monastic settlement. Most had significant relationships of mutual support with monastic communities. Echoes of their stories often appear in the histories of monasteries.

For other ammas, the journey was reversed. They began as solitaries who found themselves surrounded by seekers. This circle of followers would begin to form a type of monastic community, under the guidance of



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the amma. Individual followers might then move on to pursue a solitary life; others remained in the community. In the early years of Christianity, these communities were referred to as “communal households” or as “communities of solitaries.”

Some ammas would leave these young communities to return to the desert. At times, they were successful in their quest for solitude; at other times they were again followed into the desert by seekers. Many of the surviving stories reflect this common experience.

Frequently women of royal blood established and led monastic communities. Some were widows who wanted a life focused on God and service to others. Monastic life allowed them the freedom to do this while continuing to use their influence in politics as members of the royal family. Other women refused arranged marriages and used their wealth and landed estates to live as they chose. Women’s monasteries were soon centers of Christian culture and learning, and bishops in newly converted regions sought out women to establish monasteries to anchor the church.

Monasticism and the ascetic movement also spread through the veneration of saints. Sites of devotion sprung up around Mary Magdalene, Genovefa (patron of Paris), the martyr Blandina, and Martin of Tours. Believers flocked to these sites, either on pilgrimage or to live a life of devotion nearby. Solitary ascetics and small communities developed reputations for their devotion to prayer and to serving the poor and pilgrim. Often their command of scripture or their scholarly endeavors was overshadowed by the stories of their generosity.

## THE LIVES AND SAYINGS

Stories of these women's lives and teachings began as oral traditions savored and shared by their followers, friends, and families. Eyewitnesses recorded some of these, others were written down after many years. Miracles attributed to the intercession of these women were included. Often these stories would be embellished in a fashion we may find unpalatable today. Writers were more concerned with convincing the reader to take a moral stance and promulgating the value of self-denial, the importance of the inner journey, and the power and efficacious nature of prayer. The kernel of the teaching was important, not historical accuracy as we understand it today.

The desert ammas who are recorded in history represent only a small fraction of the number of women who lived as ascetics. The goal of the desert dwellers was to disappear, and often they were successful. Many of the history, writings, and teachings are lost. Most of the stories preserved revolve around wealthier, better educated women from prominent families who wanted their famous relatives to be known by posterity. Stories of truly poor women—not those who gave their wealth away—are the exception.

The stories of the ammas paint a portrait of colorful, powerful, loving, and generous women. They could be opinionated and at times seem harsh to our modern ears. These ammas did not allow cultural norms and expectations for women to thwart their call nor to limit their pursuit of God. Their lives were as prophetic as their rarely spoken words.

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The ammas were passionate and single-hearted in their desert journey. They spoke frankly, openly, and boldly: to disciples and pilgrims, to church and secular leaders. They listened to and proclaimed the signs of their times. They were gifted and committed to their call. Generous, self-giving, and liberated, the desert mothers were determined and intentional about their journey toward God. They were courageous, purposeful, prayerful, single-minded, discerning, and responsive to the needs of those around them. They lived the gospel call, seeking to incarnate God's presence in their midst.

These Lives advertise their mobility, independence, and empowerment. They reveal the context of the desert movement and provide insight into the early development of Christianity. These women were fiercely independent, with the inner strength and determination that enabled them to go against cultural expectations and pursue their chosen lifestyles. Sometimes their familial ties would be a hindrance, at other times a great benefit. These women were often leaders and shapers of the Christian movement. An informal network among desert dwellers and monastics continually expanded over the years due to the desert dwellers' reputation as wisdom figures and their radical interpretation of the gospel message.

## Chapter Two

# DESERT SPIRITUALITY

AMMA Syncletica said:

“Whatever we do or gain in this world, let us consider it insignificant in comparison to the eternal wealth that is to come. We are on this earth as if in a second maternal womb. In that inner recess we did not have a life such as we have here, for we did not have there solid nourishment such as we enjoy now, nor were we able to be active as we are here, and we existed without the light of the sun and of any glimmer of light. Just as, then, when we were in that inner chamber, we did without many of the things of this world, so also in the present world we are impoverished in comparison with the kingdom of heaven. We have sampled the nourishment here; let us reach for the Divine! We have enjoyed the light in this world; let us long for the sun of righteousness! Let us regard the heavenly Jerusalem as our homeland....Let us live prudently in this world that we may obtain eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

## Desert Spirituality

Desert spirituality is characterized by the pursuit of abundant simplicity—simplicity grounded in the possession of little—and the abundance of God’s presence. Yearning for complete union with God, desert ascetics sought to remove all obstacles to the deepening of this relationship. Obstacles included unhelpful attitudes and motives, thoughts that stalled their pursuit of God, and emotional ties that complicated their inner journeys.

The desert ascetics’ relationships were nonpossessive: They cared for others while leaving them free. Concern for reputation was discarded. Feelings were acknowledged and listened to for their wisdom but were subjected to the discipline of the heart’s goal to seek God. The desert ascetics sought to mortify disordered passions that distracted them from their deepening relationship with God and actively to cultivate a burning love for God.

Although the journey began with giving away possessions, desert ascetics understood that what possessed them was greater than the sum of goods owned. All that owned them, all that possessed their minds and hearts, their attachments and compulsions, must be healed and reconciled. Desert ascetics called this process of moving toward inner freedom *detachment*. Detachment allows for greater direct experience of the Divine Presence as the seeker is attached to fewer distractions.

Desert ascetics understood that the cultivation of inner freedom was vital to the deepening of their experience of God. As they deepened their interior freedom, all aspects of their *false self* was removed and a clearer understanding of their *truest self* emerged.<sup>2</sup> It is this

## *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

true self that dwells deeply with God. In the abundant simplicity of our true self, we experience deepest joy.

Desert spirituality was expressed in compassion: tender love and deep, practical care for the poor and dispossessed. It was a spiritual stance of quiet acceptance of all persons who came to the door—each was received as Christ. The ammas understood that compassion and tender love cultivated a healthy humility. Desert spirituality was nonconformist: Ammas passed on their living example, but where or how a disciple carried on the desert tradition was open to a myriad of possibilities. It was the quality of the inner journey that mattered.

Desert spirituality was deeply intimate and vulnerable. It was taught one on one. To hide one's faults from one's amma was to defeat the inner journey. The amma met with the pilgrim privately, and the words given were personal. The aim was an honest and intimate relationship with the Beloved. The stripping inherent to the desert journey required and deepened the capacity for vulnerability.

Desert spirituality was incarnational, in the sense that Christ was understood to dwell within the soul of each person. This understanding had deep impact on their care for the poor—each encounter with another was a meeting with God. This was not incarnational spirituality as we understand it today. The desert ascetics tended to be suspicious of the human body and its contradictory feelings, emotions, drives, and passions. They understood *self* as completed or made whole solely in God.

## ASCETICISM

Amma Syncletica said:

“Just as dreadful qualities are attached to one another (for example, envy follows upon avarice, as do treachery, perjury, anger, and remembrance of wrongs), so the opposite qualities of these vices are dependent upon love; I mean, of course, gentleness and patience, as well as endurance, and the ultimate good—holy poverty. It is not possible for anyone to acquire this virtue (I mean, to be sure, love) apart from holy poverty, for the Lord did not enjoin love on one person, but on all. Those, therefore, who have resources must not overlook those who have needs. The workings of love, in fact, are not concealed.”<sup>3</sup>

Desert spirituality developed around all practices, passed on from amma to disciple, that dispossessed the ascetic of *all* that kept her or him from God. Asceticism was valued in its ability to move the seeker toward authentic freedom. It was about reordering priorities in support of the inner journey. Anything that supported this journey was acceptable—all else was rejected as superfluous. Desert ascetics reduced their possessions to the minimum—a sleeping mat, several clay jars, books, and the clothing on their bodies. Fasting and abstinence from meat were practiced to help them become interiorly more attentive and alert to the movements of God’s Spirit; fasting to the point of bodily harm was condemned. Some ascetics ignored this condemnation, fell into anorexia, and in some cases starved themselves to death.

Authentic asceticism used practices that deepened self-awareness. The desert ascetic understood that growth in self-awareness was a necessary and valued component of the spiritual journey. Self-awareness was pursued through ascetical practices in order to become more deeply united with God and closer to heaven.

As the ammas taught, inner hesitancy and resistance to meet God in honesty, silence, and solitude are related to our resistance to come to know ourselves in our frailties. An honest encounter with God challenges our capacity for intimacy. We may come to discover that we fear our passion for God. We may want to run from our sense of emptiness. Self-awareness calls us to face our hurt and anger. Above all else, self-awareness reveals our idols—those self-serving, false images of God that deny who God actually is.

## THE DESERT WAY

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of the capacity of the Psalms to move us from orientation, through disorientation, and return us to a new reorientation.<sup>4</sup> We experience times of equilibrium, but when God moves us into a space of dislocation and relocation, beautiful psalms are birthed. In many ways this same experience is embodied in the life of the desert seeker. The ascetic was thrust into disorientation by accepting and embracing the gospel call, to be lived out in the desert or monastery. Following each new experience of reorientation, the desert ascetic would be thrust again into disorientation through continued ascetical practices, moving ever closer to deep unity with God. This movement stripped the seeker of all



that separated the truest self from God. This process of purification cultivated humility, compassion, purity of heart, and *apatheia*.

### *Apatheia*

The goal of the desert journey was *apatheia*, the quality of the interior spiritual journey in which the inner struggle against inordinate attachments has ceased. Grounded in profound interior freedom, the ascetic was free of the strong pulls of worldly desires. *Apatheia* is a mature mindfulness, a grounded sensitivity, and a keen attention to one's inner world as well as to the world in which one has journeyed. Strong emotions such as anger, fear, or anxiety did not dominate or control the ascetic's inner world—they were disciplined to serve the inner journey rather than disrupt it.

*Apatheia* is purity of heart. The ammas teach us to intentionally let go of all that keeps us from the single-minded pursuit of God: feelings and thoughts that bind us, cravings and addictions that diminish our sense of worth, and attachments to self-imposed perfectionism. *Apatheia* is nourished by simplicity grounded in abundance of the soul. This simplicity is in balance and harmony with the human community and the created world. To cultivate *apatheia*, we must be uncluttered in mind and heart and continue to be watchful and vigilant about those “seeping boundaries” where we can be deceived out of simplicity and into complexity under the guise of a “good.”

### *Solitude, Hospitality, and Relationships*

Although solitude was deeply valued and actively cultivated, the desert ascetic received all guests with a deep

spirit of hospitality. With the guest, Christ was received. Hence, one's fast might be set aside to join the guest in a light meal. Silence would be broken for heart-to-heart conversation. The guest might later be taught to sit silently in the presence of God while enjoying one another's company.

Desert ascetics understood that the journey to a deep and mature relationship with God was made within oneself. The arduous work of stripping away illusions and all that keeps us from knowing God gifted the ascetic with a deep sense of understanding her own true humanity. This understanding of their true humanity, created fully in the image and likeness of God and yet still on the journey toward full maturity, made desert ascetics deeply humble people.

### *Humility, Suffering, and Compassion*

As the ammas taught, the virtue of humility does not diminish a person's sense of self-worth or dignity. Humility is the maturing state of deepening in understanding the implications of the incarnation—God's presence in the world. The humility of a deeply listening and docile heart enables one to learn even from an apparently disastrous experience.

Desert ascetics faced suffering with determination and courage. They understood that suffering was grounded in their attachments to attitudes, thoughts, motives, relationships, and reputation. Suffering was the avenue toward freedom and detachment, toward maturity and humility. Suffering remained until they "let go." A deep capacity for compassion often resulted.

Compassion brought the ascetics to deep understanding of the struggles of others, enabled them to see

themselves in the lives of others, and removed any sense of distance or distinction. Desert ascetics vigorously rejected any judgmental or critical attitude; they teach us that awareness of our own weaknesses gives us an opportunity to deepen our compassion for the weaknesses of others. As we cultivate a tender, vulnerable, expansive heart that embraces the humanity of all, we see with new eyes...the eyes and heart of Christ.

## PRAYER

A certain monastic went to the cell of Abba Arsenius in Scetis and looked through the window, and beheld the old one as if completely on fire....Late on Saturday evening the old one turned his back on the setting sun, and stretched out his arms towards heaven in prayer; and so Arsenius remained until the rising sun shone on his face. And then he sat down.<sup>5</sup>

Prayer was a continuous way of life in the desert. It was intentionally cultivated until it became second nature. Prayer involved the hard work of learning a new language—the language of heaven. For the ascetic, prayer was not merely the speaking of words. It was the heart yearning for God, reaching out in hopeful openness to being touched by God. Prayer was the Holy Spirit breathing through the inner spirit of the ascetic and returning to God with yearnings for intimacy.

The ascetic sought to cultivate a silent, passionate, and burning love for God experienced in deep and nurturing solitude. The atmosphere for rich prayer was a simple quiet voice, not a noisy inner crowd. Physical as

well as inner stillness and quiet were necessary. The words of prayer were brief and straight from the heart. Praying the psalms, intercession, contemplation, and silent awareness of God's presence were all expressions of prayer in the desert and monastery.

### *The Word*

The psalms were recited throughout the day, and ascetics strove to pray into the night as well. Reading the sacred word, as is understood from our Jewish heritage, was a bodily experience.<sup>6</sup> Ascetics did not simply "recite" the psalms. In their pondering of the word, they allowed it to permeate their inner being in order to pray from their gut. Desert ascetics were grounded in sacred scripture. Knowing there were multiple senses of any text, they rejected a rigid approach to understanding scripture.

Seeking to interiorize the word and make it a part of their very being, ascetics often began their desert journey in deep inner struggle to reflect upon, understand, and become one with the word. Reverenced as a source of life, the word was seen as having a capacity to awaken deep sensitivity and to transmit life energy. Meaning was found when word and life corresponded. Wrestling with God's word cultivated in the ascetic a way of understanding and reflecting on the world. The word shaped how they saw and interpreted their culture. The word was their source for discerning God's call of the church.

### *Accidie*

Amma Theodora warned her followers that as they began their discipline of prayer, they would be attacked by *accidie*, the sense of boredom or dejection that comes without cause as a temptation in prayer. *Accidie* deters

one from the inner journey and discourages one's inner struggle toward freedom. Theodora invited her followers to be tenacious in prayer and to trust the original desire for God. The boredom then would pass.

## SILENCE

Drawn deeper into the desert, they are drawn deeper into solitude, deeper into themselves and at the same time deeper into community and deeper into God the ground of being, and thus closer to the ground of being within us, for the depth of being of each of us is as strange and alien, yet hauntingly as familiar, as the desert solitude.<sup>7</sup>

The desert ascetic pursued and cultivated silence. This was a silence pregnant with the presence of the Divine, the womb where the word grew. The goal of silence was the inner quiet of strength, not the total absence of words.

Silence was deemed as intrinsic to the desert journey as prayer. This silence was inner calm and serenity grounded in strength. As for us today, silence calms the inner spirit to allow the whisperings of God to be heard. Silence allows the word to permeate to the inner heart. Purifying and nurturing silence supports the intentional inner journey.

Silence helps us begin the pilgrimage within and better discern the sacred. Silence helps us to cultivate and deepen our passionate love for God because it provides the atmosphere of true and authentic communication with God. Silence teaches us to speak simply, directly, compassionately, and honestly. Kenneth Leech reminds

us that “the protest of the solitary is not against human companionship as such, but against the evasion of self which can easily occur when involvement with people obscures and prevents any real encounter with one’s own identity. Only in stillness can the truth be seen.”<sup>8</sup>

Entering into silence is not easy. To risk encountering our fullest and truest self, and to meet God *as God is* requires courage and the freedom to risk. Silence invites us to meet and discover our truest selves—with masks, illusions, and public personae removed. Self-image is stripped and realigned: We begin to put on the mind of Christ. Silence, therefore, invites us to change, to grow toward the fullness of life. Silence helps us cultivate a healthy detachment from reputation, thwarted desires and plans, and anything that keeps us distracted from God.

The ascetic strove to sit quietly, attune her attention fully to the silence, and allow silence to speak its wisdom. As the psalmist tells us, “But I have stilled and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me” (Ps 131:2).

For the desert dweller, “silence itself was layered, having depth and texture, and that to learn to be attentive to the varied qualities of the layers was to begin to discern the presence of the Spirit of God.”<sup>9</sup> Silence is essentially listening.

## LISTENING

Spiritual listening is a contemplative undertaking and not a problem solving task. It is essentially prayer....Spiritual listening as a contemplative

## *Desert Spirituality*

discipline pushes us...to a level of listening beyond our own powers of analysis to the grace and the gift of divine life itself....To listen this way is to listen with heart and mind opened wide. It invites us to be changed along with those to whom we listen.<sup>10</sup>

Desert ascetics cultivated a heart engaged in intense listening. Listening for the Beloved's voice cultivated a wise and compassionate heart, able to yield to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Listening for the ebbs and flows of the Spirit was fundamental to a life of discernment. A still, focused attention was needed for fruitful discernment. True discernment does not presuppose how the Spirit will move, nor what God will say. In this life of cultivated listening, ascetics were open to the unexpected. They were willing to risk being surprised.

Desert ascetics were deeply aware that their cultural backgrounds, educations, and life experiences framed and influenced listening. Some were concerned that prior education and privilege would hamper their inner journeys. Ammas steeped their minds in scripture and other sacred writings in order to cultivate minds and hearts able to listen for God's voice. Growth in self-awareness clarified the lens that filtered and colored their listening. The clearness of a prism was the goal.

Wendy Wright reminds us that listening in the desert tradition "involves listening to the delicate intersection of the human heart, with its desires and dreams, and the vast and silent mystery that is God."<sup>11</sup>

## Chapter Three

# THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT MOTHERS

### INTRODUCTION

PILGRIMAGE has been an important form of worship from the earliest days of Christianity. Traveling to the holy sites and visiting with the spiritual giants of the day have always been highly valued experiences. The journals and letters of pilgrims record much of our early history. When approaching a spiritual master, the pilgrim would ask for a *word*: a word spoken by a desert ascetic under the inspiration of God. The word was given because the seeker was willing to put it into action.

Pilgrims, their souls stirred, began to share their received words with one another and with their faith communities at home. Disciples of spiritual masters also remembered words received and would later share them with their own followers. These words soon formed a rich oral tradition.



## *The Sayings of the Desert Mothers*

The sayings grew in number and were shared along trade routes.<sup>1</sup> Most often a group of sayings was attributed to a particular master. Unlike today, the Mediterranean culture of the time was an oral culture. While we can trust that these words are true, we know that the disciples and pilgrims were more concerned with remembering and sharing the essence and teaching received rather than with an exact word-for-word recitation.

In the fifth century, these sayings, originally spoken in the Coptic of Egypt, began to be written down. Desert ascetics and monastic communities had scattered because of ongoing theological debates.<sup>2</sup> Different versions of the same sayings appeared in different languages, some containing more sayings than others. The sayings are generally short, pithy, and cryptic, close in form to parable and folk wisdom, and are meant to stir the heart and give the hearer something to mull over.

Common themes of the sayings are the importance of repentance and compunction; prayer and stillness; perseverance in the lifelong struggle to see God and become a friend to God; growth in self-awareness; penance and obedience; silence and meditation; and manual labor. A restless heart was contrasted with an inner well of peace, strength, and stability. With their sayings, the desert ascetics sought to strip seekers of illusions and self-deceptions, enabling them to reject all that bound and constrained, and deepen their experience of true freedom. Genuine asceticism was grounded in the seeking heart.

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Our Western and postmodern minds may find these sayings harsh. They exalt suffering, show a suspicious attitude toward the human body, and reject the goodness of sexuality. We should remember that these sayings come from a different understanding of human physiology and from a culture that saw sexuality as a deterrent to the spiritual journey.

The sayings of the desert ascetics often refer to “demons.” Demons, or unclean spirits, were real and personal experiences for the early Christians. Rage and aggressive violence, sexual desire, seizures, and at times physical paralysis were all attributed to demonic possession. Much of what we understand today as psychological or neurological disorders or natural biological urges were attributed to demons. Amma Syncletica spoke from personal experience of her dealings with a demon of fornication. Today we nuance our understandings of human biology, normal sexual drive, and psychology with the inner call to make responsible and committed decisions. We understand that to be tempted is common and normal.

These sayings were meant to be evocative, not merely descriptive or prescriptive, in order to elicit a deeper response from the listener. The amma gave words that would be cultivated and reflected on in prayer, words that deeply impressed the mind and heart, words that spoke to the imagination and touched feelings. She sought to expose any and all barriers to a deeper experience of God. These sayings inspire us to stay single-minded in our pursuit of God and to seek to deepen our capacity for love.

## THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT MOTHERS

### *Amma Matrona*

This amma is unknown. Her Sayings have traditionally been included in various texts of the desert ascetics, but scholars have little knowledge and less certainty about her personal history. She probably resided in the Egyptian desert.

### *The Sayings of Amma Matrona*

1. We carry ourselves wherever we go and we cannot escape temptation by mere flight.
2. Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company.

### *Amma Sarah*

Amma Sarah was a native of Upper Egypt. Born into a wealthy Christian family, Sarah was well educated and a voracious reader. Moving to the vicinity of a women's monastery in the desert of Pelusium (near Antinoë), Sarah lived alone for many years near the river in a cell with a terraced roof. She attended to the needs of the nearby community.

Eventually Amma Sarah received the monastic garb and lived in a closer relationship with the community, serving as spiritual elder. Sarah continued to follow the

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ascetic life by living alone in a cave by the river for seven years. She died around her eightieth year.

Amma Sarah was deeply concerned that her heart never be divided in her pursuit of God. Much of her desert struggle was centered on calming inner distractions and cultivating those things that brought her close to God. "Lust" and "fornication" were not so much about bodily passions but rather anything or anyone that kept her heart distracted from God. The movement toward a deeper and more profound awareness of God is a spiraling movement toward simplicity that occurs when we voluntarily let go of all our attachments that keep us from moving deeper within. This is not a rejection of the created world, all of which is God's delightful gift to us, but rather is the rejection of our tendencies to grasp aspects of creation in a way that diminishes our unity with God.

Amma Sarah's goal was purity of heart. As one grows and deepens in purity of heart, one deepens in pure love for Christ. Sarah lived with a deep sense of awe for God. She sought neither special treatment nor recognition for herself.

Amma Sarah models for us the gift of tenacity and focus on the final goal of life: oneness with God. Sarah sought to eliminate distractions that she experienced as stumbling blocks to total union. This is never an easy journey, and Sarah's response was to pray for strength to endure and move into freedom. She avoided neither the challenges nor the pain; she stayed with her struggles until there was resolution.

Amma Sarah calls her followers to growth in self-awareness. Self-awareness is not selfishness but self-connectedness. It is a deep and intense listening to our

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inner being, learning to be conscious and alert to what our inner world is trying to say to us. With self-awareness and self-knowledge, we understand our reactions toward others, issues that complicate our lives, blind spots that we can fall into, as well as our particular strengths and gifts. As we grow in self-awareness, we grow in God-awareness. Amma Sarah, in the desert tradition, understood that God has chosen humanity along with all creation as the vehicle of Divine Revelation.

Her feast day is July 13.

### *The Sayings of Amma Sarah*

1. It was related of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of fornication. She never prayed that the warfare should cease, but she said, "O God, give me strength."

Although Sarah may have been a deeply passionate woman, keenly aware of her sexuality, *fornication* principally meant anything that possessed her heart and separated her from God. A part of our being belongs only to God and can only be satisfied by God. Replacing God with anyone or anything is idolatry. Sarah, in her awareness of her own weaknesses and of God as the source of her strength, challenges us not to run but to stand firm in our persistent struggle with personal problems and with all that keeps us from God.

2. Once the same spirit of fornication attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and to asceticism and went up onto her little

terrace to pray. Then the spirit of fornication appeared bodily to her and said, "Sarah, you have overcome me." But she said, "It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ."

Amma Sarah knew that we are always open to temptation, no matter how long we have been intent on our inner journey. She knew the source of her strength in a very earthy and incarnational way. She did not overcome this spirit of fornication on her own strength but relaxed into God, trusting God to complete her journey into wholeness. Amma Sarah encourages us to cooperate with God's work and not rely solely on our own efforts.

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

Amma Sarah was not easily distracted. She allowed her surroundings to support her without any need to possess them. She so intensely focused on cultivating total union with God that it seems she was unaware of her surroundings. Today, we might better appreciate gazing lovingly and reflectively on that river in order to move into union with God.

4. Another time, two old men, great anchorites, came to the district of Pelusia 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 conceited thinking to yourself: 'Look how anchorites are coming to see me, a mere woman.'" But Amma Sarah said to them,

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“According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts.”

To be a woman was to be “fleshly, sinful, sensuous, passionate, and bodily”: qualities Sarah’s culture sought to avoid. To be a man was to be “rational, god-like, angelic, otherworldly”: qualities valued in her culture. To be “manly” (not necessarily a male) was to live beyond the passions: to know them, to be aware of them, yet not let them rule. Several of our spiritual foremothers were referred to by their contemporaries as “this female man of God” – deemed a compliment!

Amma Sarah was aware of the depth of her spirituality. She did not need the approval of anyone for who she was or for the inner journey she had undertaken. Not willing to be diminished by foolish and arrogant men, she gifted them with an appropriate reply.

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

Amma Sarah did not seek the approval of others; likewise, she remained nonjudgmental in her attitude toward others and their own journeys toward God. As in any other time in church history, there were strong personalities in Sarah’s day, but she did not follow fads. She sought to remain true to her own simple path toward God.

6. She also said, “I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, and I place death before my eyes before going up it.”

Ascending a ladder was a well-known and understood metaphor in Amma Sarah's day.<sup>3</sup> To ascend a ladder was to draw close to God and deepen in spiritual maturity. The metaphors of the ladder and of keeping death ever before one's eyes figure strongly in desert and monastic spirituality. We are exhorted to remain firmly focused on our unity with God. Being mindful of eventual death need not be depressing; rather it can give us the freedom to make choices that support and nurture the goal: abiding in God's unconditional love.

7. She also said, "It is good to give alms for people's sake. Even if it is done only to please others, through it one can begin to seek to please God."

Early ascetics deeply valued having something to give to the poor and were consistent in their giving. Manual labor was both a part of their ascetic practice as well as a means of providing for the poor.

Being mindful of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed cultivates within us a deeper capacity to experience God's endless compassion for us and for all creation. It is in extending compassion to others that we both experience and receive God's compassion. These incarnational experiences begin to teach us of God.

8. Some monks of Scetis came one day to visit Amma Sarah. She offered them a small basket of fruit. They left the good fruit and ate the bad. So she said to them, "You are the true monks of Scetis."

Desert asceticism does not seek to draw attention to self. Ascetical practices were quiet and unobtrusive.



The desert ascetic practiced self-denial in small daily ways, such as choosing simpler and less appetizing foods, just enough sleep on a sufficient but not necessarily comfortable bed, and prayers spread throughout the day. Self-denial was cultivated in order to deepen one's relationship to God, to deepen in compassion, and to build bridges toward others.

The true ascetic seeks neither to exalt nor to denigrate self. Humility is to know oneself as created by God, as interdependent with others and the cosmos, and deeply loved by God. Humility helps us to embrace and deepen our sense of connectedness.

9. She also said to the brothers, "It is I who am a man, you who are women."

Sarah knew who she was and did not waver—this is genuine humility. She both challenges the arrogance of presuming one is better than another due to gender, education, position in society, or anything else, and challenges her hearer to pursue spiritual maturity.

### *Amma Syncletica of Egypt*

For just as those who wish to gaze at the sun damage their vision, so also those who try to mirror the radiance of her life fall victim to confusion of mind, dazzled, overcome, and unstrung by the magnitude of her achievements.<sup>4</sup>

We know of Amma Syncletica from the Sayings as well as from *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Teacher Syncletica*, a fifth-century work by Pseudo-Athanasius.<sup>5</sup> The early church thought her so

important that her Life survives to this day. An early theologian of mysticism, Evagrius Ponticus, influenced her teachings.<sup>6</sup>

Amma Syncletica was born in Alexandria into a well-respected Christian family of Macedonian heritage. Her two brothers died at relatively young ages and her sister was blind. Syncletica began her ascetical practices in her parents' home. She was well educated and had a reputation for her beauty.

At the death of her parents, Amma Syncletica sold all her possessions and distributed the family wealth among the poor. She then cut her hair as a sign of consecration and moved with her blind sister to the family tomb outside Alexandria. Here she began her life as a desert ascetic.

As women began to gather around her, Amma Syncletica reluctantly agreed to serve as their spiritual mentor, training them in the disciplines of the inner life. She trained her followers to cultivate such qualities as gentleness, patience, and endurance—each grounded in love and vitally needed for a fruitful spiritual journey.

For Syncletica, this discipline meant emptying oneself of all stumbling blocks: attitudes, motives, addictions, emotions not united with Christ, as well as any ignorance that hindered the inner journey. Amma Syncletica sought to relinquish anger, vindictiveness, envy, and ambition, and challenged her followers to do the same. Through her Life and Sayings, she encourages us to grow in self-awareness, to understand our passions and desires, and to purify them, always directing us toward God.

## *The Sayings of the Desert Mothers*

Amma Syncletica lived into her eighties and died after three and a half years of intense physical suffering, most likely from cancer.

Her feast day is January 5.

### *The Sayings of Amma Syncletica*

1. Amma Syncletica said, “In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek (as it is said: ‘Our God is a consuming fire’ [Heb 12:24]): so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work.”

Amma Syncletica was aware that change is often painful. She was honest with her followers yet left them with hope that the hard work of conversion—of the spiritual battle—brings joy with it as well. In desert spirituality, change can mean becoming countercultural, altering family dynamics and lifestyles and resulting in suffering of one kind or another. This suffering was deeply personal, especially when necessary choices affected those who did not understand the desert journey.

Amma Syncletica understood these difficulties. Initial attempts at asceticism can be rough and seem to bear little fruit. Old support systems begin to disappear, and the new journey seems clumsy and foreign. The spiritual journey seems filled with digression

rather than progression forward. Discouragement can easily settle in. Amma Syncletica exhorts us not to give up hope.

2. She also said, “We who have chosen this way of life must obtain perfect moderation. It is true that among seculars, also, moderation has the freedom of the city, but immoderation cohabits with it, because they sin with all the other senses. Their gaze is shameless and they laugh immoderately.”

Our speech and eyes are the mirror of our soul. Amma Syncletica is concerned that too much boisterous behavior reveals an inner world that is out of balance. Balanced moderation is thoughtful and nurturing, and integrates the essentials of our lives. Desert ascetics teach that balance in all aspects of our lives is a necessary condition of a fruitful inner journey. Acknowledging that some degree of balance can be found in anyone’s life, Amma Syncletica challenges her followers to be single-minded about building and maintaining a nurturing balance. It is in the inner space created by our temperance that fruitful growth and transformation occurs.

3. She also said, “Just as the most bitter medicine drives out poisonous creatures so prayer joined to fasting drives evil thoughts away.”

Although the desert way was of sparse meals and fasting from most foods, Amma Syncletica understood that more was involved. Fasting may take the form of giving up something other than food, such as excessive commitments, overachieving, unhealthy attitudes, and old

resentments. The desert ascetics began by fasting from food, possessions, and social relationships.<sup>7</sup> They then progressed to fasting from interior attachments, such as anger, jealousy, envy, or possessiveness. The desert ascetics understood that fasting creates the space in our bodies, minds, and spirits for God to *be* within us, for new things to grow.

The ammas knew the power of thoughts: to encourage, affirm, be creative, move, and nourish. They can also move one toward discouragement, despair, anxiety, and depression. Fasting and prayer breaks the cycle of thoughts that drains one of life; prayer heals and nourishes the inner life. Faith enables one to trust that an inner work is going on even when there are no corresponding positive feelings or when difficulties are encountered.

4. She also said, “Do not let yourself be seduced by the delights of the riches of the world, as though they contained something useful on account of vain pleasure. Worldly people esteem the culinary art, but you, through fasting and thanks to cheap food, go beyond their abundance of food. It is written: ‘One who is sated loathes honey’ [Prov 27:7]. Do not fill yourself with bread and you will not desire wine.”

Overindulgence drags and weighs us down, dulls self-awareness, weakens our inner strength and resolve, and can cause us to lose sight of the pursuit of our original goal. Overindulgence can be a sign that we seek to replace God with something else.

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Amma Syncletica beckons us into true freedom, freedom that does not rely on external things for inner happiness and peace. The early ascetics valued simplicity, modesty, and acceptance of their physical situations. They sought balance in their daily lives, aware that they were on a long journey.

5. Blessed Syncletica was asked if poverty is a perfect good. She said, “For those who are capable of it, it is a perfect good. Those who can sustain it receive suffering in the body but rest in the soul, for just as one washes coarse clothes by trampling them underfoot and turning them about in all directions, even so the strong soul becomes much more stable thanks to voluntary poverty.”

Simplicity keeps us faithful to the spiritual journey and removes anything that keeps us from God. Simplicity supports and strengthens our deepest commitments and responsibilities. Balance helps us recognize when poverty is becoming an idol in itself. The ascetic does not seek poverty for poverty’s sake but rather cultivates simplicity for the sake of the poor and to remove any blockages to finding God.

As we move through life, we often sense a call toward simplicity: not just of our possessions but of our commitments, attitudes, and whatever binds our heart. As we become more aware of what possesses us, we yearn to divest ourselves of this. Stress is often a good indicator of our need to simplify.

6. She also said, “If you find yourself in a monastery do not go to another place, for that will harm you a

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great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or the nun grows cold and their faith dies, when they go from one place to another.”

Amma Syncletica challenges her followers to stay put. The desert journey is one inch long and many miles deep. Inward is the only direction of travel.

The spiritual journey requires perseverance, steadfastness, remaining with commitments, and working through difficulties. Relationships can grow stale and boring; our overcommitments can seem hard to untangle. “Moving on” might seem easier than working through misunderstandings; “staying on” is an invitation to deepen valued relationships and commitments.<sup>8</sup> Stability and perseverance provide the strength for the hard interior work of transformation; inner wrestling deepens our interior life. In the midst of this hard work we encounter our real selves.

7. She also said, “Many are the wiles of the evil one. If he is not able to disturb the soul by means of poverty, he suggests riches as an attraction. If he has not won the victory by insults and disgrace, he suggests praise and glory. Overcome by health, he makes the body ill. Not having been able to seduce it through pleasures, he tries to overthrow it by involuntary sufferings. He joins to this, very severe illness, to disturb the faint-hearted in their love of God. But he also destroys the body by very violent fevers and weighs it down with intolerable thirst. If, being a sinner, you undergo all these things, remind yourself of the punishment to come, the everlasting

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fire and the sufferings inflicted by justice, and do not be discouraged here and now. Rejoice that God visits you and keep this blessed saying on your lips: ‘The Holy One has chastened me sorely but has not given me over unto death’ [Ps 118:18]. You were iron, but fire has burnt the rust off you. If you are righteous and fall ill, you will go from strength to strength. Are you gold? You will pass through fire purged. Have you been given a thorn in the flesh? [2 Cor 12:1]. Exult, and see who else was treated like that; it is an honor to have the same sufferings as Paul. Are you being tried by fever? Are you being taught by cold? Indeed Scripture says: ‘We went through fire and water; yet God has brought us forth to a spacious place’ [Ps 66:12]. You have drawn the first lot? Expect the second. By virtue offer holy words in a loud voice. For it is said: ‘I am afflicted and in pain’ [Ps 69:29]. This share of wretchedness will make you perfect. For it is said: ‘The Holy One hears when I call’ [Ps 4:3]. So open your mouth wider to be taught by these exercises of the soul, seeing that we are under the eyes of our enemy.”

Desert spirituality understood that the inner journey was one of warfare. Any weapon might be used against the seeker. Amma Syncletica was known for her profound gifts of the discernment of spirits. She had a keen perception of what was going on in someone’s inner struggles.

Any situation can be used by the evil one to distract and confuse us, discourage us, and try to move us toward despair or apathy. Any situation can be an opportunity for learning and growth. For Amma Syncletica, a “sinner” is one who allows circumstances to



disrupt prayerful pursuit of God or who gives up the inner journey altogether. Detachment allows us the reflective space and inner freedom to recognize these attacks and learn from them. Keeping the eye of our soul upon our ultimate goal helps us to not get hooked by the turbulence of daily life.

The evil one attacks our sense of self-worth and feeds our internalized self-hatred.<sup>9</sup> Discouragement and depression can move us toward despair and a loss of hope in God. When we live out of our wounded sense of self-worth, we tend not to trust the inner wisdom and intuition given each of us by God.

8. She also said, “If illness weighs us down, let us not be sorrowful as though, because of the illness and the prostration of our bodies, we could not sing, for all these things are for our good, for the purification of our desires. Truly fasting and sleeping on the ground are set before us because of our sensuality. If illness then weakens this sensuality, the reason for these practices is superfluous. For this is the great asceticism: to control oneself in illness and to sing hymns of thanksgiving to God.”

Amma Syncletica is concerned that her followers grow and deepen in their understanding of the inner journey. Bodily asceticism serves to deepen our single-minded pursuit of God by deepening our self-awareness and God-awareness. Tempering our body deepens our capacity to live in freedom, a freedom that allows us to experience and express our passion for God sensuously, without confusing our sensuality with the totality of our being.

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Although Amma Syncletica was primarily concerned with singing the psalms and praising God, she also invites us to find new ways to explore our understanding of our singing. Illness, disabilities, or circumstances may hinder or thwart us, but this should not silence us. Singing expresses our innermost yearnings and desire for God.

9. She also said, “When you have to fast, do not pretend illness. For those who do not fast often fall into real sicknesses. If you have begun to act well, do not turn back through constraint of the enemy, for through your endurance, the enemy is destroyed. Those who put out to sea at first sail with a favorable wind; then the sails spread, but later the winds become adverse. Then the ship is tossed by the waves and is no longer controlled by the rudder. But when in a little while there is a calm, and the tempest dies down, then the ship sails on again. So it is with us, when we are driven by the spirits who are against us; we hold to the cross as our sail and so we can set a safe course.”

Often the early years of our spiritual journey are filled with wonderful experiences of God. Great strides are made in prayer and personal transformation, the very near presence of God seems to be with us daily, and the miraculous is seen. Then the journey seems to get harder. Growth and transformation come to frustrating dead ends; prayer seems dry and pointless. Friends, at best, fail to understand us and too often abandon us—family can too. Sometimes it seems that God has abandoned us.

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Amma Syncletica wants us to remember that these “tempest times” will come—but they will also pass by.

Amma Syncletica urges us to remember the God who is our strength and support during these difficult times. Our spiritual disciplines are for our own benefit. Our spiritual practice strengthens our resolve to remain undeterred in our pursuit of spiritual transformation and fosters the inner shifts needed in our attitudes and motives. We are better able to seek God. Jesus is our assurance that we have not been abandoned; Jesus is our best example of how we may best stand firm in the midst of the turbulence.

10. She also said, “Those who have endured the labors and dangers of the sea and then amass material riches, even when they have gained much desire to gain yet more. They consider what they have at present as nothing and reach out for what they have not got. We, who have nothing that we desire, wish to acquire everything through the fear of God.”

Desert spirituality understood that with each new dawn, there was the new beginning. Amma Syncletica exhorts her followers not to accept easily gained substitutes for authentic union with God.

The ascetic knows the riches sought, and in remembering this is not easily swayed; anything else fails to satisfy and leaves us sated but wanting more. We will experience times of great inner emptiness. It can be tempting to fill this emptiness with anything and everything, but unless it is God, we will be unsatisfied. Nurturing and prayerful reflection upon our experiences of

emptiness invites us to move deeper within and to mature spiritually.

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

Desert spirituality valued mercy, grounded in humble awareness of personal need. Desert spirituality also understood that meekness—grounded in the strength and courage of the desert—would be rewarded with life.

The qualities of gentleness, kindness, and humility foster awareness of our need for God and the openness to be taught by God. Paradoxically, each fosters self-acceptance...to accept ourselves as we are. Amma Syncretica challenged her followers to embrace themselves in their createdness and creatureliness before God, dwelling in a stance of open vulnerability that can be taught and shown the way.

12. She also said, “It is dangerous for anyone to teach who has not first been trained in the ‘practical’ life. For if someone who owns a ruined house receives guests there, harm is done because of the dilapidation of the dwelling. It is the same in the case of someone who has not first built an interior dwelling; loss is caused to those who come. By words one may convert them to salvation, but by evil behavior, one injures them.”

Desert ascetics did not seek students. They were keenly aware of the responsibility an amma had for her disciple. A true amma tended to resist accepting a

follower into her cell, and hence, her life. Amma Syncletica has strong words for those who would be called “teacher.” She gives her listeners some guidelines for discerning a true spiritual elder. An elder was first taught by a desert master and was shaped by life in the desert. Healing and wisdom were the fruit.

Authenticity needs to permeate an amma; any teaching must be grounded in her lived experiences. Her example and the integrity of her life give evidence of her interiority. Amma Syncletica understood that with an amma, there was a consistency between words and life, and a sense of inner strength and calm. An amma’s word moved followers toward a deeper sense of one’s own personal relationship with God, rather than interfere with this relationship.

For us today, there is also an invitation and a certain urgency to network with kindred spirits: with those who deeply value the hard work of the inner journey. The guidelines for choosing ammas are valid today.

13. She also said, “It is good not to get angry, but if this should happen, St. Paul does not allow you a whole day for this passion, for he says: ‘Let not the sun go down’ [Eph 4:25]. Will you wait till all your time is ended? Why hate the one who has grieved you? It is not this person who has done the wrong, but the evil one. Hate sickness but not the sick person.”

Desert spirituality perceived anger as a deterrent to the inner journey and a wall to unity with God. Anger often revealed a lack of detachment, and certainly violated silence. If a disciple got angry, then Amma Syncletica

wanted her followers to be aware of the difference between the person and sin.

We must deal with the cause of our anger: acknowledge the gift and message of anger and respond to what our anger is calling forth in us. If we do not actively attend to our anger, it comes out in ugliness such as bitterness, whining, rage, and depression. Unfortunately we can just sit around and nurture our anger, stroke it into resentment, and get negative energy from passively attending to it.

If we are willing to actively listen to what our anger would tell us, we can then act on what we must do: seek reconciliation, speak the truth, and/or make necessary changes in our life. Working with a spiritual companion or modern-day amma to discern how to respond to our anger may be very helpful. It is not always obvious what we must do with our response to our anger. Reflection with a wise amma can help. For a heart seeking only God, there is no room for resentment.

14. She also said, “Those who are great athletes must contend against stronger enemies.”

Desert spirituality understood a “great athlete” as one who took on longer fasts, more difficult prayer vigils, and greater experiences of solitude—often moving deeper into the desert. These “enemies” or contenders were those discoveries deep within the self that limited God-experience and God-understanding.

I have journeyed with people in spiritual direction who seem on the surface to have no great inner conflicts. They are also unsatisfied with their relationship with God. When we begin to explore their healthy passions and

desires, when we look together at their healthy abilities to take risk, I often notice a correlation between a reluctance to risk expressing their gifts and an unsatisfactory relationship with God.

I have sat with those who wrestle with honest inner anguish, wondering where God is in the midst of it. I have been deeply aware and awed by how gifted these people are. As they wrestle with their understanding of God and their “God questions,” it seems I am watching them give birth to a new self that will deeply bless the human community.

At times our talents and abilities, given us by God for the benefit and joy of God’s creation, can make the inner journey toward quiet and unity with God more difficult. Amma Syncletica recognizes that her more gifted followers may also face deeper anguish as they seek to become one with God. I hear an encouragement not to shy away from our gifts but to recognize the value of our inner struggles as we seek to become the people God intended us to be.

15. She also said, “There is an asceticism which is determined by the enemy and his disciples practice it. So how are we to distinguish between the divine and royal asceticism and the demonic tyranny? Clearly through its quality of balance. Always use a single rule of fasting. Do not fast four or five days and break it the following day with any amount of food. In truth, lack of proportion always corrupts. While you are young and healthy, fast, for old age with its weakness will come. As long as you can, lay up treasure, so that when you cannot, you will be at peace.”

Tyranny? Amma Syncletica was aware that there were some who went to extremes in their asceticism, even to the point of destroying their health. She did not want her followers to do this. It is too easy to fall into the deception that “harder is better.” She understood that obsessions and perfectionism drive many people whose asceticism is not grounded in personal freedom.

Amma Syncletica calls her followers to balanced asceticism grounded in reflective discernment. She encourages her followers to pursue spiritual maturity and healthy ways of being that build wisdom. She is concerned with proper motive behind the ascetical practice. True ascetical practices deepen our sense of serene peace and move us closer to God and others.

16. She also said, “As long as we are in the monastery, obedience is preferable to asceticism. The one teaches pride, the other humility.”

Obedience is faithful attending to the whispering guidance of the Spirit within ourselves as we listen to scripture, tradition, our faith community, and those people intimately involved in our lives. Obedience is active and fruitful and evokes an intelligent response. Obedience does not silence the prophetic voice—to speak the truth passionately from the heart takes courage and obedience to the stirrings of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Obedience to the spiritual journey is neither simple nor easy. The faith community God has placed us in can disappoint us, provoke us to anger, or leave us dissatisfied. Painfully—and truthfully—our family, friends, and faith community will invite us to see ourselves as we



really are. Too often it can seem that life would be easier if we moved on rather than staying “for the long haul.”

17. She also said, “We must direct our souls with discernment. As long as we are in the monastery, we must not seek our own will, nor follow our personal opinion, but obey our elders in the faith.”

Discernment is vital to the spiritual journey. Discernment requires that we listen deeply and intently to our hearts, and to all the ways that God chooses to whisper to us. Saint Benedict tells his followers to listen *with the ear of [their] hearts*.<sup>11</sup> When we listen well, we intentionally choose to hear those we disagree with, those whose lives are significantly different from ours—we allow ourselves to be stretched and challenged. There is a quality of openness to learn and to change.

It is through discernment that we come to better know our truest self as well as the false self we have so heavily invested in. Amma Syncletica is concerned that we cease empowering our false self and instead risk the journey deep within to find our truest self...and God.

18. She also said, “It is written, ‘Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ [Matt 10:16]. Being like serpents means not ignoring attacks and wiles of the devil. Like is quickly known to like. The simplicity of the dove denotes purity of action.”

Serpents are wise: They are aware of their hostile environment and are prepared to defend themselves from attack. In pursuit of purity of heart and singleness of intention, Amma Syncletica calls us to be attentive and aware of those things that can creep back into our

lives and thwart our journey. When our attentiveness dulls, we are susceptible to attack and may begin the deceptive slide toward mediocrity. Amma Syncletica exhorts us to wise simplicity: to choose an uncomplicated life, to seek oneness with God, and yet to be mindful of how easy it is to be caught unawares.

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

Alone with ourselves, we can still be crowded with rapid-fire thoughts, conflicting emotions and concerns. We can be bombarded by the inner noise of internalized messages that are not from God and become exhausted by the internal churning that results from stress. Sometimes we seek out the company of others just to avoid this menacing internal crowd.

The journey to the desert begins in our heart; movement toward simplicity begins within. Solitude is about inner silence, calm, being grounded—in our bodies, in our healthy relationships, and in our God. The desert is the place that supports our learning this; the desert reveals the inner turbulence that keeps us churned up and distracted.

20. She also said, “In the world, if we commit an offence, even an involuntary one, we are thrown into prison; let us likewise cast ourselves into prison because of our sins, so that voluntary

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remembrance may anticipate the punishment that is to come.”

Amma Syncletica invites her followers to journey into a voluntary prison: the place of inner reflection where we make an honest assessment of self and come to recognize those areas in our lives that need reform, reconciliation, and healing. She would have us cultivate awareness of our createdness, of our healthy dependence upon God, and of our interconnectedness with one another. This prison becomes the place of grace where transformation begins.

As we grow in self-awareness, we begin to become aware of the unnecessary prisons we have placed ourselves in. At times, these familiar prisons can seem more safe and secure than risking the journey out and into freedom. Jesus would lead us toward freedom, but he is gentle and calls us only when we are ready and willing to go.

21. She also said, “Just as a treasure that is exposed loses its value, so a virtue which is known vanishes; just as wax melts when it is near fire, so the soul is destroyed by praise and loses all the results of its labor.”

Desert spirituality is a hidden spirituality. Desert ascetics sought to “disappear” from the memory of others. To be seen by others was to fall from the chosen path; a virtue seen is a virtue lost.

Amma Syncletica was also aware that the inner journey is sensitive and tender. It is the place where we are most vulnerable to attack; it is the place where our true selves

emerge, unknown and unproven. Because of an unconscious and innate need to protect that tender vulnerability, the inner journey is deeply susceptible to pride. Amma Syncletica would alert her disciples to this danger.

22. She also said, “Just as it is impossible to be at the same moment both a plant and a seed, so it is impossible for us to be surrounded by worldly honor and at the same time to bear heavenly fruit.”

Most of us are a mosaic of maturity and immaturity. God creates us with wonderful potential: potential that needs tender nurturing and exposure to growth-filled experiences. When we patiently tend to our inner gardens, the seed of spirituality germinates. Growth, maturity, and fruitfulness are the result. Self-defeating, self-deceiving behaviors thwart this seed’s attempts to grow, leaving us in stagnating immaturity.

Amma Syncletica consistently rejects worldly recognition. She is concerned that honors given by society may diminish ardent pursuit of the inner journey. Nothing is to detract us from the primacy of Jesus in our lives.

23. She also said, “My children, we all want to be saved, but because of our habit of negligence, we swerve away from salvation.”

Amma Syncletica is not speaking of the “first” salvation found in embracing the message of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather she is concerned about a mature living out of salvation that is serious about following Jesus. Negligence is deceptive, often initially appearing to be “good.” Seemingly innocuous choices can begin to

snowball—we become unaware and inattentive in many ways. This is why we must be watchful and attentive, discerning the direction of our choices.

24. She also said, “We must arm ourselves in every way against the demons. For they attack us from outside, and they also stir us up from within; and the soul is then like a ship when great waves break over it, and at the same time it sinks because the hold is too full. We are just like that: we lose as much by the exterior faults we commit as by the thoughts inside us. So we must watch for the attacks from people that come from outside us, and also repel the interior onslaughts of our thoughts.”

“Demons” were often mentioned in the language of the early church. Early Christians did not have the language of psychology to describe their experiences of inner turmoil; everything was attributed to demonic activity, true evil as well as personal sin or woundedness. In our attentiveness and watchfulness, Amma Syncletica invites us to be aware of the sources of our own inner turmoil: all those things that keep us distracted and out of focus, that frustrate and drain us of energy.

Amma Syncletica calls us to be aware of giving too much voice to our internalized self-hatred. When we become aware of those parts of our inner self that are vulnerable to attack from others, we can be prepared and less apt to be caught off guard. Internal and external attacks “feed” the messages we have internalized that tell us of our unworthiness, of our lack, of all that we are not and yet “should” be. This reinforces and perpetuates our internalized messages of self-hatred.

Amma Syncletica encourages us to be watchful and aware of how we respond when—not if—these attacks occur. In our self-awareness we can respond appropriately and care for ourselves in the midst of them.

25. She also said, “Here below we are not exempt from temptations. For Scripture says, ‘May you who think that you stand take heed lest you fall’ [1 Cor 10:12]. We sail on in darkness. The psalmist calls our life a sea and the sea is either full of rocks, or very rough, or else it is calm. We are like those who sail on a calm sea, and seculars are like those on a rough sea. We always set our course by the sun of justice, but it can often happen that the secular is saved in tempest and darkness, for he keeps watch as he ought, while we go to the bottom through negligence, although we are on a calm sea, because we have let go of the guidance of justice.”

Amma Syncletica is keenly aware that those who have been intentional about their inner journey, who have grown in their sense of inner calm and tranquility, can quickly grow lax in awareness and be caught off guard. We must never presume we have “arrived.” The inner journey is a way of life, a process of transformation that continues until death.

There is also a deceptive calm when we do not attend to our inner world. True calm cannot be forced or willed into existence. Our lack of awareness of inner turmoil, or the call to growth, is not true calm. True inner calm is rooted in strength and reality. There is a sense of movement toward life, toward the Divine. Purity of motives and purity of heart is maintained.

26. She also said, “There is grief that is useful, and there is grief that is destructive. The first sort consists in weeping over one’s own faults and weeping over the weakness of one’s neighbors, in order not to destroy one’s purpose, and attach oneself to the perfect good. But there is also a grief that comes from the enemy, full of mockery, which some call accidie. This spirit must be cast out, mainly by prayer and psalmody.”

Desert spirituality understood that healthy grief is dynamic and transformative: it moves. Grief can help us to touch our well of compassion and extend it toward ourself and others. Grief can also be an opportunity to allow ourselves to rest deeply in God’s compassion.

Grief that feeds inner turmoil and refuses resolution, that moves us toward death rather than life, that leads us away from our truest selves, must be rooted out or healed. A spiritual director, mentor, or other professional can help us look at ways to let go of our grief issues and move on. This amma can help us discover resurrection in our grief.

### *Amma Theodora*

Amma Theodora lived in the fourth century in the desert of Egypt. Not much is known about her—at times Amma Theodora is confused with other women of the same name. We do know that she was a colleague of Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria and was often consulted by monastics about the monastic life.

Amma Theodora was concerned that her disciples have a self-discipline that would withstand inner and

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outer conflict. She is one also of the first persons to give a description of *accidie*.

Her feast day is September 1.

### *The Sayings of Amma Theodora*

1. Amma Theodora asked Archbishop Theophilus about some words of the apostle saying, “What does this mean, ‘Knowing how to profit by circumstances?’” [Col 4:5]. He said to her, “This saying shows us how to profit at all times. For example, is it a time of excess for you? By humility and patience buy up the time of excess, and draw profit from it. Is it the time of shame? Buy it up by means of resignation and win it. So everything that goes against us can if we wish, become profitable to us.”

Life is a continuous occasion for learning. Our interaction with and listening to others are opportunities to grow. Growth occurs in our reflection upon these interactions; if necessary, we can bring our reflections and concerns to a mentor. As we cultivate God-awareness, we begin to look for the gift in these encounters and we cultivate openness to life. Amma Theodora cautions us to maintain balance in all aspects of our life, not being swayed toward any extreme.

2. Amma Theodora said, “Let us strive to enter by the narrow gate. Just as the trees, if they have not stood before the winter’s storms cannot bear fruit, so it is with us; this present age is a storm and it is only



through many trials and temptations that we can obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.”

Desert ascetics lived closely with nature, often at its mercy. This shaped much of their self-understanding and God-understanding. They lived intimately with the rhythm of harsh winters and fruitful springs.

God can use all of our experiences to deepen our growth and transformation. A “winter’s storm” is no indication that God has deserted us. Rather these seasons, as we reflectively respond to God’s presence in the midst of them, become the test of our commitment to stand firm. They deepen our dedication to the inner journey and facilitate our transformation into the image of Christ. These seasons will come. If we watch attentively for their arrival and attend to our self-care, we will weather them just fine. The diversity of our liturgical seasons can be a helpful reminder that difficult times do come and that our God is still with us.

3. She also said, “It is good to live in peace, for the wise person practices perpetual prayer. It is truly a great thing for an ascetic to live in peace, especially for the younger ones. However, you should realize that as soon as you intend to live in peace, at once evil comes and weighs down your soul through accidie, faintheartedness, and evil thoughts. It also attacks your body through sickness, debility, weakening of the knees, and all the members. It dissipates the strength of soul and body, so that one believes one is ill and no longer able to pray. But if we are vigilant, all these temptations fall away. There was in fact an ascetic who was seized by cold

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and fever every time prayers began, suffering from headaches, too. In this condition, the ascetic thought, 'I am ill, and near to death; so now I will get up before I die and pray.' By reasoning in this way, the ascetic exercised self-discipline. When finished praying, the fever abated. So, by reasoning in this way, the ascetic resisted, prayed and was able to conquer unhelpful thoughts."

The peace Amma Theodora calls us to has strength, substance, and weight. This peace is not a lack of turmoil but is rather a strength that moves toward life, integrating mind, body, soul, and spirit. Peace was a deeply held value among desert ascetics and monastics. They recognized that peace begins within each individual.

4. The same Amma Theodora said, "A devout person happened to be insulted by someone, and replied, 'I could say as much to you, but the commandment of God keeps my mouth shut.'" Again she said this, "A Christian discussing the body with a Manichean said, 'Give the body discipline and you will see that the body is for the one who made it.'"

Amma Theodora warns her followers against letting bodily passions and desires, emotions, attitudes, and motives rule our lives. Passions, desires, and emotions are gifts from God, but they were never meant to be out of balance, dominating, or controlling. Amma Theodora challenges us to bring our inner and outer world into congruence and harmony. This is interior freedom and simplicity.

5. The same Amma said that a teacher ought to be a stranger to the desire for domination, vainglory, and pride. A teacher should not be fooled by flattery, nor be blinded by gifts, conquered by the stomach, nor dominated by anger. A teacher should be patient, gentle and humble as far as possible; successfully tested and without partisanship, full of concern, and a lover of souls.

Amma Theodora insists that spiritual elders have a healthy relationship with power, recognizing the power dynamics of the spiritual mentoring relationship and placing responsibility on the elder for maintaining proper boundaries. If power is our motivation, we are a danger to those in our lives. Self-knowledge is imperative here.

Amma Theodora teaches us that all authentic teachers have already begun the journey and teach only what they have already learned and cultivated in their personal lives. The maturity revealed in a balanced and disciplined life is essential.

6. She also said that neither asceticism, nor vigils nor any kind of suffering are able to save, only true humility can do that. There was an anchorite who was able to banish the demons; and asked them, "What makes you go away? Is it fasting?" They replied, "We do not eat or drink." "Is it vigils?" They replied, "We do not sleep." "Is it separation from the world?" "We live in the deserts." "What power sends you away then?" They said, "Nothing can overcome us, but only humility." "Do you see how humility is victorious over the demons?"

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Humility is honest, accepting, and loving self-knowledge and self-awareness of ourselves as fully human, created and gifted by God, balanced with a keen awareness of God's grace and awesome presence in our life. Humility strengthens rather than diminishes our sense of self-worth.

Amma Theodora is using a literary tool—the characters of the demons—to reinforce her teachings on the inner journey: the end goal of the desert journey is complete and loving unity with God. Asceticism is a useful tool for growth into this unity; asceticism is not a goal in itself. We must not confuse the process with its goal—unity with God.

7. Amma Theodora also said, “There was an ascetic who, because of the great number of personal temptations said, ‘I will go away from here.’ While putting sandals on, saw another ascetic who was also putting on sandals. This other ascetic said, ‘Is it on my account that you are going away? Because I go before you wherever you are going.’”

Wherever we flee, we will only meet ourselves there. It is pointless to run away from difficult situations—we ourselves are part of the difficulty. Difficulties are an invitation to grow in self-awareness, in patience and inner strength, in humility and self-acceptance, and in God's immense and unconditional love. Difficulties teach us the real work of peacemaking.

Amma Theodora challenges her followers to be attentive to possible unpleasant motives in seeking a change in personal circumstances. In considering change, we must discern whether the sense of inner movement is

away from difficulties or *toward* life. Quite often, this inner movement is not obvious.

8. The same Amma was asked about the conversations one hears. "If one is habitually listening to secular speech, how can one yet live for God alone, as you suggest?" She said, "Just as when you are sitting at table and there are many courses, you take some but without pleasure, so when secular conversations come your way, have your heart turned towards God, and thanks to this disposition, you will hear them without pleasure, and they will not do you any harm."

In the desert, one cultivates an intimacy with God that filters out anything harmful. Only those things that penetrate the heart are harmful.

Are we intentional about discerning what we listen to, watch on TV, and read? We live in a very noisy society. What we consume *does* affect our minds and hearts. It takes focused and intentional work to cultivate the contemplative attitude and heart. We can be discerning about what touches and feeds our minds, hearts, and inner world.

9. An ascetic suffered bodily irritation and was infested with vermin. Now originally this ascetic had been rich. So the demons said, "How can you bear to live like this, covered with vermin?" But this ascetic, because of the greatness of soul, was victorious over them.

In obvious and in subtle ways, our commitment to the desert way will be called into question. Amma

## *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

Theodora is warning her followers. We can meet someone special, experience a stirring of our heart, or question our marriage commitment. When one of our relationships—with a colleague or friend—gets difficult, other relationships begin to look attractive. We can begin to look on our past with fond memories and romantic illusions, believing that then must have been better than now.

Difficulty can seem like an indication that God has deserted us. It is wise for us, in these times, to discern with another the movement of our inner sense of God's call in our life and to stand firm in our commitments. Greatness of soul or spiritual maturity deepens when we choose to remain true.

10. Another of the old ascetics questioned Amma Theodora saying, "At the resurrection of the dead, how shall we rise?" She said, "As pledge, example, and as prototype we have him who died for us and is risen, Christ our God."

Amma Theodora held a firm, steadfast hope and trust in the resurrection. In her oneness of spirit with God, Theodora knew deeply that ultimate unity with God would be experienced only in our resurrection after death. With other desert ascetics and monastics, death—and hence resurrection—was the focus kept ever before their eyes.

The desert way cultivated an awareness of the small glimpses of resurrection already present and a hope grounded in the resurrection.

## Chapter Four

# BRIGHT STARS IN THE DESERT SKY: LESSER KNOWN DESERT MOTHERS

THE following, arranged in alphabetical order by name, are the stories of ammas whose Sayings did not survive the course of history. Seeking solitude in city or desert, each woman has a unique story, except for the shared intense search for God alone.

### *Alexandra*

Alexandria in Egypt was a major port established where the Nile meets the Mediterranean Sea. There was a major Christian community there, and it was a growing intellectual center. One of the earliest schools of theology was located in this city.

Alexandra was a beautiful young woman of the fourth century who fled the unwanted advances of a young

man, left the city of Alexandria, and shut herself up in a mausoleum. She received food and supplies through a window from a woman friend. Alexandra maintained strict privacy through the remaining ten or twelve years of her life, keeping a curtain at her window so that no one ever saw her face to face again.

Melania the Elder sought a visit with Alexandra. When Melania asked Alexandra how she persevered through the harsh conditions and the difficult inner journey, she replied,

From early dawn to the ninth hour I weave linen, and recite the Psalms and pray; and during the rest of the day I commemorate in my heart the holy fathers, and I revolve in my thoughts the histories of all the Prophets and Apostles, and Martyrs; and during the remaining hours I work with my hands and eat my bread, and by means of these things I am comforted whilst I await the end of my life in good hope.<sup>1</sup>

Despite her strict privacy, Alexandra developed a reputation among Christians for her wise advice and spiritual direction.

### *Anastasia the Patrician*

Anastasia<sup>2</sup> was a member of the sixth-century Byzantine aristocracy and the royal court of Emperor Justinian (ruled 527 -565 C.E.) and Empress Theodora. Theodora grew increasingly jealous of Anastasia, who chose to leave Constantinople for Alexandria in Egypt.

Anastasia built a monastery in a neighborhood called Ennaton, about five miles outside of Alexandria. She



lived the discipline of the monastic life and wove cloth to support herself.

With the death of Theodora in 548 C.E., Justinian began to pursue her. Rather than risk being found, Anastasia went to Scete, deep in the Egyptian desert.<sup>3</sup> There she met with Abba Daniel, who helped her get reestablished away from the probing eyes of the emperor. Anastasia began to wear men's clothing and moved into a *laura* about eighteen miles deeper into the desert. She intended never to leave this cave, and it was arranged for a fellow hermit to bring her jugs of water.

Anastasia lived in solitude for twenty-eight years. As her death approached, she sent word to Abba Daniel to come and bury her. Abba Daniel and his disciple arrived swiftly in order to share some final words and receive her blessing. She requested and received the Holy Eucharist and a final prayer of blessing from Abba Daniel, turned toward the southeast, stretched out her hands, and said, "O God, into your hands do I commend my soul."<sup>4</sup> Anastasia then made the sign of the cross and died. Her feast day is March 10.

### *Asella*

From the earliest days of the Jesus movement, Rome attracted active and dedicated groups of women who were committed to prayer, service to the marginalized, and the study of scripture. They soon developed into urban monastic communities. Often attached to one of these communities would be a solitary. Asella was one of the earliest.

Born around 334 C.E., Asella and her sister Marcella were members of a noble and wealthy Roman family.<sup>5</sup> Jerome, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the historian

Palladius were among her friends and mentors. Asella consecrated herself to God when she was ten years of age.<sup>6</sup> At twelve she chose—with some initial family resistance—to live the life of a solitary ascetic. Jerome describes her life in a narrow cell in her family's home in Rome:

Enclosed in the narrow confines of a single cell, she enjoyed the wide pastures of paradise. The same patch of earth existed as her place both of prayer and of rest. Fasting was her recreation and hunger her refreshment. If she took food, it was not from love of eating but from human exhaustion, and the bread, salt, and cold water to which she restricted herself sharpened more than appeased her appetite.<sup>7</sup>

Asella gave all her possessions away and dressed only in dark clothing. Jerome mentions her sale of a gold necklace in the lamprey pattern with bars of gold linked together to form a flexible chain. The money was given to the poor.

Asella lived in silence and privacy, appearing discreetly in public only when she attended the Church of the Holy Martyrs. She rarely saw her family, including her sister Marcella, although her cell was located in the family compound. She fasted several days a week and framed her day in regular schedules of prayer and psalmody. The few who had contact with her, including Jerome and Palladius, remarked at her cheerful, gentle, and pleasant disposition. Jerome tells us,

She is equally pleasant in her serious moods and serious in her pleasant moods. She is equally

solemn in her laughter and charming in her sadness. Her face is pale enough to indicate continence but not ostentatiously to display austerity. Her speech is silence and her silence speech.<sup>8</sup>

In later years, her family compound became a monastery with a portion dedicated to hospitality and to receiving and instructing converts. Asella died between 405 and 408. Her feast day is December 6.

### *Athanasia of Antioch and Egypt*

Antioch was an inland city in present-day Syria, located at a major crossroad for traffic from Asia Minor, especially for Roman troop movement. Antioch rivaled Alexandria as a growing intellectual center and for its important contributions to theology.

Athanasia and her husband, Andronicus, were prosperous silver merchants who lived in Antioch with their two children. They were generous believers and gave a third of their wealth away to the poor. Each of their children died at the age of twelve. Athanasia was inconsolable. She mourned deeply, spending most of her time at the church of Saint Julian the Martyr. While in intense prayer, Athanasia saw a vision of Saint Julian that irrevocably changed their lives.

Athanasia and Andronicus decided to sell all they owned, giving all their wealth to hospitals and monastic communities. They journeyed to Jerusalem to visit the holy places, and then to Egypt to consult with Abba Daniel. They decided that Athanasia would begin her desert journey by joining a monastic community in Tabennisi while Andronicus stayed with Abba Daniel.

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Twelve years later Athanasia was journeying to Jerusalem on pilgrimage when she encountered her husband. Athanasia recognized her husband, but Andronicus did not recognize his wife. They agreed to journey together, maintaining total silence as if each was alone.

Upon return to the desert region outside Alexandria, the two decided to share a cave together, continuing to live in deep silence. They lived this eremetical monastic life for twelve years, until the death of Athanasia. Many of the desert dwellers and monastics in the area attended her funeral. Their feast day is celebrated on October 9.

### *Athanasia of Constantinople*

Athanasia was a married woman of independent wealth. After developing a friendship with Matrona and her monastic community, Athanasia decided she wanted to give all her wealth to Matrona and join this community. Matrona initially refused this request, reminding Athanasia that she was still young (eighteen) and lacked her husband's consent. Matrona encouraged her to begin her training for the ascetic life by living simply and chastely, devoting several times each day to prayer.

Athanasia went to live on one of her farms, and sought an appropriate way to separate from her extravagant and intemperate husband. Soon she discovered that he had spent all his fortune. While Athanasia was staying at her farm, her husband stole some of her cash. This was sufficient grounds for a divorce; Athanasia won her freedom,<sup>9</sup> took most of her wealth with her, and joined Matrona's community.

Athanasia's wealth was used to enlarge the hermitage and construct a church for the community. Another large

portion was sent to needy monasteries in Jerusalem. The remainder was distributed among the poor. Athanasia remained with this community until her death.

### *Caesaria the Patrician*

Samosata was an ancient city located on the Euphrates River in northern Syria. It held some importance to the Roman military after its capture in 72 C.E.

A colleague of John of Ephesus<sup>10</sup> and Severus of Antioch, Caesaria the Patrician was an early sixth-century woman of prominence from Samosata, whose husband was of imperial descent. After years of marriage, Caesaria sought to establish a monastic and solitary life for herself.<sup>11</sup> Caesaria accepted the clothing of the ascetic and intensified her prayer life. She was known for her faithful presence at the Divine Office, for her dedication to intercessory prayer, and for her love of silence and solitude.

Like many of her social class who underwent conversions, Caesaria renounced her royal lifestyle. She fasted stringently, eating only every other day, and slept on the ground. She was admonished to greater moderation but steadfastly chose a more extreme asceticism, desiring to break fully from her former life.

Caesaria was well educated, both in scripture and in the writings of the church fathers. Her personal library contained over seven hundred volumes that she had read with such understanding that she could converse zestfully with John of Ephesus. She was particularly interested in understanding the process of discernment. This is especially notable, as Caesaria lived through some of the church's doctrinal turmoil.<sup>12</sup>

Caesaria sought to leave the monastic community she founded and move deeper into the desert with two

companions. John of Ephesus talked her out of this, partly due to her old age and fragile health, and partly due to her importance to the local community.

Caesaria established two monastic communities, one for women and one for men, in the desert near Alexandria, and endowed them with a gold mine. Refusing to serve as abbess, she appointed Cosmiana to this position. Caesaria lived the monastic life for fifteen years, until her death in 556 C.E.

### ***Blessed Woman Candida***

Candida was the daughter of General Trajan. Modeling her life on the example of Deaconess Olympias of Constantinople, Candida gave financial support to the churches and clergy. She instructed her daughter in the ascetic life and eventually gave her to a monastery. After deciding to join a monastery herself, Candida gave away all her wealth to the poor and needy.

Following the common example of monastics, Candida spent her nights in prayer while grinding corn and baking bread for the Offering. She valued fasting and ate a near-vegetarian diet of only fish and vegetables with oil. Her spirituality was focused on a hope-filled waiting for the resurrection.

### ***Cerona***

Cerona was born in Cornillan, near Beziers in Gaul. Cerona and her brother were adult converts who received instruction in the Christian faith from the Bishop of Bordeaux. In 440 C.E., she traveled north to the diocese of Seez and built a small cell in the forest near Mortagne near Mont Romigny. Cerona balanced

times of solitude with travel in her immediate area, seeking the conversion of the inhabitants.

Cerona eventually established the region's first monastery for women. She also built several oratories, one on a spot where pre-Christian funeral rites had been conducted. Cerona served as amma to this monastic community but maintained her solitary cell. She died in 490 C.E., and her feast was celebrated on November 16 and February 3.

### *Domnina*

Theodoret of Cyrrhus tells us that Domnina was an ascetic in the southern region of Syria. She set up a small hut in the garden of her mother's home to maintain solitude and was supported by her family. She continued a strong connection with the local church, attending morning and evening prayer each day. Domnina wore rough and uncomfortable clothing made from hair, with a hood that covered her face. She lived on a simple vegetarian diet. Domnina died around 460 C.E., and her feast is celebrated on March 1.

### *Elisabeth the Wonderworker*

Elisabeth was born to aging parents, Euphemia and Eunomianos. While scholars do not know the exact date of her birth or her death, we do know that she was a contemporary of Gennadios I, patriarch of Constantinople from 458 to 471 C.E.; of Leo I, Byzantine emperor from 457 to 474 C.E.; and of Daniel the Stylite, who arrived in Constantinople around 451 C.E. Her family owned an estate in Abydenoi, near Herakleia in Thrace, and was known for their hospitality to the poor, giving liberally

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to those in need. Her parents invested heavily in Elisabeth's education, which included scripture.

Elisabeth's mother died when she was twelve; her father died when she was fifteen. Although she inherited her family's wealth, she decided to join her aunt's monastic community. She gave her silver and gold to the poor, distributed her other considerable property, and set her slaves free.

Elisabeth joined her aunt in Constantinople, whose monastery was located on "Little Hill." Saint George was its patron saint. She began her monastic observance, fasting, bathing rarely, embracing poverty, and going without shoes (significant for one of her social class). Elisabeth grew in humility and in freedom from passions. When her aunt died, she was appointed abbess.

Elisabeth quickly became known for her prophetic and healing powers. She was especially effective in praying for women who suffered from an excessive flow of blood and for the blind. This ministry continued for many years.

Elisabeth made a final visit to her familial estates to see family and pray at holy sites. She had been made aware of her impending death through a dream. Upon returning to her monastic community, Elisabeth died of an intense fever on the twenty-fourth of April. She was buried in the Cathedral of Saint George, and her body remained incorrupt—in some spiritual traditions, a sign of the particular holiness of the deceased. Her feast is celebrated on April 24.

### *Ermelinda*

A sixth-century hermit, Ermelinda was born into a noble family near Louvain in present-day Belgium.



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Her family owned extensive lands in northern France, and Ermelinda spent portions of her childhood on different estates. She began to live the ascetic life in her parents' home.

When Ermelinda chose to become a hermit, her parents gave her a neighboring estate. She soon decided that she could not focus solely on her pursuit of God with her family nearby. Moving near the village of Bevec, Ermelinda lived as a virtual unknown in a small, simple hut and entered the village only to attend the Divine Office.

When she began to attract the attention of villagers, Ermelinda moved to the diocese of Mechlin (Belgium) and continued to live the life of a hermit. It is here that she spent the remainder of her life. Her feast day is October 29.

### *Eugenia of Alexandria*

The story of Eugenia evolved into a fantastic martyr-legend. However, the mosaic was formed from historical pieces of an earlier woman.

Eugenia was the daughter of Philip, proconsul of Egypt under Commodus from 180 to 192 C.E. She was raised in a pagan Roman family but privately began to follow the Christian way. Eugenia rejected an arranged marriage to Aquilinus, a man of high standing but not a follower of the Way. Before another suitable marriage could be arranged, Eugenia and two of her fellow students met a monastic community of men and decided to join.

Disguised as a man, Eugenia entered the community and quietly began to live the monastic life. Eventually elected abbot, she reluctantly accepted the office and made a little cell for herself by the side of the door of the

monastery that she might remain in it continually. She protected her desire for silence and solitude while serving as spiritual elder for the brethren.

It is recorded that Eugenia was martyred in Rome around 257 C.E., during the reign of Valerian and Gallienus.

*Euphrasia the Elder and Euphrasia the Younger*

Euphrasia was a young widow with a daughter, also named Euphrasia. When she became the unintentional cause of a dispute between Emperor Theodosius and his wife, Euphrasia took her daughter and moved to Egypt, where she owned some estates. She began to visit churches and monasteries, leaving sizeable donations behind.

Eventually Euphrasia visited a women's monastery deep in the Theban desert. This community of 130 nuns practiced severe asceticism. They followed a regular schedule of fasting and abstinence from wine, wore hair shirts, slept on hair mats, and refused to bathe. They spent their time in intense prayer. Euphrasia died at this monastery when her daughter was around five years old. The monastic community raised her daughter.

Young Euphrasia's family had betrothed her to a suitor despite her distance from the royal court. When Euphrasia was of marriageable age, her betrothed asked Emperor Theodosius to see that the marriage proceed. The younger Euphrasia wrote the emperor of her desire to remain with her monastic community, and asked him to distribute her wealth to the churches and the poor and for the care of orphans.

Euphrasia lived a contented life in the desert. She developed a close friendship with another noblewoman

named Julia. Julia taught Euphrasia to read, to sing, and to pray. They baked the community bread together, sharing all their deepest struggles and joys. Euphrasia lived to around thirty years of age, and then died of a fever. Her feast day is March 13.

### ***Euphrosyne of Alexandria***

Euphrosyne (meaning “good cheer”) was born in Alexandria in 410 C.E. to a wealthy and prominent family. Euphrosyne was given an education, including the scriptures, and became known for her love of learning and her growth in wisdom. As she was their only child, her parents made arrangements for an advantageous marriage.

When Euphrosyne was eighteen years old, she went with her father, Paphnutius, on retreat to a monastery for men for three days of intense prayer. The abbot also privately instructed her. Euphrosyne fell in love with the monastic life. She sought the help of a wandering ascetic as well as a monastic hermit to prepare for a life of monastic observance.

When her father left her at home to go on another retreat, she took the opportunity to depart. A hermit from Scete shaved her head, gave her a monastic robe, prayed with her, and departed. She quickly decided not to join any women’s community for fear her father would find her. So she changed into men’s clothing, took 500 dinars, and went to join the men’s community that she and her father had visited. Euphrosyne told the porter that she was a eunuch from the palace, named Esmeraldus. The abbot placed Euphrosyne in training under Agapius, one of the elders of the community.

Dissension arose in the community over Euphrosyne’s beauty, and this same abbot ordered her into seclusion.

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She moved deeper into the desert to a more solitary cell, and began to recite services alone rather than join the monastic community for prayers. Euphrosyne quickly grew to love the intense solitude and ceased having contact with anyone other than the abbot and Father Agapios, her elder and mentor.

Euphrosyne's grieving father sought out the assistance of the abbot in the search for his "abducted" daughter. The abbot helped, unaware that Euphrosyne was in his community. Eventually, Paphnutius began coming to the monastery for solace from his grief, and the abbot sent him to Euphrosyne for comfort and spiritual direction. Euphrosyne met him, keeping her face covered with a veil and never revealing her identity. Paphnutius returned several times, as they had drawn close from their personal sharing.

Euphrosyne lived near this monastic community for thirty-eight years, with no one discovering that she was a woman. In the last year of her life, Paphnutius again visited on retreat and met with Euphrosyne for direction. Aware that she was dying, Euphrosyne revealed her identity to her father, and there was a final reconciliation.

At her request, Paphnutius distributed the family wealth to the poor, hospitals, and prisons, and to the monastery. The monastic community buried her, and her tomb quickly became a place of prayer with miracles attributed to her. Paphnutius moved into Euphrosyne's cave and dwelt there for ten years, until his own death.

An early version of her Life was written in iambic pentameter. Saint Symeon the Translator wrote her Life in prose.<sup>13</sup> Euphrosyne's feast is celebrated on September 25.

### ***Florence***

During one of the early christological controversies called Arianism, the Roman emperor intervened and tried to coerce all bishops to embrace his chosen position. All bishops who refused to do so were banished. The personal witness of Saint Hilary of Poitiers—who sided with the orthodox position—converted Florence to Christianity during his exile in Phrygia. Florence and Hilary returned together to Poitiers in 360 C.E. She lived in a cell near Poitiers under the guidance of the recluse Amma Triaise until her death in 367 C.E. Her feast day is December 1.

### ***Fracla, Posenna, and Prompta***

Fracla, Posenna, and Prompta were three Irish sisters who went on a pilgrimage to northern Gaul with their seven sisters and brothers. The sisters settled on the banks of the Marne River near Rheims to live as hermits, each in a separate cell. They lived at the end of the fifth century. Their feast day is January 3.

### ***Blessed Woman Gelasia***

Gelasia was the daughter of a tribune who followed Candida into the monastic life. Palladius tells us, “Her virtue is said to be such that the sun never set on her anger, not even at manservant or handmaid.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Hilaria***

We know of Hilaria from an apocryphal<sup>15</sup> story that calls her the older daughter of the Emperor Zeno (474-491). As befit their royal background, Hilaria and her sister were well educated and memorized the psalms.

## *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

Hilaria was deeply influenced by the martyrdom of the forty-nine fathers of Scete and decided to become a monastic herself. She fled her home disguised as a man and sailed to Alexandria. At the church of the Holy Mar Marcus, Hilaria met a deacon named Theodorus, who escorted her to Scete to see Abba Banfu (Pambo). Abba Pambo was reluctant to take Hilaria, due to her obvious upper-class background. When Hilaria's determination and quick wit became obvious, Abba Pambo, believing she was a young man, accepted her as a disciple and began to train her in the desert way. Hilaria was known in the region as Hilary the Eunuch, which explained her lack of a beard.

Hilaria's younger sister went on pilgrimage to Scete in hopes of a cure from a serious illness. Abba Pambo ordered Hilaria to host the princess in her cell. Hilaria prayed for her day and night until the princess had a full recovery. The princess returned home amazed—as much at the deep love she experienced from this unknown monk as at her cure.

The Emperor Zeno, suffering from heart trouble, ordered the unknown monk to come to him at the royal court in Constantinople. Hilaria agreed only because Abba Pambo ordered her. After eliciting a vow of silence, Hilaria revealed her identity to her father and prayed for his healing. The emperor endowed the monks of Scete in thanksgiving both for the younger princess's healing and for his reconciliation with Hilaria.

### *Blessed Woman Juliana*

Following the election of the very learned Firmilian as bishop in 230 C.E., Caesarea, in Cappadocia, evolved into an important theological center. Juliana, a resident

of Caesarea, was an erudite and well-educated woman of prominence.

During the persecution against Egyptian Christians in 235 C.E., Origen, a leading theologian, fled Alexandria.<sup>16</sup> Juliana hid him in her home for two years and supported him financially.<sup>17</sup> She had lived a life of solitude in her own home, yet when she invited Origen to live with her as a brother, no scandal arose because her reputation was above suspicion.

Juliana is held up as an example of someone who makes every opportunity one for learning. She is honored in the Orthodox<sup>18</sup> tradition for her capacities as a teacher of sacred scripture. She owned books and was a woman of understanding. Palladius discovered the following words in an old book of verse, written in Origen's own hand: "I found this book among the things of Juliana the virgin in Caesarea when I was hidden by her. She used to say that she had it from Symmachus himself, the translator of the Jews."<sup>19</sup>

### *Manna of Fontenet*

Living in the fourth century, Manna was the daughter of Sigmar and Liutrude. Manna (sometimes "Menna") was baptized and instructed in the household of the bishop of Chalons (Gaul). She refused to marry a non-Christian nobleman and took the veil of an ascetic.

At the death of her parents, their wealth was divided among the children. Soon, Manna and her siblings dispersed because of the persecutions under Julian the Apostate.<sup>20</sup> She and her maid fled to the forests of Fontenet and built a hermitage near a spring. She remained in her hermitage the rest of her life. The area

eventually became known as *Le Gue de Sainte Manne*. Her feast day is October 3.

### ***Marana and Cyra***

Theodoret of Cyrrhus tells us of two noblewomen who founded a small monastery in Beroea (Syria). Around 398 C.E., Marana and Cyra purchased a roofless building on the outskirts of this city. They walled up the door with clay and stone. They also built a separate dwelling for the women who joined them.

Marana and Cyra served as ammas to this community while living in seclusion and silence. Marana give outsiders spiritual counsel only during the season of Pentecost. For the remainder of the year, she and her sister spoke only with their community. As was common in Syrian asceticism, Marana and Cyra practiced mortification of the flesh: They wore iron chains daily and went on long fasts. Several times the bishop asked them to moderate their asceticism, to no avail.

Marana and Cyra lived the ascetical life for forty-two years, leaving their enclosure only twice: to go on pilgrimage to Aelia and to the shrine of Saint Thecla at Isauria.

### ***Blessed Maria the Harp Player***

Cyril of Scythopolis tells us Maria was a liturgical musician.<sup>21</sup> She served as a harp player and cantor in the Holy Church of the Resurrection of Christ in Jerusalem. Sensing a call to a life of deep prayer and solitude, Maria moved into the desert near Sousakim in the region of the Dead Sea. Maria filled her clay vessel at the pool of Siloam, took a basket of soaked legumes (a common, simple desert food), and moved with her harp into



a cave that served as her hermitage for eighteen years. Travelers walking in this region would hear Maria playing her harp, but would not know where it came from.

Abba John and Abba Parammon were journeying to the anchorite Abba Cyriacus when they encountered a desert anchorite who was unfamiliar to them. Drawing near and deep in prayer, lest they were encountering an evil spirit, they discovered a woman living in an underground cave. Maria was reluctant to speak to them, hesitant to reveal either her identity or her location to the public. Maria told them her story: She had never left her cave nor spoken to anyone until encountering them, and her pitcher of water and basket of legumes never ran out.

On their way back to their own monastery at Chariton, John and Parammon discovered Maria's dead body and buried her in her own hermitage cave. The entrance was sealed with stones. Her feast day is September 29.

### ***Blessed Woman Marina***

Marina,<sup>22</sup> a fifth-century woman, was raised and educated by her father, Eugenios.<sup>23</sup> When she reached marriageable age, Eugenios announced his intention of giving all his wealth to her and becoming a desert ascetic. Marina refused to be left behind and insisted on following her father in the ascetic life.

They decided that Marina would shave her head, wear men's clothing, and change her name to the masculine "Marinos" in order to enter the same monastery as her father. Eugenios gave all their wealth away, and they went to join the community.

Marina embraced the monastic observance faithfully. She became known for her obedience, humility, and great devotion to prayer. No one suspected Marina was

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a woman but presumed she was a eunuch. She lived with her father in his cave until his death, after which her reputation for hard work and spiritual maturity continued to grow.

One day, the abbot sent Marina off with three other monks to visit other monasteries and conduct business. On their journey, the monks spent the night at an inn they frequently used. While they were there, a soldier seduced the innkeeper's daughter and suggested that if she became pregnant, she should accuse Marina.

The innkeeper's daughter claimed that Marina had seduced her and fathered her child. Not revealing her identity, Marina accepted the accusation and begged for forgiveness. The abbot expelled Marina, who then lived right outside the monastery gates. When the baby boy was brought to Marina, she accepted him without protest.

Marina and the child lived outside the monastery gate for four years. She continually requested readmittance and "confessed her sin of fornication to all who passed by." The monastic community was deeply moved by Marina's continual requests to reenter, and eventually she was allowed to return to the monastery with the child. Marina accepted the lowest rank in the community and resumed her life of simplicity and austerity. Only at her death did the community discover she was a woman. The abbot grieved for his treatment of Marina, realizing that his judgment was based on mere external appearances.

Her feast days are June 18 (West) and February 12 (East).

### ***Mary the Anchorite***

Mary was the daughter of a noble family. While still quite young, she met a holy man from a neighboring town. She decided to live as he did and rejected marriage. Her parents, upon discovering her intent, began wedding preparations for fear they would lose the rich man she was betrothed to.

Mary left home, took the habit, and cropped her hair in the manner of ascetics. She joined a monastic community, and later lived as a hermit for thirty years, in imitation of the holy old man. She focused her spiritual journey on the attainment of interior freedom.

Mary was involved for fifteen years in the Monophysite controversy. She hosted, financially supported, and defended many of its more outspoken adherents. She treated this controversy as a holy war and was seen as a hero in the local church. We know of Mary the Anchorite through John of Ephesus.

### ***Mary and Euphemia, Two Holy Sisters Called Daughters of the Gazelle***

Mary the Pilgrim<sup>24</sup> was an urban hermit who resided in the region of Tella in southeastern Turkey. She lived a life of quiet, fasting, recitation of the Divine Office, continual prayer, and profound generosity. Wandering and continuous pilgrimage was a form of asceticism that kept Mary from being attached to any place and allowed her to focus on intense prayer. Holy sites were her usual destinations.

Mary made an extended pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to pray at the holy places. When she arrived at Golgotha, she was lifted up in ecstasy and remained

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in deep prayer for three days and three nights. She was so moved by this experience that she stayed in Jerusalem for three years, living among the very poor in churches and on the street, and maintaining strict silence. Golgotha was her favored place of solitude and prayer.

Pilgrims from the East recognized Mary as the woman of great honor from Tella and began to spread her story. Mary, appalled at being recognized and having people pay her homage, fled Jerusalem and returned to Tella. She returned each year to Golgotha on pilgrimage, and many miracles occurred because of her presence.

Euphemia, her younger sister, had been married as a young woman and also lived in southeastern Turkey. When she was widowed, she and her daughter, Maria, turned their home in Amida into a hermitage. They wore religious garb, prayed the Divine Office, and relieved the afflicted.

Euphemia and Maria decided to support themselves by the work of their own hands, living on half their earnings and using the remainder to provide cooked food, bread and wine for the poor, sick and those in prison. Euphemia sought out the marginalized in order to talk and pray with them as well as meet their needs. They treated each as a unique individual. Euphemia became known as “our consolation and our visitor.”

During a period of turmoil within the church over doctrine, Euphemia opened her house to those driven from their monasteries and homes. As the numbers seeking her hospitality grew, she rented a larger home

and turned it into a monastery. Her daughter remained secluded in silence. Euphemia accepted the generosity of the believing community to support those seeking her help while continuing to support herself by the work of her own hands.

After thirty years of dedicated work, Euphemia was arrested and imprisoned for her hospitality to exiles.<sup>25</sup> Eventually she was banished from the city. Euphemia and Maria went to join Mary on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After five years, Euphemia attempted a quiet return to her city but was discovered. As she was preparing to depart again, Euphemia fell seriously ill. As she lay dying, her final parting words to Maria were,

My daughter, take comfort in Christ and guard yourself in purity...I am entrusting you to the child of our blessed lady Mary, and to the Holy One herself, that by her prayers you may be guarded, and become a temple of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit of God.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Mastridia of Jerusalem***

Mastridia lived a quiet ascetical life in Jerusalem. She was known for her gentleness, modesty of spirit, and compassionate love for her neighbors. Due to her deep wisdom and understanding of the interior life, she was referred to as a “female man of God.”

In order to seek more intense solitude and union with God, Mastridia took some soaked beans in a basket, moved to the desert mountains, and embraced the hermit life for seventeen years.

Mastridia died around 580 C.E. Her feast day is February 7.

### ***Matrona of Perge***

Born around 425 C.E. in Perge, Matrona<sup>27</sup> was married to Domitianus and was the mother of a daughter named Theodote (meaning “given by God”). Conventional upper-class life in Constantinople left Matrona dissatisfied, and she yearned for change. She began to spend days and nights attending prayer services.

Soon she found mentors in two urban ascetics, Eugenia and Susanna. In order to follow their lifestyles, Matrona cropped her hair short and dressed in men’s clothing. Seeking to escape her husband, she entered the men’s monastery of Basianus in Constantinople and took the name of Babylas. Susanna took responsibility for raising Matrona’s daughter.

When her identity was discovered and her husband demanded her return, Abbot Basianus arranged to send her to a women’s monastery near Emesa in Syria. Matrona became known for her powerful prayer life and effectiveness in praying for the healing of others.

Matrona finally settled as a desert ascetic in an abandoned pagan temple in the desert near Beirut. Her fame as a spiritual director and teacher grew, and many came to spend time with her there. There were many conversions, especially of women. Disciples, including a woman named Sophrone and a former priestess, began to join her and share her life in the desert.

Around 457 C.E., after the death of her husband, Matrona returned to Constantinople with eight of her followers to establish a monastery. They bought an estate near the Church of Saint Laurentius and began

their monastic observance. They wore male monastic garb openly. The community grew large and prosperous and was renowned as a place of prayer, healing, and learning. Women of all social classes, including the very poor, were welcomed as members and as visitors.

Matrona was a staunch supporter of the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), but Emperor Anastasios I favored the Monophysites. The emperor tried to force her to publicly support his position, but Matrona refused and he eventually backed down.

Matrona was abbess until her death in 524 C.E. at the age of 100. Her feast is November 9.

### ***Monegund, Recluse of Tours***

After the death of her two daughters, Monegund<sup>28</sup> chose to live alone on her family estate in Chartres. She lived in a spacious cell with a fireplace and a window. Monegund, rejecting a comfortable bed with goosedown covers, slept on a mat of woven rushes. In order to protect Monegund's solitude, a maid brought her water and other basic necessities.

Monegund was dedicated to a life of intercessory prayer and fasting. Gregory of Tours said that she would bake soda bread and distribute it to the poor. She cultivated a large garden that included healing herbs. The many poor who came to her for food also began to seek physical healing. Her prayer for their healing often included herbal mixtures and massage.

Monegund, like many in her region, yearned to live near the shrine of Saint Martin of Tours; she was also concerned that those seeking her help too often disrupted her day. Monegund moved to Tours and found a cell to live in. Soon her husband and friends came

to retrieve her and forcibly brought her home to Chartres.

Again slipping away to Tours, Monegund began to mentor a group of other women in the solitary life. As her death drew near, she blessed oil and salt so that her healing ministry could continue. Monegund died in 570 C.E. The group of women eventually developed into the monastery of Saint Pierre-le-Puellier. Her feast day is July 2.

### *Nymphodora, Menodora, and Metrodora*

Nymphodora, Menodora, and Metrodora<sup>29</sup> were sisters who lived as recluses in a *tumulus*, a domelike mound formed in hardened lava, near the hot springs of Pythiis in Bithynia in northwestern Asia Minor. They were spiritual elders and mentors to many and were known for their powerful healing prayer ministry. All three eventually were martyred during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian around 304 C.E. for refusing to make sacrifices to the emperor's favorite pagan gods. Their feast day is September 10.

### *Paesia, Holy Recluse*

Paesia was a generous, compassionate believer in fourth-century Egypt. When she was orphaned, she turned her home into a hospice for desert dwellers. When her resources were exhausted, some men convinced her to become a courtesan.

John the Dwarf soon learned of her situation, and remembering her unwavering generosity toward others, went to see her. He went into her chamber and sat beside her on the bed. Looking into her eyes, he asked, "What have you got against Jesus that you behave like



this?" and began weeping. Paesia's heart began to stir with grief. When they finished speaking, she followed John into the desert of Scete. Paesia lived in the wilderness, sleeping on the sand, and died soon after her journey into the desert.

### *Photina*

Photina was the sole survivor of a fourth-century shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea. The recluse Martinian, the sole resident of a small and barren island, saved her but soon left her alone on the island.

Martinian's regular contact, a boatman, returned two months later and found Photina alone on this island. Choosing to live as a recluse, she made arrangements to spin wool in return for food and water. The boatman also provided Photina with a monk's garb.

Photina remained alone on this island as a hermit for six years. She died at the age of thirty-one in 400 C.E. The boatman and wife found her dead and made arrangements for her burial at Caesaria. Her feast day is February 13.

### *Amma Piamon the Virgin*

Near a small village on the banks of the Upper Nile, Piamon and her mother lived a life of simplicity and austerity. Piamon spent her nights in vigil, a common practice among ascetics, who often strove to cultivate the ability to spend the night in constant prayer in anticipation of Christ's return at dawn. She ate every other evening and spun flax for linen.

Piamon was renowned for her gift of prophecy and her powers of intercessory prayer. When her village was under threat of attack by a neighboring city over water

rights, Piamon's help was sought. Her neighbors were afraid to confront their enemy and were unwilling to defend themselves; they looked to her to settle the dispute or defend the town on their behalf. Piamon spent the night in intense prayer, and through her intercession, the threat was averted and peace made. Her feast day is March 3.

### *Pusinna*

Pusinna was the well-educated daughter of rich Christians. She made her consecration before Alpina, bishop of Chalons-sur-Marne. She gave all she possessed to the poor and spent her days in prayer and fasting. Eventually she retired to a solitary cell in the village of Bansion, near Corbie. Pusinna died in the latter part of the fifth century, and was buried at Bansion.

### *Romana of Todi*

Todi is a lovely town built on the side and at the pinnacle of Mount Soracte in the Tuscany region of Italy. The slopes of Mount Soracte have natural caves. Romana was a young woman who lived in one of these caves, maintaining intense solitude until her death in 324 C.E. Two local priests knew of her presence. Her feast day is February 23.

### *Holy Shirin, Blessed among Women*

Shirin was a sixth-century solitary ascetic who lived in the village of Halmon, in present-day northern Iraq. John of Ephesus and the Syrian monastic writer Martyrios (also known as Sahdona) both knew Shirin, and Martyrios's mother became one of her followers.

Shirin cultivated a powerful prayer life, praying the Divine Office and maintaining continuous prayer. She was known for her ministry of intercessory prayer, and villagers believed she had “power over Satan.” She dedicated time each day to studying scripture, theology, and monastic writings.

Shirin lived a simple life of hardship. Her ascetic life was without guile, and she maintained integrity and authenticity in her inner journey. People experienced her as serene, gentle, simple, and filled with compassionate love. Her home was open to all, and she became known for her hospitality.

Shirin was a spiritual director to monastics as well as lay people. She inspired others to a zealous observance of their faith life, more by example than words. Abbots sought her counsel and looked to her as a spiritual elder.

She lived into her eighties.

### *Sosiana*

Sosiana had enjoyed a long and happy married life to her husband, John, with whom she served as chamberlain to Caesaria the Patrician. Upon John’s death, Sosiana decided to join Caesaria’s monastic community. Sosiana surrendered all of her possessions and committed herself to trust God for her needs.

She gave John of Ephesus all of her husband’s and her own expensive clothing, silk cloth, and embroidery to be made into altar cloths. She also gave up many pounds of silver to be made into chalices and patens. John distributed these during his mission of 542 C.E. to the churches and monasteries he had founded in Asia.

Sosiana lived in Caesaria's community until she died quietly and quickly from an illness.

### ***Blessed Hermit Susan***

John of Ephesus tells us "this woman, then, holy and manly in Christ...astonished me by her appearance, words, and strength in God."<sup>30</sup> Susan was from a fifth-century noble family of Persian Arzanene near the Tigris. From early childhood, she was known for her sensibility, modesty, and devotion.

At an early age Susan dreamt of praying at the holy shrines, and especially of going to Jerusalem. Her parents refused because she was only eight years old.<sup>31</sup> She began to pray earnestly that God would open doors for her to travel. Finally, trusting in God's protection, Susan ran away from home.

Susan joined a caravan of women and men traveling to Jerusalem. When the caravan was ready to return, Susan refused to join them. Instead she joined a monastery of women situated between Ascalon and Gaza. She lived the common life of prayer and manual labor.

After ten years, the monastery fell under persecution by followers of the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon. Rather than submit, Susan left for the desert beyond Alexandria. Eventually, five other nuns from her community joined her there. They moved deeper into the desert near the monastery of Mar Menas, two miles from the village of Mendis. The women moved into an old watchtower, continuing their common life.

Wanting to live the life of a solitary and hermit, Susan would go out wandering and praying in the desert. One day she discovered an underground cave. Without returning for provisions, she moved in. Her

community soon went looking for her and eventually found her. Susan refused to leave her cave, determined to continue growing in silence and inner strength. At the women's continued urging to return with them, Susan told them, "My sisters, leave me alone. I am with you for all time; but because the Lord prepared this place for me, so that I might easily live in quietude here, go and stay in peace."<sup>32</sup> They finally agreed to leave Susan to her solitude if she would accept a Sunday offering of dried bread and a pitcher of water.

This continued for three years. Word of her reputation began to spread around the region of Alexandria and the villages of Libya. People came to visit her. An old man named Maro with about ten disciples from a community in Palestine had been wandering during the persecutions. Upon hearing of the whereabouts of these women and especially of the growing reputation of Susan, they came to live with Susan's community in the desert. The men began to build a *laura* nearby, and others moved there to join them.

Concerned by the growing number of hermits and monastics in her area, Susan began to plan to move deeper into the desert. It was decided that a secluded monastery was needed for the women at the edge of this monastic village in order to give them greater solitude from the men. Susan agreed to stay in her cave as long as her privacy was protected. She continued living in her *laura* for another fifteen years, speaking to the monastic community, veiled and from a distance.

Susan was remembered for the strength and wisdom revealed in her teaching as well as for her gift of healing. She held a steadfast and unwavering trust in God's

willingness and ability to protect her from the evil one, to deliver her from her own weakness and sin, and to prevail fully in the end. Hers was no feeble Christ.

Susan was known to have lived deep in the desert for twenty-five years before she disappeared from historical records.

### *Syncletica of Palestine, anchoress*

Daughter of an aristocrat in Constantinople, Syncletica was betrothed to another aristocrat when she turned eighteen.<sup>33</sup> As the date of the marriage approached, Syncletica convinced her parents to let her go to “worship at the holy places.” She traveled to Jerusalem with a retinue of slaves and eunuchs and 3,000 coins. They continued on to the desert of Egypt and visited some of the desert ascetics.

As her retinue was preparing to embark from Jerusalem for Constantinople, Syncletica eluded it by making a pretense of one last visit to the Church of the Resurrection. She walked the highway to Jericho and on to the caves of Copotha. One of the old desert dwellers she had met clothed Syncletica in simple attire and gave her his books, including a two-volume Bible.

Syncletica went off into the desert and found an abandoned cave. She lived alone there for twenty-eight years, known by very few and unseen by anyone. Only Silas of Pharan, a desert ascetic who would later write her Life, knew of her existence, and he reported that Syncletica simply disappeared deeper into the desert.

Syncletica’s inner journey focused on cultivating integrity of life: that her outward behavior matched her inner. She fled the frivolous life of her aristocratic circle and dedicated herself fully to seeking God. We know

from the details given in her Life that Syncletica is unusual in that gender was not an issue for her: She neither sought to hide her womanhood by choice of clothing or haircut nor focused on it as a challenge or difficulty.

### ***Amma Tachom***

Amma Tachom was a fifth-century desert ascetic residing near Athribe in Egypt. She served as amma to a group of women; Abba Shenoute led the men's community nearby. Amma Tachom had a reputation for strong and unwavering leadership.

For reasons unknown to us, Abba Shenoute tried to appoint a priest of his community as her community's chaplain against her will. Amma Tachom refused to meet with him, and a battle over authority and the right to self-determination ensued. It is possible that this is a shadow of the cultural shift in which women who had been presiding at their own community's prayers were forcibly ousted and replaced by male clerics.

### ***Blessed Mother Talida***

In the town of Antinoë of the Thebaid in Egypt there were twelve monastic communities of women. For eighty years, Mother Talida (sometimes translated as Talis) resided in one with sixty other women. This community was known as a happy, harmonious, affectionate, and love-filled home. It was rare for anyone to leave. The women were deeply devoted to Talida, who was renowned for her teaching, her ascetic excellence, and the quality of spiritual formation of her sisters. Grounded in the freedom and confidence of her faith, Talida exercised a quiet boldness in dealing with others.

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### *The Virgin Taor*

Taor was a disciple of Mother Talida, and lived in the same monastery for thirty years. Renowned for her beauty and graceful manners, Taor never went out in public and preferred rags to new clothing. Her dedication to solitude in her urban desert was so intense that she refused to go to town with her community on the first day of the week to partake in the Offering (Mass).

### *Theodora*

Theodora had been married to a good man but was unfaithful to him. Eventually she was seized with remorse and fled to the desert, disguised as a man. Admitted to a men's monastery under the name of Theodoric, she lived there contently until she was accused of fathering a child. She was expelled from the monastery and lived alone with the baby for seven years. Without revealing her identity, Theodora sought forgiveness and reconciliation with her desert monastic community. She was eventually readmitted to the monastery, where she lived a life of great humility until her death. Her feast day is September 11.

### *Amma Triaise*

Amma Triaise was born in fourth-century Poitou (Gaul) to poor parents. Saint Hilary of Poitiers was a close friend and mentor. Amma Triaise made an extended pilgrimage to the main churches of Aquitaine. She settled as a hermit, with few possessions, near Saint Stephens in Rodez. Eventually Florence would become one of her followers. Her feast day is August 16.



*Lesser Known Desert Mothers*

***Verene***

Verene, an Egyptian, traveled through Europe with her relative, Victor of Thebes. She settled in a cave in the Swiss mountains. Living in complete solitude, she eventually died in 300 C.E. Ultimately her remains were transferred to the Church of Saint Stephen in Vienna.

***Vitalina***

Vitalina was a solitary of Artona in Auvergne (Gaul) and a friend of Saint Martin of Tours. She died in 390 C.E., and her feast is celebrated on February 21.

## Chapter Five

# DEACONESSES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

THE office of deacon has existed since the earliest days of the church. In the first century, women and men serving the people of God in this capacity were called “deacon.” Over time and with diverse expressions of Christianity emerging, the term “deaconess” began to appear. Initially this was sporadic, and eventually it became the normative reference for women.<sup>1</sup>

Deaconesses were fairly common in the early church. The office evolved over time, mostly due to political and social pressures. Like all offices related to the liturgy, deaconesses had diverse functions and responsibilities. Some deaconesses served in significant positions within monastic communities; some seemed to have served—as they do today in many Christian traditions—along with the presider at Eucharist. Many were actively involved in outreach to the poor, training and baptizing

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female catechumens, and preparing women to receive the sacraments.

Historical records give us the names of many of these deaconesses, sometimes with their geographical locations. Unfortunately, these women are usually just names in records, often in funerary inscriptions. Their history was not recorded or was lost. For example, we know only that Athanasia was a fifth-century deaconess from Delphi, Greece, whose tombstone reads, “*The most devout deaconess Athanasia, established deaconess by his holiness Bishop Pantamianos.*” We know of Eneon, a deaconess of a hospital near Jerusalem; of Sophia, a fourth-century deaconess from Jerusalem; and Maria, a sixth-century deaconess from Asia Minor. Theodora of Gaul, whose tombstone reads, “*Here rests in peace and of good remembrance Theodora the deaconess who lived about 48 years and died on 22 July 539,*” is otherwise unknown. On a tombstone at Aksaray in Cappadocia we read of the deaconess Mary, who “*according to the text of the apostle, raised children, practiced hospitality, washed the feet of the saints and distributed her bread to those in need.*”

The *Didascalia of the Apostles* and later the *Apostolic Constitutions*<sup>2</sup> mention deaconesses assisting at baptism, preparing catechumens, teaching women, visiting pagans and believers in their homes, and serving the sick. The Councils of Nicaea (325 C.E.) and Chalcedon (451 C.E.), which convened to discuss and clarify significant doctrinal issues around what we now call the Trinity, also clarified some concerns about the ordination of deaconesses. It was decided they were to be at least forty years old, unmarried or widowed, with no dependent

children and impeccable private lives. Deaconesses were to be scrutinized to verify that they held theological views supportive of the emerging orthodox position. Among the deaconesses were women who followed the monastic way and/or moved out into the desert. Eventually women religious would replace the ministry of deaconess—in a sense.

The role and position of the deaconess within the increasingly institutionalized church was different and distinct from that of the widow and virgin. Widows and virgins were given designated seats in church, just behind the deaconess or deacon. They were acknowledged for their service to the poor and dedication to prayer. Deaconesses, however, held a more official and liturgical place within the community.

Deaconesses were recognized as ordained in the Eastern Orthodox Church until the eighth or ninth century. By the fourth century in the Western Church, deaconesses were not included in the official list of ordained offices. In 441, the Council of Orange forbade the ordination of deaconesses in its region. The Synod of Nîmes declared that the very idea of women claiming to be deacons was so indecent that it would invalidate the whole idea of ordination. In 494, Pope Gelasius wrote a letter to numerous bishops on the need to restrict women ministering at the altar.<sup>3</sup> However, the diaconate continued, even in Gaul. Saint Remigius of Reims (d. 533) mentioned his daughter, the deaconess Helaria, in his will.

There exist several ancient manuscripts, themselves copies of earlier originals, that were used in the ordination of deacons and deaconesses.<sup>4</sup> These show that the

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rite of ordination was virtually identical, while acknowledging the gender and name of the one being ordained.

Here is one of the prayers recited for the ordination of a deaconess, said as the bishop laid hands on the candidate:

O eternal God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who did fill with the Spirit Miriam, Deborah, Anna and Huldah, who did not deem unworthy that your only-begotten Son should be born of a woman, who also in the tent of witness and in the Temple ordained women as keepers of your holy gates: now look upon this your servant who is being ordained as a deaconess, and give her the Holy Spirit, and purify her from any defilement of the flesh and spirit, so that she may worthily accomplish the work entrusted to her and to your glory and the praise of your Christ, with whom to you and to the Holy Spirit be glory and adoration forever. Amen!<sup>5</sup>

The following are accounts of some of the church's early deaconesses. Each was unique in the way she performed her role and ministry.

### *Basilina*

We know of Basilina from Cyril of Scythopolis, who had met her. Cappadocian by birth, she was deaconess of the great church of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia. Basilina traveled to Jerusalem with a nephew, a prominent man who was not in communion with Rome. She sought out John the Hesychast in the hope that he would inspire her nephew to rejoin the universal church. As women were not permitted in his presence,

John's disciple Theodore escorted the nephew to the *laura*. As a result of John's prophetic ability to read hearts, the nephew was reunited with the church.

Hoping for a personal audience herself, Basilina decided to dress as a man and enter the *laura*. John the Hesychast saw her intent in a prophetic dream. He sent word that he would refuse her visit but would come to her in a dream and converse to her satisfaction. That night Basilina dreamt of John's visit and received the answers she sought.

### *Dionysia*

Dionysia, a fourth-century woman of noble birth, came from Melitene, a metropolis of Armenia. After many years of marriage, Dionysia was widowed and left with a young son. As her brother, Eudoxius, was the bishop's advisor, Dionysia presented her son Euthymius (meaning "confidence") to be raised in the bishop's household. Bishop Otreius then ordained Dionysia as deaconess of his cathedral in Melitene.

### *Domnika*

Domnika was a deaconess who lived during the late fourth century. She was born into a wealthy and prominent Christian Roman family. She rejected marriage and moved to Alexandria in search of meaningful ministry. Domnika befriended four women, nonbelievers who lived in community. These women—Dorothea, Evanthia, Nonna, and Timothea—were seekers and welcomed Domnika into their lives. They eventually converted to Christianity.

They traveled together to Constantinople, where Patriarch Nektarios baptized them and blessed their growing

community. They cared for the sick and extended hospitality to travelers. Domnika gained a reputation for her gifts of discernment and prophetic intuition, and for healing the physically and spiritually sick. As the number of pilgrims to the community grew and increasingly interrupted their common life, the women decided to move into the desert. They built a monastery and dedicated the chapel to the Prophet Zechariah. At the time of its dedication, Patriarch Nektarios ordained Domnika a deacon. Her feast day is January 8.

### ***Eusebeia Hospitia***

Eusebeia was born in Rome sometime during the fifth century into an aristocratic family of Christians. As she approached the time of an arranged marriage, Eusebeia and two of her slaves began preparations for their flight. She gave most of her personal wealth away to the poor of the city and freed her slaves, making them her equals. They then dressed themselves as men and boarded a boat for Alexandria. From Alexandria they continued on to the Greek isle of Kos in the Aegean sea. They lived in a rented house, resumed wearing women's clothing, and changed their names. Eusebeia became known as Xene ("stranger").

Meeting an old man at the harbor, Eusebeia convinced him to accept the three women as his disciples. The man was Paul of Mylassa, who was abba of a small monastery in Caria. The women lived in individual cells near the monastery. Eusebeia later built a chapel dedicated to Saint Stephen the First Martyr. Other women eventually joined her community.

When Paul became Bishop of Mylassa, he ordained Eusebeia a deaconess. She fasted for long periods and

spent hours standing in prayer. She was known for being gentle and loving, never impatient or angry. Eusebeia died on January 21 while stretched out in prayer in the monastery chapel. It was said that a dazzling light and sweet incense filled the chapel at the time of her death. She is buried in Sykinon, south of Mylassa. Her feast day is January 24.

### *Gorgonia of Nazianzus*

Gorgonia was the eldest child of Gregory and Nonna; her brother was Gregory of Nazianzus, the theologian. She lived a life dedicated to prayer and the study of scripture. After her children were raised, she was ordained a deacon and opened her home to the care of the poor. Her feast day is February 23.

### *Justina (Justa)*

The story of Justa is a mixture of history and legend dating from the fourth century.<sup>6</sup> She was born in Antioch, daughter of Aidesios and Cledonia, who were pagans devoted to the Roman Empire's gods and idols. Justa was raised accordingly but soon became a seeker of truth. Convinced of the truth and spiritual power of Jesus' message, Justa was instructed in the Christian faith by the deacon Praylios of Antioch. Soon after her conversion, her parents embraced Christianity as well.

Justa's beauty caught the attention of a highborn and wealthy man, Aglaidas, but she rejected his romantic overtures because he was not a believer. She began monastic observance in her home, cut her hair in the common style of monastics, and observed the seven daily periods of prayer. She began to experience spiritual and physical



attacks; each attack shook her new faith and threatened to diminish her growing inner stillness and quiet. Through her faithfulness to the spiritual journey, Cyprian, the chief sorcerer of the magical arts, was converted to Christianity. He publicly repudiated his past, was soon ordained and apparently made a bishop to serve the church in the eastern provinces.

As bishop, Cyprian ordained Justa deaconess, renaming her Justina. She became abbess of a monastery of ascetics in Carthage. Justina and Cyprian were eventually arrested for their work of evangelization. Trial and torture took place in Damascus. As they could not be convinced to renounce Christ, they were transferred to Nicomedia to be tried before Caesar Claudius II (reigned 268-270 C.E.), and they were beheaded in 268 C.E. Their remains were secreted away and buried in Rome by Matrona Rufina, a relative of the emperor. Her feast is October 2.

### ***Blessed Woman Magna***

In the city of Ancyra of Galatia lived about 2,000 women ascetics. Magna<sup>7</sup> was an eminent member of this highly respected group of women. Magna had been married against her will but refused to consummate the marriage. When her husband died, she inherited the full estate and chose to live as an ascetic. Magna was so devoted to serving God that the bishops held her up as an example for all to follow. She was known for her love of voluntary poverty; she gave her wealth away to churches, monasteries, and houses for receiving poor strangers, orphans, and widows.

Magna's spirituality was rooted in the imminent return of Christ; she spent much of her time in church awaiting his coming.

### ***Marthana***

Marthana lived in the fourth century and was a dear friend, colleague, and equal of Egeria.<sup>8</sup> They originally met in Jerusalem. Marthana was abbess of the *martyrium* of Saint Thecla near Seleucia. This was a double monastery, a monastery of both men and women. Each lived in an individual cell as a solitary, observing strict asceticism.

### ***Melania the Elder***

Born around 341 C.E., Melania was a Roman citizen of Spanish origin and daughter of the consul Marcellinus. At around age fourteen, Melania married a high-ranking member of the Valerii clan and resided among the aristocracy of Rome. She was widowed in 364 C.E. at age twenty-two. Two of Melania's three children soon followed their father in death. Melania was active in the ascetic circle of Rome centered around Marcella,<sup>9</sup> devoting much of her time to the ascetic practices of prayer, fasting, study of the word, and good works.

In 372, Melania decided, as was customary, to go on a pilgrimage to Egypt to learn from the desert ascetics. Actually, she never intended to return to Rome. Melania made her plans secretly because the Emperor Valens (ruled 364-378 C.E.) would have forbidden her to go and might have attempted to force her into another arranged marriage in order to maintain his base of power and to keep her wealth within the aristocratic circle. She placed her surviving son, Publicola, in guardianship in Rome so that he could continue his education and prepare for his place in the aristocracy.

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When her family discovered her plans, they tried unsuccessfully to detain and dissuade her.

Loading all her movable property onto a ship, Melania sailed for Alexandria, Egypt. Many women and children of her household joined her. Upon arriving, Melania sold all her possessions and went into the desert to the mountain of Nitria. She met with some of the church fathers: Pambo, Arisisus, Serapion the Great, Paphnutius of Scete, Isisore the Confessor, and Dioscoursus, bishop of Hermopolis. Melania spent six months visiting monastic settlements in Egypt and learning more about the monastic way of life. While with Abba Pambo, Melania tried to give him a basket containing 300 pounds of silver, but he refused it. She was given the gift of the last basket Abba Pambo made before his death.

With the continued christological controversy, a persecution broke out in 373, and many monks were banished from their monasteries. Many chose to go to the countryside of Palestine. Melania went with them and gave them financial support. When they first arrived in Palestine, Melania would dress in the evening as a slave in order to bring them provisions. The consul of Palestine, upon learning that someone was assisting the banished men, arrested Melania with the intent of “blackening”<sup>10</sup> her reputation and in hope of collecting a bribe. When Melania confronted the consul with her identity and position in society, he let her go and gave her unhindered freedom to meet with these monks.

Melania built a monastery for fifty women on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and lived there for twenty-seven years. Her days were spent in prayer, work with

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the poor, hospitality toward pilgrims, and the study of scripture. She “received those who turned up in Jerusalem for the sake of a vow, bishops, monks, and virgins,” edifying all who visited her monastery.<sup>11</sup> Among her more famous guests, in 385 C.E., were Jerome and Paula, who would model their own monastic communities on Melania’s. Melania supported Evagrius of Pontus through his time of personal crisis when he fell in love yet felt called to remain celibate.

Melania built a monastery for men near her own community. Rufinus of Aquileia<sup>12</sup> developed a school and scriptorium, and the monasteries supported themselves by copying manuscripts. Due to the large numbers of manuscripts, the monastics flourished in a learned environment. Melania was deeply involved in local church matters, including the schisms over Paulinus<sup>13</sup> and over the divinity of the Holy Spirit. She worked to restore unity, especially among monastics.

Melania used her wealth to build monasteries and churches, provide hospitality to refugees and pilgrims, and to make provision for prisoners. Palladius tells us that she

lavished so much wealth in her godly zeal, as if she were ablaze with fire, that the residents of Persia, not I should do the reporting. No one in either the east or the west, the north or the south, failed to benefit from her good works...for twenty-seven years she offered hospitality; at her own expense, she assisted churches, monasteries, guests, and prisons...she persevered in her hospitality to such an extent that she did not keep a span of earth, nor pulled by longing for her son, did she separate herself from the love of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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Melania influenced a circle of men whose writings would become highly influential in the formation of Christian theology. She was perceived as mature in the spiritual journey and a capable theologian in her own right. In a letter to Sulpicius Severus (author of *The Life of St. Martin of Tours*), Paulinus of Nola wrote,

A woman of more elevated rank, she loftily cast herself down to a humble way of life, so that as a strong member of the weak sex she might censure indolent men, so that as a rich person appropriating poverty, and as a noble person adopting humility, she might confound people of both sexes.<sup>15</sup>

Learning that her married granddaughter, Melania the Younger, had decided to pursue the ascetic life, Melania the Elder returned to Rome in 400 C.E., when she was sixty years old. While with her family, Melania the Elder worked to convert several members to Christianity, and she inspired others to become ascetics or monastics. Despite resistance from senatorial families, Melania sold her remaining real estate. Upon returning to Jerusalem and giving away the last of her wealth, Melania the Elder died.

Melania was renowned for her generosity and for her scholarship. Paulinus writes of her,

Now know that there is such power of God in that member of the weak sex, that woman who finds restoration in fasting, repose in prayer, bread in the Word, clothing in rags. Her hard couch (it is a cloak and a patchwork quilt on the ground) is made soft by her scholarly work, because her delight in reading mitigates the

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insult of the inflexible bed, and it is rest to her holy soul to keep vigil in the Lord....<sup>16</sup>

Palladius writes,

She was very learned and a lover of literature. She turned night into day by going through every writing of the ancient commentators, three million lines of Origen, and two hundred fifty thousand lines of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil, and other excellent men. And she did not merely glance through them casually, but laboring over them, she read each work seven or eight times. Therefore she could be freed from “knowledge falsely called” [1 Tim 6:20] and to take flight by the influence of the books, making herself a spiritual bird, passing over to Christ in good hopes.<sup>17</sup>

### *Olympias*

Born 365 C.E. in the region of Constantinople, Turkey, to Seleucus, an imperial officer and a prominent member of court circles, Olympias<sup>18</sup> was orphaned at a young age. She was quite wealthy, with extensive lands in Thrace, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia, and in Constantinople. Olympias was well educated, as was expected of members of the imperial court.

Olympias was married briefly to Nebridius, prefect of Constantinople, but they apparently never consummated this marriage. After the death of her husband, Olympias was accused before her relative, the Emperor Theodosius, “of dispensing her goods in a disorderly fashion.”<sup>19</sup> Theodosius tried to force her to marry one of his relatives, Elpidius. Olympias gave a wonderfully independent response to Emperor Theodosius:

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If my King, the Lord Jesus Christ, wanted me to be joined with a man, he would not have taken away my first husband immediately. Since he knew that I was unsuited for the conjugal life and was not able to please a man, he freed him, Nebridius, from the bond and delivered me of this very burdensome yoke and servitude to a husband, having placed upon my mind the happy yoke of continence.<sup>20</sup>

When Theodosius failed to force Olympias into a new marriage, he placed her possessions under the protection of the prefect Clementinus until she turned thirty. This prefect denied her access to the church and the opportunity to meet with notable bishops. Theodosius hoped to coerce Olympias into a new marriage, but she responded to the emperor and the prefect,

You have shown toward my humble person, O sovereign master, a goodness befitting a king and suited to a bishop, when you commanded my very heavy burden to be put under careful guard, for the administration of it caused me anxiety. But you will do even better if you order that it be distributed to the poor and to the churches, for I prayed much to avoid the vainglory arising from the apportionment, lest I neglect true riches for those pertaining to material things.<sup>21</sup>

In 391, Theodosius restored Olympias's right to control her personal wealth, allegedly because of her reputation for ascetic discipline. Olympias began to distribute her wealth to the poor, to establish monastic communities and endow churches. Her biographer tells us,

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For no place, no country, no desert, no island, no distant setting, remained without a share in the benevolence of this famous woman; rather, she furnished the churches with liturgical offerings and helped the monasteries and convents, the beggars, the prisoners, and those in exile; quite simply, she distributed her alms over the entire inhabited world. And the blessed Olympias herself burst the supreme limit in her almsgiving and her humility, so that nothing can be found greater than what she did.<sup>22</sup>

After Olympias gave away a significant portion of her wealth in gold, silver, and real estate, Bishop Nectarius ordained her deaconess of the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople.<sup>23</sup> She still owned all the property—houses and shops—at the south edge of the cathedral, where she built a monastery for herself.

Fifty of her chambermaids joined her in the monastic life. Her sisters, Martyria and Palladia, as well as another relative, Elisanthia, also joined her. Eventually her niece Olympia and many other women of senatorial families joined, and this monastery eventually grew to include 250 members. While her monastery was being constructed, Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia were also made deaconesses of the cathedral.

Olympias was as renowned for her asceticism as for her generosity and disposal of her goods. She and her community were known for their faithfulness to prayer, their inner peace, and their firmness of conviction. As was common among ascetics, Olympias slept little, bathed rarely, abstained from eating meat, and wore



only the simplest clothing of poor quality. Despite treating her body harshly, Olympias was known for her gentleness of spirit.

Olympias' biographer describes her as

full of every reverence, bowing before the saints, venerating the bishops, honoring the presbyters, respecting the priests, welcoming the ascetics, being anxious for the virgins, supplying the widow, raising the orphans, shielding the elderly, looking after the weak, having compassion on sinners, guiding the lost, having pity on all, pity without stinting anything on the poor. Engaging in much catechizing of unbelieving women and making provision for all the necessary things of life, she left a reputation for goodness throughout her whole life, which is ever to be remembered. Having called from slavery to freedom her myriad household servants, she proclaimed them to be of the same honor as her own nobility.<sup>24</sup>

The monastic life Olympias led centered upon learning, prayer, service to the poor, and ascetic practices. John Chrysostom and other theologians found her an able colleague with whom they could debate and explore theological issues. Many sought her counsel, and she influenced the affairs of the church.

Chrysostom is primarily remembered as a brilliant preacher in the churches of his native Antioch and as a powerful bishop of Constantinople, a stern proponent of the ascetic life, critic of luxury and corruption, and a prolific writer. Olympias remained his friend and supporter during his exile when he suffered from loneliness and

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depression. Chrysostom felt deeply the separation from his close friends, including Olympias. When ousted from Constantinople for his unpopular attempts at moral reform in 404 C.E., Chrysostom found Olympias his chief defender. Chrysostom remained in exile, traveling around eastern Turkey until his death in 407. Olympias continued to support him and his followers in exile.

In Chrysostom's letters to Olympias, we learn that his exile drove her to despair and bouts of depression. In his attempts to inspire her with hope, Chrysostom spoke of his only suffering being Olympias's unhappiness expressed in the too few letters he received from her. He writes,

This is one way in which you can show your affection for me....I want you to show the same cheerfulness as I saw in you when we were together. For you are well aware how much you will restore me if you succeed in this and can show it openly in your letters to me.<sup>25</sup>

Olympias was friend and supporter of some notable people who significantly shaped the development of Christianity: Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, and Macrina.<sup>26</sup> Her teacher, Theodosia, was a friend and correspondent of Basil and cousin of Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, while bishop of Constantinople, dedicated a poem to her; Gregory of Nyssa dedicated part of his commentary on the Songs of Songs to her. Her biographer, writing soon after her death in 410 describes Olympias in the following words:

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A partner of the divine Word, a consort of every true humility, a companion and servant of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church of God.<sup>28</sup>

And,

She had a life without vanity, an appearance without pretence, character without affectation, a face without adornment; she kept watch without sleeping, she had an immaterial body, a mind without vainglory, intelligence without conceit, an untroubled heart, an artless spirit, charity without limits, unbounded generosity, contemptible clothing, immeasurable self-control, rectitude of thought, undying hope in God, ineffable almsgiving; she was the ornament of all the humble.<sup>29</sup>

And,

...Full of simplicity and humility,  
Untiring in her works of mercy,  
Radiating love, modest, calm,  
And of infinite generosity.<sup>30</sup>

Her feast day is July 25.

### ***Poplia***

Poplia lived in fourth-century Antioch. Married, with children, she earned a reputation for the strength of her faith and her spiritual discipline. Sometime after the death of her husband, Poplia was ordained a deacon. Her home became a monastery; there were several deaconesses in the community.

Poplia, in her later years, confronted the Emperor Julian the Apostate by arranging for her community to sing certain psalms when his entourage passed by her monastery.

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In a fit of rage, Julian ordered his guards to attack Poplia. The community sang even more insistently until the frustrated Julian left. Her feast day is October 9.

### *Romana of Antioch*

Romana was the senior deaconess serving with the bishop of Antioch. When Nonnus converted Pelagia “the Harlot,”<sup>31</sup> Romana was sent for. Romana instructed her in the faith and was present for her baptism. Pelagia lived with Romana for a while, receiving further support and instruction in the faith during the early days of her new life.

### *Sabiniana*

Sabiniana lived as a solitary in Antioch, an active center of the Christian movement. She was the aunt of John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople and a father of the church, who referred to her as “my lady Sabiniana the deaconess.” She joined Chrysostom in exile. Palladius, who had met her while visiting Antioch, wrote in his *Lausiatic History* that she was “a most venerable woman, on intimate terms with God.”

### *Severa*

Severa was a deaconess and member of the monastic community in Jerusalem that had been founded and guided by Melania the Elder. At some point during her monastic journey, Severa and several companions decided to become wandering ascetics. Evagrius Ponticus wrote a letter to Melania expressing his concerns both for their safety and for the wisdom of monastic wandering—a form of asceticism in the East.

### **Susanna**

Susanna was born in Palestine in the latter part of the third century. Her father, Artemios, was a rich pagan priest. Her mother, Martha, brought her up in the Jewish faith. When her parents died, Susanna was placed under guardianship until she married.

After many conversations with her neighbor, Silvanos, Susanna decided to become a Christian and was baptized. She gained control of her wealth, gave much to the poor, and set all her slaves free. She cropped her hair short, donned men's clothing, took the name John, and presented herself at a men's monastery in Jerusalem. The monks assumed she was a eunuch, and Susanna was accepted.

Susanna matured in her monastic observance and eventually became superior of the monastery. Twenty years into her faithful service, a visiting nun fell in love with Susanna and tried to win her affections. When this failed, the nun accused Susanna of seducing her. The local bishop, Kleopas, was called in along with two deaconesses from Eleutheropolis. Susanna revealed her gender to the deaconesses and her name was cleared. The bishop was so impressed with Susanna that he brought her back with him to his cathedral. There he ordained Susanna deaconess and appointed her abbess of a convent. She served as spiritual elder for many years, served the poor, extended hospitality, and prayed for the healing of many.

Eventually Susanna was arrested for refusing to offer sacrifices to the gods. She died in prison during the reign of Julian the Apostate. Her feast is September 19.

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### ***Vetiana***

Vetiana was of noble birth, extremely wealthy, and quite beautiful. Daughter of Senator Araxios, she was married to Aguilo, commander of the infantry and of equal social rank. When Araxios died in 366 C.E., Vetiana joined Macrina<sup>32</sup> in the monastic life in Cappadocia while also maintaining a residence in Constantinople. She was present at Macrina's death and, along with Lampadion,<sup>33</sup> made burial arrangements.

## Chapter Six

# MENTORS OF THE MONASTIC WAY: COMMUNITIES AND THEIR LEADERS

I do not view monasticism as a retreat from the world but as an entry into its beating heart.<sup>1</sup>

MONASTICISM is a communal endeavor. The story of a monastic woman is also the story of her community. Many of the first monastic communities evolved around a single charismatic personality. Others were complex webs of relationships among many gifted women. Many monasteries included hermits; others were in close contact with desert ascetics. In recognition of the communal nature of monasticism, I have grouped the following stories by geographic location.

## CAPPADOCIA

Asia Minor was a crossroad for the trade route between the Roman Empire and the Far East. Roads crisscrossed this region to support trade and the activities of the Roman military. Cappadocia, an important region of Asia Minor, was located in present-day Turkey. The region is mountainous yet is also blessed with rivers and rich farmland. The nobility owned profitable estates and summer homes in Cappadocia.

### *Macrina the Younger*

One of the earliest monastic communities was founded and developed by an aristocratic family of Christians. It began on their estates at Annisa near the Black Sea. Macrina the Younger was the original inspiration and genius behind this development.

Macrina's family was already renowned for its financial support of fellow persecuted Christians and its faithful leadership during the difficult time of Diocletian's persecution. Macrina's grandmother, Macrina the Elder, worked closely with the bishop in Pontus, Gregory Thaumaturgus (the Wonder Worker). Macrina's parents were Emmelia, who managed the family estates and oversaw Macrina's education; and Basil, bishop and teacher of rhetoric. Emmelia and Basil continued the family dedication to extending hospitality and caring for the poor and sick, as well as to an intense life of prayer.

Born in 327 C.E., Macrina was the eldest of many children. When her fiancé died, she resolved to live a life of asceticism. Her father died in 340, and she assisted her



mother in running the household and estates. Macrina became a pillar of strength for the family.

Macrina's continued dedication to asceticism would eventually encompass the full household. She began to simplify the family's lifestyle, giving away many of the trappings of their social class. She lived with her household as one in Christ: servants and slaves treated as equals. She wore the same clothing, slept in a similar type of bed, made do with the minimum of necessities of life, and shared a table for meals. Emmelia and Macrina took on the pastoral care of the household.

Macrina pursued her brothers—especially Basil and Gregory of Nyssa—until they accepted baptism.<sup>2</sup> When Basil returned from his studies in Athens with a head swelled with pride, she cut him down to size. They all acknowledged her as the primary influence in their theological education, and each finally embraced ascetic and monastic observance. Basil would codify their way of life into a series of conferences on the monastic life known as the *Short* and *Long Rules*. Basil, later known as the Great, is credited as the founder of Eastern Monasticism, a movement that Macrina actually began.

The family estate at Annisa grew into the center of their monastic observance that became known as the "School of Virtue." The women gathered around Macrina and Emmelia and lived in a compound on one side of the river Iris; the men, gathered around her brother, Peter of Sebaste, lived in a compound on the other. Scholars are unable to determine the exact layout of these compounds, and the ratio of solitary ascetics to those living communally is unknown.

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The communities cultivated gardens for quiet and meditation. Gregory wrote of a particularly favored garden spot with an arbor of climbing vines.

They worshiped together—at least some of the time—in a shared church. The communities prayed the psalms throughout the day: on rising in the morning, when beginning their work and when resting from it, and before and after meals. The community prayed the Evening Office of Thanksgiving as the lamps were lit.

Macrina insisted that her community support itself through manual labor and not live off the work of others. She baked the community bread as well as the bread for Eucharist. Her personal wealth was administered by another and was used to feed the poor.

Macrina's biographer, speaking of her monastic observance, tells us,

Just as souls, when released from bodies by death, are freed at the same time from the cares of this life, so was their life similarly liberated. It was lived apart from all worldly trivialities and was brought into harmony with the life of the angels.<sup>3</sup>

And,

For neither anger nor envy nor hatred nor pride nor anything else of that kind was ever seen in them; the desire for earthly vanities, honor, glory, pride and everything of that kind had been banished. Their delight was in self-control; their glory was to be unknown; their wealth was to possess nothing, having shaken off all material superfluity from their bodies as though it were dust. Their work...consisted only of attention to the things of God, prayer

## *Mentors of the Monastic Way*

without ceasing, and the uninterrupted chanting of the Psalms, which was extended equally in time through night and day, so that for the virgins it was both work and rest from work.<sup>4</sup>

The most gifted and brilliant of her brothers, Naucratiios, with his servant Chrysaphios left public life and lived a quiet life as an ascetic in a simple shelter in the dense woods on a cliff above Iris River. They both accepted responsibility for caring for a group of poor and ill peasants nearby. Emmelia served as their pastoral and spiritual guide. Naucratiios died in a hunting accident while trying to secure provisions for the poor. The family and community were deeply grieved.

According to Gregory,

They say that the testing of gold takes place in different furnaces, so that if any impurity escapes the first smelting, it is separated in the second, and once more in the final smelting, when the substance is purged of every impurity that is mixed with it. The most accurate proof that gold has been properly tested is that it throws up no further impurity after it has been through every melting pot. What happened to Macrina was of similar character. The lofty nature of her thought was tried from every direction by successive blows of fortune, but she displayed purity and steadfastness of soul....She remained firm, like an athlete who could not be defeated, and never flinched as the blows of fortune.<sup>5</sup>

Gregory became a bishop and soon developed much of our early theology of the Holy Spirit and mysticism. With Basil, he was a major leader in the movement in support

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of the Council of Nicaea, which developed the Nicene Creed to combat the Arian heresy. He faced intermittent persecution from supporters of Arius and the Arian movement. The Roman emperor supported the Arians, and this placed Gregory in an uncomfortable opposition. Macrina exhorted him—with dry humor—to stand firm, just as their grandparents did before them:

Will you not put an end to your failure to recognise the good things which come from God?... Churches send you forth and call upon you as ally and reformer, and you do not see the grace in this? Do you not even realise the true cause of such great blessings, that our parents' prayers are lifting you on high, for you have little or no native capacity for this?<sup>6</sup>

Macrina was renowned for giving clear-headed counsel during difficult times of political and theological upheaval in the church. Recognized for being intellectually capable (some scholars speak of her as a genius), she was often referred to as “the Teacher.” She ably handled cruel food shortages in her region. Macrina inspired deep affection in others. Many sought her out for spiritual counsel.

Gregory records some of Macrina's teachings for us in a document entitled *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (380 C.E.). In classic philosophical fashion, Macrina ponders the nature of the human soul and what happens after death. Her teachings reflect both the depth of her understanding and her use of common human experience to express her thought.

As she approached death, Macrina's bed was turned toward the East in anticipation of the resurrection. She

stopped speaking with others, and only spoke to God in prayer. Her brother Gregory was with her, and he saw Macrina stretch out her hands to her Beloved in supplication and say in a gentle, barely audible undertone:

### *Macrina's Prayer*

It is you, O Lord, who have freed us from the fear of death. You have made our life here the beginning of our true life. You grant our bodies to rest in sleep for a season and you rouse our bodies *again at the last trumpet*.

You have given in trust to the earth our earthly bodies, which you have formed with your own hands, and you have restored what you have given, by transforming our mortality and ugliness by our immortality and your grace.

You have delivered us from the curse of the law and from sin, by being made both on our behalf. You have *broken the dragon's head*—that dragon who seized man by the throat and dragged him through the yawning gulf of disobedience. You have opened for us the way of the resurrection, after breaking the gates of hell, and have destroyed him that had the power of death.

You have given as a token to those who fear you the image of the holy cross, to destroy the adversary and to bring stability to our lives.

Eternal God, for whom I was snatched from my mother's womb, whom my soul loved with all its strength, to whom I consecrated my flesh from my

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youth until now, entrust to me an angel of light, who will lead me by the hand to the place of refreshment, where the “water of repose” is, in the bosom of the holy patriarchs.

May you, who cut through the fire of the flaming sword and assigned to paradise him who was crucified with you and entrusted to your pity, remember me too in your kingdom, because I too have been crucified with you; from fear of you I have nailed down my flesh and have been in fear of your judgements.

May the terrible gulf not separate me from those whom you have chosen, nor may the malignant Enemy set himself across my path, nor may my sin be discovered in your sight, if having error through the weakness of our human nature, I have committed any sin in word or in deed.

May you who have power on earth to forgive sins, forgive me, that I may draw breath and that I be found in your presence, “having shed my body and without spot or wrinkle” in the form of my soul, and that my soul may be innocent and spotless and may be received into your hands *like incense in your presence.*<sup>7</sup>

Scholars believe that Macrina had spoken many portions of this prayer during her lifetime, and that Gregory wove these prayers and her teachings together in Macrina’s honor.

As evening drew near and the lamps were lit, members of Macrina’s community began the Evening Office of Thanksgiving in her presence. As the prayers concluded, Macrina sighed deeply and died.

A solemn procession from the women's monastery to the church included the local populace and clergy and lasted all day. Candles were lit and psalms chanted while they were in procession. Bishop Araxios presided at her funeral. Macrina was buried in the Church of the Holy Martyrs, next to her parents.

## ROME

### *Marcella*

One of the first persons to establish a monastic community in Rome was the widow Marcella. Born in 325 C.E., she first learned of the ascetic movement in 340, when some Egyptian monks visited Rome. Soon she founded her own monastic community in her palace on the Aventine Hill, a wealthy area of Rome. Tradition places the Basilica of Santa Sabina on the ruins of this compound of homes. Principia joined Marcella's community. They quickly became close friends and constant companions.

Marcella fasted moderately, abstained from meat, and seldom drank wine. She rarely went out in public and avoided visiting other noble women. However, her monastery hosted many visitors who wanted to deepen their knowledge of scripture and to learn of the ascetic way. Marcella privately visited the basilicas dedicated to the apostles and martyrs for prayer.

Marcella's younger sister, Asella,<sup>8</sup> lived in solitude in the family compound that was Marcella's monastic community. Paula the Elder,<sup>9</sup> member of another wealthy and aristocratic Roman family, was a frequent visitor and became a keen student of scripture under

Marcella. Later, Paula's daughter, Eustochium,<sup>10</sup> was raised and trained in Marcella's community until she left with her widowed mother for Bethlehem.

Fabiola, a young married aristocrat, was also a member of Marcella's circle of friends and followers. Initially, Fabiola flitted between ascetic observance and active participation in Roman social life. She divorced her philandering husband, but later married another man who was just as unfaithful. She eventually left him without bothering to obtain a divorce, and joined the ranks of the penitents.<sup>11</sup> Fabiola, after reconciliation with the Christian community, sold her estates and devoted her immense wealth and service to the poor. With the help of a friend, Pammachius, she founded a hospital and helped care for the sick there. In 395, she visited Paula in Bethlehem and settled into an austere, solitary life nearby. She was particularly eager to study scripture, and her sharp mind kept Paula busy. Returning to Rome, Fabiola established a hospice for pilgrims at the port of the city. Jerome wrote of Fabiola, "Was there a naked or bedridden person who was not clothed with garments supplied by her? Were there ever any in want to whom she failed to give a quick and unhesitating supply? Even Rome was not wide enough for her pity." She died in 399.

Marcella and Principia were astute students of the Bible. Marcella knew Greek and gained a reputation for her detailed, literal biblical exegesis. She had a fondness for "scholarly disquisitions into obscure words and phrases."<sup>12</sup> Strong-minded and educated,<sup>13</sup> Marcella debated significant points of scripture with Jerome,<sup>14</sup> who later credited her with much of his own learning.



Jerome introduced Marcella's community to the controversial idea of studying Hebrew in order to read the Hebrew Bible in the original language.

After Jerome's departure for Jerusalem, Marcella became the person that many—including priests—sought out for debate and discussion of scripture.<sup>15</sup> Marcella mentored Melania the Elder,<sup>16</sup> Paula and her daughter Eustochium, and Sophronia.

Marcella considered Origen a heretic.<sup>17</sup> She debated with his followers and challenged them to come to Rome and refute her. She gave evidence to Pope Anastasius that Origen's writings were corrupting Christians. Origen's writings were condemned in Egypt, and Pope Anastasius convened a synod that anathematized his teachings.

During the conquest of Rome in 410, Goth soldiers broke into the monastery seeking gold. After they were beaten, their assailants escorted Marcella and Principia to the basilica dedicated to Paul.<sup>18</sup> Marcella and Principia remained there until it was safe to return home. Several months later, Marcella died. Her feast day is January 31.

### *Lea*

With the success and attraction of Marcella's monastic community, other communities began to spring up around Rome. Lea, a widow and friend of Marcella, established and led one of these communities. Lea was from a prominent family and nobility, but left all this when she founded her community.

Lea wore simple, rough clothing, prayed during the night, and was renowned for teaching the monastic way more by example than by words. Jerome wrote to Marcella from Holy Land because of her distress at not being able to perform the last offices for Lea.

### ***Marcellina***

Marcellina, sister of Saint Ambrose, also established herself as an ascetic around 352 C.E., living in the family home in Rome. Rome continued to see small and large monastic communities established and evolve over the years. None were formally organized until the reign of Charlemagne in the ninth century.

## **BETHLEHEM**

The region around Bethlehem had inviting terrain for desert ascetics and small communities of believers. Pilgrims frequented the city to visit the holy sites, especially the alleged birthplace of Jesus. Pilgrims would then also seek out the desert solitaries for spiritual council and blessings. Monastic communities for women and men were established in and near Bethlehem.

### ***Paula the Elder***

Born in 347 C.E., Paula the Elder was a wealthy aristocrat in Roman society. She was required to host receptions for many of her social class, which she did without becoming attached to or enamored of her important position. Paula was known for her gentle sense of humor. She and her husband Toxotius were the happily married parents of five children, including Eustochium.

Paula was a friend of Marcella and often visited her monastery for prayer and scripture study. Paula became proficient in her study of scripture and a scholar in her own right. She and Eustochium favored the allegorical approach to scripture, seeking moral

and spiritual edification. Paula mastered Hebrew so well that she could chant the psalms without a hint of an accent.

Paula and Toxotius personally saw to the distribution of their wealth to the needy. They were kind and considerate, especially toward the poor and powerless. Paula's charity caused some concern and public scandal—her generosity led some to believe that her children would be left destitute. She was thirty-two when Toxotius died, leaving her grief-stricken.

Paula deeply loved her children, and they returned her affection. Jerome describes her parting for Cyprus in 385 C.E. with only her daughter, Eustochium. The others were well provided for from her estate and would stay with family. Yet her heart was torn, and an inner battle raged as she followed her inner call to leave Rome.

Paula and her party sailed for Cyprus where they met Jerome's party. Together they traveled on to Antioch and began visiting sites in the Holy Land. They traveled to Alexandria in Egypt and then ventured into the Nitrian desert to visit the ascetics. Eventually Paula and her entourage settled in Bethlehem. She stayed in a simple hostel for three years while she built her first monastery, consisting of numerous cells, monastic buildings, and a guesthouse.

Paula had a reputation for being authentic and down to earth. She did not draw attention to herself; she was comfortable to be who she was. Paula was known for her simplicity of person, interaction, friendship, and lifestyle. In order to avoid scandal, she never ate with men. She bathed rarely, slept on the hard ground on a mat of goat's hair, and observed a regular schedule of

prayer. She was known for being patient with the frailties of others.

Paula immersed herself in scripture; often it was her consolation in difficult situations. She continued to debate fine points of translation and meaning with Jerome, although he found her irritating yet helpful in his work on the Vulgate. She lived with the disapproval and anger of her social class for her way of life and for her refusal to give special attention to upper-class visitors.

Paula built three monasteries for women and one for men. She took pastoral responsibility for the women, Jerome for the men. Her communities contained noble, middle, and lower-class women. Each community of women worked at making clothing and ate separately but gathered for prayer. They prayed the psalms at dawn, the third, sixth, and ninth hours, in the evening and at midnight. Each spent time every day memorizing scripture, beginning with the psalms. On Sundays, they walked to the nearby Church of the Nativity, built upon the cave where Jesus was supposed to have been born, for Mass.

In her pastoral care, Paula worked to erase class distinctions. She worked hard with individuals to resolve conflicts, improve relationships, and guide them toward deeper monastic observance. Ultimately she sought to develop each woman's ability to live the interior life and to build a monastic community of relationships that supported this.

Desiring to be poor as Jesus was, Paula continued to give her wealth away to the poor, and then began to take out loans in order to continue her giving. With her death, Paula left her daughter Eustochium with extensive debts. She died in 404 after a lingering illness.

Paula's funeral was held in the Church of the Nativity. Her body was carried on a bier by the local bishops. The mourning began with several days of chanting the psalms in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Hebrew. Hundreds attended her funeral, monastics as well as the poor. Paula is buried beneath this church. Her feast day is January 26.

### ***Eustochium***

When Eustochium took over leadership of the monastic community, membership numbered around fifty. She was a quieter leader than Paula. Like her mother, Eustochium was a scripture scholar with a strong mastery of Hebrew. She paid off her mother's debts and got the community in sound financial shape before her death in 419.

Her niece, Paula the Younger, was raised by Eustochium in the monastic community at Bethlehem and became the next leader of the monastic community.

## **JERUSALEM: THE MOUNT OF OLIVES**

Jerusalem, long a bustling and busy city, played host to many Christian pilgrims wishing to visit the holy sites. Some would stay for a few days; others remained for months or years. Pilgrims desired to walk the path, relive the life of Jesus, and spend time in prayer at each of these sites. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, influenced the pilgrim tradition with her claim to have discovered the significant places of Jesus' life and ministry. Hermits and ascetics abounded; monastic communities sprung up. Many individuals and monastic

communities extended hospitality to the pilgrims flocking to Jerusalem.

### ***Melania the Elder and Albina***

Melania the Elder<sup>19</sup> began to establish and build a monastic community for women on the Mount of Olives, within the modern city limits of Jerusalem but outside the walls of old Jerusalem. Melania and her community welcomed many of the more famous pilgrims, and her monastery quickly gained a reputation for its intellectual interests.

At Melania the Elder's death, her daughter-in-law Albina assumed leadership of the monastic community. Albina, a widowed aristocrat, tried to maintain a balanced and humane observance. She resisted any tendencies toward excessive fasting, unduly long hours of prayer, and labors that might be destructive to health. She did not see any value to excess. Albina continued with the construction of the monastery buildings.

### ***Melania the Younger***

Albina's daughter, Melania the Younger was born in 383 C.E. into aristocracy and was raised in the midst of Marcella's Roman ascetic circle. Her biographer describes her as having a heart burning with divine fire. Melania was married to Pinianus in 397, but she preferred a life focused on God. Pinianus felt obligated to have two children in order to carry on the family name; they were born shortly.<sup>20</sup> Melania nearly died with the birth of her second child, and Pinianus reluctantly agreed that they would live as brother and sister. They dedicated their time and wealth to the Christian movement. Both

children subsequently died, but Melania remained adamant that she would bear no more.<sup>21</sup>

Melania and Pinianus began to simplify their lives and withdraw from such trappings of their social class as refined foods, silk clothing, and gold. They dedicated their time to visiting the sick and extended hospitality to foreigners and made provision for their travels. They visited prisoners, the mines in which slaves and prisoners were forced to work, and places where the marginalized lived, giving generously to free those imprisoned for debt and providing for those they could not free. Eventually, they began to sell off their possessions in order to continue their charity for the needy and the churches.

Pinianus's brother Severus, as well as the senate, tried to intervene in order to take away their wealth, but Melania managed to outsmart them. She went to her friend, Serena, the daughter-in-law of the Emperor Honorius, bearing gifts of ornaments, silks, and crystal drinking glasses. Serena, upon hearing her story, intervened with the emperor, who decreed that Melania and Pinianus were free to sell all their possessions throughout the empire. This was unusual, because most emperors wanted all imperial wealth to remain within the royal family.

Melania and Pinianus began to give their riches away in bulk. They purchased several islands and hermitages around Constantinople for ascetics and supported them. They gave away their remaining silk garments to the churches and monasteries for use on the altars.

Melania and Pinianus decided they wanted to leave Rome, with its pressures and expectations of them as aristocrats. They traveled first to Nola, where they

visited Bishop Paulinus, his wife Therasia, and their monastic community. Then they traveled on to Sicily in 407 C.E. In 410, soon after they sold all their estates in Italy and Spain, Alaric invaded and conquered the region.

Melania and Pinianus sailed for Africa in 410 and sold all their African estates. They endowed many of the monastic communities, who then lived off the interest without touching the principle. Saint Augustine mentored and guided them.

Melania and Pinianus decided to make the small, poor town of Tagaste their home. They wanted to be near Bishop Alypius, Saint Augustine's friend and a scripture scholar. Melania spent hours in study and debate. While in Tagaste, they founded and endowed a monastery for women and for men.

As their wealth finally began to diminish, Melania also began to feel free enough from the burden of her wealth to begin a more contemplative life. She began severe fasts, remained for long periods in solitude, and studied. Her biographer, Gerontius, tells us that Melania

wrote elegantly and faultlessly in little notebooks. She mentally decided how much she should write each day, how much in the Canonical Books [of Scripture] she should read, and how much in the collections of homilies. After she had had her fill of these writings, she went through the lives of the Fathers as if she were eating a cake.<sup>22</sup>

After spending seven years in Africa, Melania and Pinianus visited Alexandria before arriving in 417 on



the Mount of Olives. It seems she informally took over leadership of the double community, although Albina was amma to the women and Pinianus led the men's community until his death in 432. Melania wrote the rule for the community, establishing liturgical and ascetical practices as well as overseeing the spiritual growth of the women. Even when Melania appointed another woman superior of the community after the death of Albina in 420, she remained a strong force. Melania had a powerful and exuberant personality. She was strong-willed, zealous, and determined. Although she denied she was the leader, she led.

Melania and Pinianus went on pilgrimage to the desert of Egypt in 419, visiting the ammas and abbas there. Upon return, Melania arranged for a water supply for the monastery and moved into the new, more reclusive cell her mother built for the two of them. She rarely saw anyone other than Albina, Pinianus, and her cousin Paula the Younger. When apart, Melania and Paula corresponded freely—a frequent topic was the importance of humility for an aristocratic ascetic.

Melania remained a recluse for fourteen years. She lived in a cell with her mother and maintained limited contact with the other members of the community. However, she would leave her cell in order to engage visiting scholars in discussion. She also continued expansion of the monastery complex. Albina and Melania disagreed over Melania's tendencies toward austere fasting and other observances—a disagreement that was never resolved.

Melania read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures completely three to four times each year. The women

continued the tradition of copying elegant and accurate texts, sacred and secular. Melania copied much of what she wanted to read but was also able to borrow books—the community had a worthwhile library.

She exhorted others to follow her example and to divest themselves of their wealth. Many turned their estates over to her, and she arranged for the wise distribution of the proceeds.

The community prayed together several times each day. They prayed in anticipation of dawn, an office that consisted of three psalms, three readings, and fifteen antiphons as the sun rose. They prayed together again at the third, sixth, and ninth hours.

While living in extreme poverty herself, Melania traveled freely in wealthy and powerful circles, comfortable with her high profile and simple life. Empresses, senators, and aristocrats were within her circle of influence. Melania built several churches and monasteries in addition to her own on the Mount of Olives.

Melania went to Constantinople to visit an uncle who was still a nonbeliever, in the hope of converting him. There she met with the Emperor Valentinian III<sup>23</sup> and Empress Eudoxia. Melania convinced the empress to visit the Holy Land on pilgrimage, and Melania met her in Sidon.

Melania died during the Christmas season, 439. Paula, members of both communities, and several prominent people were with her at death. Many of the ascetics from the surrounding region came to join the monastic community in chanting the psalms throughout the night and buried Melania the following morning.

## GAUL

### *Caesaria*

In Arles, several monastic communities of women thrived. Around 500 C.E., Bishop Caesarius began the construction of a monastery for his sister Caesaria and her community outside the city walls near the old Gallo-Roman cemetery called the Aliscamps. Caesaria had been living and studying the monastic life in Marseille, another location of many monasteries of diverse membership. When invading Franks and Burgundians destroyed the first monastery building in 508-509, Caesarius began construction of a second compound—this time within the city walls—with a cloister to protect the women from physical harm. Later, such an enclosure would be associated with a spirituality that valued withdrawal from society. Abbess Caesaria would have the keys to the lock, which would have been on the inside of the door.<sup>24</sup>

Caesaria's community, called Saint John of Arles, spent much of their time studying scripture and supporting themselves by copying manuscripts. The Rule—written by Bishop Caesarius, brother of the Elder Caesaria<sup>25</sup>—provided for the recitation of eighteen psalms during the night office, six psalms during each of the day offices, and scripture readings during vigils. Each member memorized the Psalter, so that their hearts would be transformed by their immersion in the scriptures. Bishop Caesarius considered the authority of the abbess to be so central to the monastic observance that his Rule forbids any abbess ever to transfer the authority

of her office to any bishop. The pope backed him up in writing.

The monastery gave as much of its wealth to the poor as it could, balanced by the awareness that it must maintain an endowment for its own protection. Wealthier monasteries enjoyed greater protection than poor ones.

In 524, Caesarius completed the construction and dedicated the Basilica of Saint Mary, providing a burial place for the members of Caesaria's community. Caesaria died shortly thereafter and was buried under this basilica, and Caesaria the Younger succeeded her as abbess. The community flourished in numbers and wealth under her leadership. She freely shared the wisdom of her way of life and Rule; many of her letters survive. The younger Caesaria disapproved of excessive devotions and severe fasts, exhorting those who were displaying such tendencies.

Under the fourth abbess, Rusticula, the monastery was rebuilt at the east angle of the city walls, near the Tour des Morgues. Although several new buildings would be built in the course of history, Caesaria's community continued in existence until the French Revolution in 1789.

### *Radegunde*

Radegunde, born in 525, was the reluctant wife of Clothar I and a queen of the Franks. Radegunde used her personal wealth to build hospitals and minister to the poor during her marriage. She left her husband in 550 upon learning that he had ordered the murder of her brother. Arriving in Noyon, she demanded that the

bishop, Medard, consecrate her a nun. He instead made Radegunde a deacon since she was still married.<sup>26</sup>

Radegunde made a pilgrimage to Tours and then settled at her estate at Saix in the region of Poitou. She lived there for several years, devoting her time to prayer and service to the poor. She followed a simple vegetarian diet and soon developed a reputation as a contemplative and mystic.

Perhaps as a final settlement on the dissolution of their marriage, Radegunde was endowed with the means to establish a monastery of women at Poitiers sometime between 552 and 559. Her monastery adopted the *Rule of Arles*—a copy given her by the younger Caesaria. Radegunde habitually performed the most menial domestic tasks around the monastery, in defiance of her highborn station in life.

Radegunde had a talent for pastoral care and spiritual direction. She studied and preached daily, as well as dedicating time to private prayer, and was well versed in the writings of early church leaders. She served as spiritual mother while refusing appointment as abbess—Richeldix was probably the first abbess. One of Radegunde's early followers, Agnes, served later.

Radegunde venerated the relics of saints and collected many from around the Roman Empire. She believed that they linked her with the saints in continuous meditation. Sometime in 567–568, she was able to secure a relic of the true cross.

Radegunde died August 13, 587. Her death was unexpected and the cause is unknown. She was buried outside the cloister, as was the custom of her day.



## Epilogue

### THE GIFT OF THE DESERT

MY journey with the ammas has been a wonderfully enriching experience. In my pursuit of their stories, they have taught me by word and example. Some of my experiences began to make sense to me. The quiet pull toward change in the present has become clearer. How I want to live in the future is much more focused and understandable. They can be guides for us all.

We are a generation of seekers. We desire to know an authentic God. We want our faith to help us understand moral and ethical choices in work, education, economics, politics, and even our families. We want to integrate spirituality into every facet of our daily lives. We are questing for voices that have never been heard before. We are reclaiming women's spirituality and listening to the voices of nondominant cultures to help us find our way.

We are a generation of questioners. We do not want to be told what to do, what to think or believe. We insist on figuring it out ourselves. Faith must make sense and seem logical. It must stand up to our challenges. We want

to encounter God, not merely learn about God. Our spirituality must be grounded in this perpetual search.

We are a generation that yearns for wisdom figures, heroes and heroines, ammas and abbas who will show us the way. While maintaining fierce independence, we desire interdependence and community. We want our lives to have depth of meaning and purpose. We want to be connected. We secretly want someone to challenge us toward the transcendent.

While being questioners and questers, we are often lost; we follow too many fads and fashions in our search. Too often we are left with a shallow and narcissistic inner life.

The ammas show us how to begin the spiritual journey and what the elements of a life-giving and challenging spirituality are. They model healthy mentoring for us, showing us signs of what a modern amma or abba might look like.

## **WHAT CAPTIVATES OUR HEARTS?**

The ammas showed me that my life was too fast-paced and cluttered. I was trying to do too much. I found it difficult to say “No” to others and was always overcommitted. I was losing sight of what was important to me and never thought to prioritize my time and commitments according to my own values and interests. I had never realized that God would and could invite me to let go of everything—literally everything—that was a barrier to my own goals and to God’s call in my life. The ammas began to show me the way toward an interior simplicity and detachment. They gave me permission to



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let go of all those things that can weigh me down and make life more difficult and cumbersome. I began to let go—one by one—all my worries, concerns, attempts to please others, and past hurtful memories. I became less burdened and more lighthearted.

The ammas teach us about the freedom that comes with detachment. “Attachment” is placing distorted importance on relationships, material goods, a successful career, or reputation. While these things are not bad in themselves, they can weigh us down and make life far too complex and difficult. We can easily confuse our truest self, our be-ing, with one of these externals. Until we have the inner vision of the true possibilities of freedom, it is hard work to let go of all that we think we need to grasp, of all that holds and possesses our hearts. It is hard work simply to discover what it is that possesses our hearts. It takes deep trust to let go of attitudes and beliefs that we once held dear. There is deep risk in change and transformation. The risk is in trusting the process of our inner journey.

How might we best recognize those things, people, and attitudes that possess our hearts and keep us from freedom? What helps each of us move deeper toward freedom? This might be time spent with a spiritual director or counselor, simplifying our life, seeking healing and reconciliation in relationships, and continued growth in self-awareness. Where is strength needed? What parts of us yearn to be satisfied by God? Where are we feeding substitutes to the yearning for God? The ammas invite us to gaze inward and reflect: Are we able to “hold” our surroundings nonpossessively and in freedom, so we are not distracted?

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While God always remains present to us, we can move through life oblivious to the divine presence in our midst. The ammas teach us of the importance of cultivating attentiveness to the Divine. This is mindfulness, awareness and alertness to the many ways God and the Holy Spirit move in our life and in this world. With attentiveness, we listen deeply within, filtering out all that blocks our God-awareness. We let go of resentment, bitterness, jealousy, envy, and anxiety. We are intentionally present to each moment. We discern all that is happening in our life with a wise mentor: Is it noisy chatter, conflicting interests, or is it God whispering? God continuously invites and entices us inward toward the Divine. A wise mentor helps us to become familiar with and trust how God chooses to speak to each of us. How do we best cultivate a quiet inner spirit? Do we attend to what feeds and expands our soul? What helps us focus on God? Where is our sacred space? Have we made a cell in our home, at the ocean, or in our favorite park? It is that place where we are away and alone.

Our dominant culture tends to favor do-ing over be-ing. In our frantic do-ing, our inner world can be neglected and left unheard. Our self-image and sense of self-worth are intimately connected with all our do-ing...even the do-ing of our play! We experience a measure of success in our attempts at avoiding pain, loss, and defeat. The desert invites us to face and befriend them. The desert teaches us to dwell faithfully and fruitfully in these periods of stripping and loss. We learn to live through our times of pain and sorrow, passing through the varied landscapes of our inner desert.

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We may feel lost, but the Divine is always with us on our sojourn, nurturing us and abiding with us.

The ammas understood that we must order our lives to support this inner journey. We need to live simply, in harmony with our surroundings. Our inner and outer worlds must be balanced. We must risk trusting our emerging relationship with God. Our signals are internal and external, physical and emotional. Are we aware of the signals that warn us that we are out of balance? Do we trust our emotions and the wisdom they express? In what ways do we cultivate listening? How do we create and protect our sacred inner space?

The ammas taught me that the way out of the frenzied pace of our culture involves both external and internal journeys. I simplified possessions and needs. I am committed to owning less, not accumulating more. I let go of all commitments and activities that did not support or fit in with my life goals. Friendships are fewer but deeper and richer. Do we give ourselves permission to say “No”—to self and others? Do we live intentionally, making choices by our values and goals? Do we give away everything we haven’t used in the last six months?

I began literally to slow down. I am learning to be more mindful of what I am doing while I am doing it. I am not so scattered, with my mind drifting in so many directions. I am deepening the awareness of God’s presence throughout my day. I stop to breathe, take note of where I am and what I am doing, and notice the Spirit in the midst of my do-ing.

## MODERN-DAY IDOLS

Our world is rampant with idolatry. Cars, computers, television, careers, success, political movements, and religious leaders own our hearts—rather than God. Idols are everything to which we are deeply attached, that take the place that belongs solely to God. These idols are our known and unknown replacements for God. We create them in order to control our world or to attempt to define and control God. The ammas understood that the desert demanded that our idols come crashing down, teaching us that this process of stripping and detachment is the work of the desert journey. Faithfulness to this process moves us into profound and life-giving freedom.

This stripping reveals that perceptions of ourselves, others, and God are false. The ways that things are “supposed to be” aren’t. The call to change does not seem optional. God no longer cooperates with all our *shoulds* and *oughts*. The God we created in our childhood no longer works. God can seem distant and even absent, silent and cold in the midst of our anguish. The Divine breaks free of the limited and rather legalistic expectations of who God is supposed to be for us. Instead, God beckons us toward a new way of relating with and new understandings of the Divine. We encounter God as God truly is.

Desert evokes a sense of silence and solitude, magnifying our feelings of dependence and vulnerability. With all its intensity, only the present moment exists. Our *inner desert* is the place of encounter with our selves and God—not escape. It is in our own inner

desert that our deepest self comes radically face to face with the Divine. Here we are invited into the transforming and consuming love of our Beloved. Our inner desert is the place of ongoing interior transformation, where we wrestle with our idols and false self. The ammas understood that the desert is where we deepen in freedom, simplicity, and compassion. Here we confront the deepest truths of our selves. The result is purity of heart.

I was being called to attentiveness to idols that left me unfulfilled. These frustrated my desire to draw close to God. I came to understand that God did not want to be placed into a box. God does not want to be tamed, controlled, or pasteurized. What are our signals that we are filling that space that belongs to God alone with something else? What is this tendency to accept substitutes saying about our need for God? How do we listen to our overindulgence? What helps us to have a healthy relationship with the gifts of life—ours to enjoy? What do we need to stay faithful to the long journey?

## YEARNING FOR HOLINESS

The yearning for holiness remains alive today. We live with a sense that we can be more than we are. We feel the pull of the transcendent and live with a call to be the person God intended. The ammas understood that holiness was founded upon wholeness. They teach us that we must shed our false self and allow our true self to emerge. This journey toward holiness takes us deep into our inner desert. The desert is too hot a place in which to carry our emotional and spiritual excess baggage, so

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we begin to let go rather than continue carrying the burden. Our desert begins to remove the excess we did not know was there.

We risk shattering our false self-image, not knowing who will emerge. Over the years, we have invested much in our public persona: the self we developed during our teens and young adult years that reflects our own hopes of who we wanted to become. This is the self that developed from the expectations of others, the self that got confused with our “roles.”

To discover the truest parts of ourselves is risky. Our old false self is inadequate but safe because it is comfortable and familiar. Familiar pain can seem the preferred choice over an unknown that might possibly contain pain. This inward journey into the unknown requires that we let go of our old security blankets and props. We risk that our being is sufficient for the journey and for the encounter with our future.

In their brutal self-honesty and intentional stripping of illusion, the ammas remind us of our tendency to project our psychological issues onto others. This projection occurs when we find something emotionally unacceptable in us that we reject and attribute to others. When the mannerisms and behavior of another irritate us, this is often a signal that we do not want to face that same behavior within ourselves. Projection is part of the false self. We diminish our God-given empowerment when we spend energy projecting rather than feeding our interior life. Living from our false self drains us of our desire for self-awareness and growth. Our self-respect is undermined and our tendencies toward internalized self-hatred are fed. Where do we do

a reality check around possible projections? How do we cultivate self-awareness around our projections? Do we listen for internal signals?

While the ammas could be tough, they were also compassionate. They understood that the evil one often came in the form of an inner critic. This spirit of criticism, this internalized self-hatred, takes our eyes off God and turns our gaze toward self. We would be wise to be attentive to where the shoulds, oughts, or our own sense of unworthiness drive us. What is the quality of our interior movement as we experience our lived asceticism? Is there a movement toward life and strength, or is our asceticism oppressive and draining us of life?

## CONTEMPORARY ASCETICISM

The ammas taught me to rethink asceticism. I shied away from what I mistakenly thought were the ascetical practices valued in Christianity. I came to see that God hands us our daily asceticism, if only we listen. Today my ascetical practices center on a heavy schedule of meetings: Am I centered, grounded, and ready to listen deeply? Do I prepare and come ready to share? And am I mindful and present to others? Choices around healthy eating and exercise, giving time to someone in need, turning off our radios, televisions, and videos, being truly present to family members, and choosing to do without more possessions are all contemporary ascetical practices. Discerning with a wise guide is important today. We must be careful not to overcommit, even with the best of intentions. In what small ways might we practice daily self-denial? What forms of

asceticism might help to nurture spiritual maturity and develop inner strength? Are we willing to set aside our own agendas? Will we let go of our controlling tendencies? What are some of our internal signals that we are out of balance: too harsh an asceticism or too much self-indulgence?

We yearn to pray, to connect authentically with the Divine. Embarking on the path of the ammas often begins with our sense of dissatisfaction with prayer as we have known it in the past. Our prayer, which had been dormant or unsatisfying, changes. We begin to discard our old ways and go in search of new ways of communicating with God. Our prayer matures and takes on new forms. Centering prayer, *lectio divina*, Christian meditation, Taize, and the Divine Office are all sought. Prayer moves toward the simple: Often sitting silently before the Divine—in contemplative or centering prayer—is all we feel drawn to do.

We care deeply about our inner journey. Spirituality is important and many of us seek to integrate spirituality into our daily lives. We are trying to make sense of religious doctrine, ethics, and spirituality. Symbols and metaphors are a rich source for expressing our yearning for meaning. The ammas teach us to make this journey of self-discovery with a wise guide and within our community of family, friends, and kindred spirits. Within the context of this community, we discern and discover God's call in our life. We seek a life of meaning—not a series of meaningless experiences.

Today, alternative forms of faith community are springing up. Within parishes we find smaller faith-sharing communities and groups dedicated to social



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justice. Mixed monastic communities are developing. These are communities of married, single, and vowed members, sharing a common life of prayer and service. We continue to have desert dwellers in our midst—some are living invisible lives in the city and some are residing in primitive shelters in mountains and deserts.

Many of us yearn to slow down. Too many of us have never learned the gift of cultivating times of silence in our lives; some do not know how to return there. The ammas affirm the importance of silence and the gift silence presents. They invite us to enter into its richness and to hear the whisperings of the Holy Spirit dwelling there. Our society is bombarded with noise and distraction. We are on information overload. We can hardly hear ourselves think and are often out of touch with our feelings and values due to the senseless noise. How do we cultivate and protect our thirst for silence? Can we listen to our yearning for silence, to honor and protect this?

In this silence, the ammas teach us the art of listening, of listening from deep within our gut. We literally place ourselves into the life of the one with whom we are listening, while also listening for how God might be speaking to this situation, need, or yearning. In this listening, we are aware of our internal tapes, messages, fears, and aspirations. Yet we are listening underneath this clatter for God. How do we cultivate a listening heart? How do we put ourselves in conversation with those who are different, with the oppressed and marginalized who are routinely silenced? Will we risk listening to those parts of ourselves that are messy and imperfect?

We are the sandwich generation, with young children and aging, frail parents needing our attention

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and support. There can be a temptation to work faster and harder, thinking that this is how we can care for two different generations with differing needs. I have learned to let go of my tendency to worry and fret. I now trust—and this has been confirmed repeatedly with experience—that the answers to these needs will emerge. There is an abundance of time and wisdom, not a scarcity. We, however, can be so frantically busy running ourselves into a nervous breakdown that we do not stop and discern God’s call and wisdom in our family concerns.

We live in a noisy culture. We are constantly bombarded with information, news, music, and the ever-present advertising reminding us of all the things we do not possess. We live with the “More is better” syndrome. This leaves many of us unaware of our inner worlds, where our true desires and passions reside. Too many of us are not aware that we are burdened with internal and external clutter. How do we feed the monk and hermit within? How do we cultivate the deep cloister within, that sacred space where no one but God may enter? How do we most effectively quiet all the internal noise and clutter? What need for God is the noise covering up?

Our fast-paced culture is stress producing. Pressures come at us from every side. We are exhausted from trying to keep up with all that we believe we must do. We are perfectionists trying to meet and exceed our high expectations. Do we listen to what stress might be saying to us? Are we willing to disengage? In our listening, are we willing to invite new possibilities into our lives and change? What do we do with the distractions and disruptions we experience? How do we need to

respond—in self-care and prayer—to avoid despair and apathy? With whom do we discern these experiences? What inner wounds drive us from a connection to the intuition and wisdom of God within?

## COMPASSION

To experience the compassion of another is a powerful experience. Compassion has the power to heal, reconcile, and give hope. The ammas teach us of the gentle strength of compassion. Compassion is the divine attribute of cherishing and reverencing the sacredness of life in a way that directly affects how we relate to others, God, all creation, and ourselves. God has revealed to us a merciful compassion that is a womb covenant, a compassion that is generative, life giving, and enabling of restoration. God's compassion is more than comforting; it is protective and creative.

This compassion requires a tenderness of heart grounded in strength. The ammas teach us of the capacity to be moved deeply by another's pain and a willingness to show them the way out without interfering with the movement of the Holy Spirit. They had a deep awareness of their place in the mystical body of Christ and that the pain of one is the pain of all. This calls forth the courage to risk being vulnerable and to risk being deeply changed and transformed by a compassionate encounter with another.

Compassion is the strength and wisdom we need in order to dwell in the midst of famine, war, greed, and misuse of power. Compassion empowers us to embrace hope and keep at the task of justice making. Compassion

helps us balance our call to attend to the inner journey, to grow in holiness and yet keep asking the hard questions that move us toward a just world. Are we cultivating a compassionate stance? Do we allow our compassionate heart to emerge? Are we willing to see Christ in all and treat them accordingly? Do we extend compassion to self in order to be able to extend this to others?

## **PROPHETIC FREEDOM**

The ammas teach us to take charge of our own lives and not to be defined by cultural expectation. In Christ we have the freedom to risk all in order to follow the lead of the Spirit in preaching the good news. We are free to step away from our own cultural trappings that might keep us in bondage to our false self. The ammas' strong sense of self calls us to choose our mentors well, and then to be receptive to their teaching.

We still live under subtle and subversive pressures that undermine our sense of self-worth and hinder our following of God's call in our lives. Many of us have experienced limitations due to gender, race, religion, social, and economic background. The ammas rejected restrictive cultural roles for women, especially those that hindered pursuit of the inner journey and kept women trapped. The ammas model for us possible ways out of this trap and into a path of freedom. We need to examine our tendencies toward negative self-talk and self-limitation with a wise mentor. Where is the call in our life to risk societal expectations and norms to follow our dreams? What do we do with invitations to risk? What nurtures and supports our risk taking? How might we

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creatively engage our “stronger enemies”? Are we mindful of the gift to us in these difficult encounters?

Many of us struggle today with the institutional church. We love the church, the people of God, yet are too aware of its imperfections. We want our church and its leaders to be holy and Christ-like. We can be frustrated in our attempts at giving voice to this hope and desire; we may not know even where to begin. The ammas spoke frankly, openly, and boldly in challenging the impious or overbearing behavior of secular and religious leaders. They listened to the yearnings and aspirations of believers and showed them the way to a deepened relationship with God. The ammas discerned and proclaimed the signs of their times. They were committed to their call. Do we exercise the prophetic voice given us, as the Spirit leads? How do we seek reconciliation between spirituality and the institutional church? How do we respond to the prophet in our midst? How do we cooperate with the church’s constant call to reform?

Galatians 3:28—“There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, for all are one in Christ”—still calls out to us today. The ammas tried to embody this fully. The challenge remains with us. Are we open to listen to and journey with peoples of differing experiences and cultures? Do we journey with the ravaged church in the barrios and ghettos? Do we welcome women and people of color into real leadership? Are there still the privileged few in our lives?

The ammas model for us a way to engage the concerns and pain of our world. Christianity is still wracked with racism, anti-Semitism, poverty and greed, misuse of power, and the marginalization of

peoples. Yet there is a yearning for reconciliation, for a way to be found for Christianity to become fully one in Christ. The ammas teach us that this prophetic transformation begins with our own interior transformation, and then show us how to live out of that integrity. How do we let our spirituality influence our choices? How do we receive people of other faiths, differing cultures and races *as Christ*? How do we let people who are different from ourselves influence, inform, and teach us? Do we allow religious differences divide us?

## SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

The ammas lived in a world with understandings of sexuality that are different from ours today. We now understand that mind and heart, sexuality and rational thought, linear thinking and heart feelings are compatible and need to be integrated as we move toward wholeness and unity with God. It is to the extent that we know ourselves that we know God: God has chosen to reveal Self in this manner. Sexuality and spirituality are flip sides of the same coin. Sexuality expresses spirituality; spirituality expresses sexuality. Both express our longing and yearning for the Divine. How do we grow in awareness of our passions? In which of our passions are we not yet free? How do we honor the God who reveals Self in our sexuality, our sensuousness, and our passion? Do we express our sexuality in healthy ways? How do we work to cultivate integrity of heart that is true to whom God calls each of us to be?

### *The Desert Way*

The ammas teach us not to fear the desert, rather to see the life present there as its gift. Before I had ever heard of the desert dwellers, I had entered into a desert season, not understanding that I was there nor why I was there. I did not realize there was a purpose to my desert sojourn. When I encountered the ammas, they made sense of the desert in my life. Because our initial entrance can be painful and confusing, we fear it and try to escape. We can even fear our very sanity—until a wise one unpacks the potential of the desert for us. The desert requires us to explore our crisis of personal meaning. The ammas show us how the work of our desert moves us through integration toward authenticity. The fruit of the desert struggle is abundant life and deep abiding joy.

For many of us, the desert is the season often called “midlife.”<sup>1</sup> This is the time in our life when a cacophony of feelings and unknown forces seem to converge on us. We begin to experience loneliness and depression, even in the midst of loving family and friends. Questions emerge around our choices and values. Struggles appear endless, hope seems lost, and unfulfilled dreams stare us in the face. We seem to be continually birthing questions with stillborn answers.

We become increasingly aware of grief in our life: sometimes quietly present, at other times nearly overwhelming. We grieve broken relationships, changes in our health, unwanted transitions, and lost opportunities. The images of God that we’ve grown up with—and were hardly aware of—no longer work. Old understandings of our faith tradition seem stale and irrelevant.

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Funerals become the time of grieving for far more than the recently deceased. The ammas exhort us to sit in this desert and let it teach us. They understood that this painful stripping must be embraced in order for healing and mature joy to emerge.

This desert may initially seem barren, dull, and colorless, but eventually our perceptions start to change. The ammas teach us to sit in the desert, and soon we begin to see the sharp contrasts and the individuality of the desert landscape. The desert eventually becomes “home”: the place and quality of life we come to prefer.

Our desert experience provides the space for emptiness and contrast where our values, beliefs, and passions are revealed and refined. Here we empty ourselves of our own obstacles to God. In the space of this emptiness, we encounter the enormity of God’s presence. Yet our heart may feel frightened and overwhelmed in the encounter.

The ammas teach us that the desert is the place where we are forced to live with our questions along with the ambiguities and paradoxes of our life. The void begins to have depth and meaning. We hear whispers of a rich yet quiet life. We begin to perceive the subtleties of our spiritual path and we initiate an inward repatterning toward our truest self. What we believed was stillborn begins to show faint signs of life.

The desert way is a journey of hard work, perseverance, and tenacity. The ammas teach us that the desert becomes the place of a mature repentance and conversion toward transformation into true radical freedom.

The ammas recognized and respected the diversity of call. Each of us is invited to let the ammas be our guide.



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We will each express this in our own unique way. Amma Syncletica told her followers,

Not all courses are suitable for all people. Each person should have confidence in his own disposition, because for many it is profitable to live in a community. And over others it is helpful to withdraw on their own. For just as some plants become more flourishing when they are in humid location, while others are more stable in drier conditions, so also among humans, some flourish in the higher places, while others achieve salvation in the lower places.<sup>2</sup>



## Appendix

### The Ordination Rite of Deacons in the Byzantine Tradition, Reconstructed from the Texts of Seven Manuscripts

Compiled from at least seven manuscripts by Jacob Goar in 1647 and translated by John Wijngaards.<sup>1</sup>

<b>Comments</b>	<b>Prayer at the Ordination (<i>cheirotonia</i><sup>2</sup>) of a Deaconess</b>
All major orders are conferred in the sanctuary, in front of the altar.	<i>After the sacred offertory, when the doors of the sanctuary have been opened, before the Deacon starts the litany "All Saints," the woman who is to be ordained Deacon is presented to the Bishop.</i>

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<p>This was a public declaration that the person was elected to the diaconate.</p>	<p><i>He proclaims the Divine Grace:</i> Teach me, Lord. O Lord, impart your power to this your maidservant, so that she may perform the mystery of your ministry in holiness and fill her with your grace.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Or</i></p> <p>Divine Grace, which always heals what is inform and makes up for what is lacking, promotes so-and-so, this most devout Subdeacon, to be a Deacon, Let us therefore pray that the grace of the Holy Spirit may descend upon her.</p>
<p>The imposition of the hand is the “matter” of the sacrament of Holy Orders.</p>	<p><i>And while she bows her head, the Bishop imposes his hand on her forehead, makes the sign of the cross on it three times, and prays thus:</i></p>

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This is the ordination prayer, the “form” of the sacrament, consisting mainly in the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Holy and Omnipotent Lord, through the birth of your Only Son our God from a Virgin according to the flesh, you have sanctified woman. You grant not only to men, but also to women the grace and coming of the Holy Spirit. Please also now, Lord, look on this your maidservant and dedicate her to the task of your diaconate, and pour out into her the abundant giving of your Holy Spirit.

Preserve her while she performs her ministry [*leitourgia*] according to what is pleasing to you, in the orthodox faith and irreproachable conduct.

For to you is due all glory, honor and worship, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, now and always and in all ages. Amen.

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Prayers for the new woman deacon is included in the intercessory litany.

*When [people] have responded: "Amen," one of the Deacons prays as follows:*

Let us pray the Lord in peace.

For heavenly peace and the welfare of the whole universe, let us pray the Lord.

For peace in the whole world, let us pray the Lord.

For our Archbishop\_\_\_\_, for his priesthood, help, perseverance, peace, wellbeing, health and the works of his hands, let us pray the Lord.

For \_\_\_\_ the Deaconess, who has just been ordained, and for her salvation, let us pray the Lord.

That the most merciful Lord may give her a sincere and faultless diaconate, let us pray the Lord.

For our most devout and beloved-by-God Emperor

Appendix

	<p>____, let us pray the Lord. That we may be liberated. Receive...Save...</p>
<p>Again, the imposition of the hand is important.</p>	<p><i>And while the Deacon prays the intercession, the Bishop, still holding his hand imposed on the head of the woman that was ordained, prays in this manner:</i></p>
<p>This is the second ordination prayer. All ordination to major Holy Orders have two ordination prayers.</p>	<p>Lord, Master, you do not reject women who dedicate themselves to you to serve your holy precincts with sacred counsel as should be done, but admit them to the order of ministers [<i>leitourgôn</i>]. Grant the gift of your Holy Spirit also to this your maidservant who wants to dedicate herself to you and perform the grace of the diaconate, as you have granted this grace to your handmaid Phoebe, whom you had elected to the work of</p>

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	<p>the ministry [<i>leitourgia</i>]. Give her also, Lord, that she may persevere without guilt in your holy temple, that she may be careful in her behavior, especially in her modesty. And make your maidservant perfect, so that, when she will stand before the judgement seat of your Christ, she may receive the worthy reward for her good behavior, through the mercy and humanity of your Only Son, to whom and-so-on.</p>
<p>Vesting the minister with appropriate vestment is public affirmation of her new status as deacon.</p>	<p><i>After the response "Amen," the Bishop puts the stole of the diaconate round her neck, under her [woman's] scarf, arranging the two extremities of the stole towards the front. The Deacon who stands in the ambo then says: Remembering all the saints, and so on...</i></p>



Appendix

Making the woman deacon hold the chalice again confirms her as a fully ordained deacon.

*When, at the time of communion, the newly ordained has taken part of the sacred body and precious blood, the Bishop hands her the chalice. She accepts it and puts it on the holy table [altar].*



# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

1. I AM THAT I AM or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE or I WILL BE GRACIOUS TO WHOM I WILL BE GRACIOUS is God's answer to Moses. See Exodus 3:14 and 33:19.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE WORLD OF THE DESERT MOTHERS

1. See Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000); Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993); Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995); John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

2. See Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

3. See Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*.

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4. Slaves were often freed and treated as equal members of the community.

5. See Wendy Wright, "Desert Listening," *Weavings* 9:3 (May-June 1994), 12.

6. *Paphnutius: Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt and the Life of Onnophrius*, trans. Tim Vivian (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 19.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

### CHAPTER TWO: DESERT SPIRITUALITY

1. Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, trans., *The Life of Blessed Syncletica by Pseudo-Athanasius* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1995), 56, adapted.

2. Although not original to him, the terms *true self* and *false self* are often associated with Thomas Merton, a contemporary ascetic and Trappist monk. The true self is that part of myself revealed in Christ. It is the person I was originally created to be: my gifts, strengths, passions, interests as well as my truest capacity to love, extend compassion, and offer hospitality. The false self is the part of myself that I have created or was created in my upbringing that is not true to the person God meant for me to be. In many ways our false self is more evident than our true self. In part, this is because my true self is revealed in God's own time and usually within community.

3. Bongie, *Life of Blessed Syncletica*, 45.

4. See Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 1986).

5. Author's adaptation from Arsenius 27 and 30.

6. Judaism has a long and fruitful understanding of prayer. Prayer that comes from the heart is a bodily experience. Jews do not "sit still" while in prayer; rather a soft,

rocking motion accompanies private (and at times, public) prayer.

7. *Paphnutius: Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt and the Life of Onnophrius*, trans. Tim Vivian (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1993), 10.

8. Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 139-40.

9. Wendy Wright, "Desert Listening," *Weavings* 9:3 (May-June 1994), 10.

10. *Ibid*, 14.

11. *Ibid*, 11.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT MOTHERS

1. These Sayings are known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Sayings of the Fathers*. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975/1984), has translated the Sayings of the three major *ammās* as they appear in the alphabetical collection; Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, *The Life of Blessed Syncletica by Pseudo-Athanasius* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1995), has translated the Life and complete Sayings of Amma Syncletica. I base the Sayings found in this chapter upon the work of Ward and Bongie, adjusted for American sensibilities and inclusive language.

2. These theological debates concerned the nature of Christ: How could Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, be fully human and fully divine? Various positions were condemned as heresy—and some clearly were. The debates had political implications. Bishops such as Athanasius of Alexandria were forced from their sees for taking positions contrary to the one favored by the emperor. Our Trinitarian theology developed as a result of these debates.

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3. For example, the ladder in Jacob's dream and Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* both use this imagery. Later, the *Rule of the Master* and the *Rule of Saint Benedict* will carry this on.

4. Bongie, *Life of Blessed Syncletica*, 10.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Evagrius Ponticus, born in present-day Turkey, united the mystical theology of Origen with the rigorous asceticism of the desert tradition.

7. Ammas deeply valued their relationships, but they let go of most casual friendships as distracting to their way of life. The relationships they kept tended to be intense and lifelong.

8. Not all relationships are healthy and worth saving; some ought to be abandoned. Healthy and valuable relationships nurture and build my self-esteem, bring joy to my life, and call the best out of me. I am called to do the same for others. Relationships that reinforce internalized self-hatred, that leave me unhappy with who I am, or that drain my energy need to be evaluated with a wise person in my life. The call may be to end such a relationship.

9. When we accept any messages that tell us we are unworthy, unable, unacceptable, somehow "wrong" – for any reason, such as our gender, culture, race, or sexual orientation – and believe them as true, we have begun to internalize self-hatred. This affects our images of God as well as how we treat ourselves, others, and the created world.

10. For a further discussion of the prophetic, see Laura Swan, O.S.B., "Hospitality and the Prophetic," *Hospitality for the 21st Century*; American Benedictine Academy Pre-Convention Papers (September 1997): 37-43.

11. Around 540 C.E., Saint Benedict will complete his *Rule for monasteries*.

**CHAPTER FOUR: BRIGHT STARS IN THE DESERT SKY**

1. E. Wallis Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Seattle: St. Nectarios Press, 1907/1978), 96.
2. Anastasia may also be the Deaconess Anastasia with whom the Patriarch Severos of Antioch corresponded.
3. Today called Wadi'n Natrun or Skete. It was the desert home of many hermits and monasteries; it is situated between Cairo and Alexandria in present-day Egypt.
4. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, trans., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 147.
5. Marcella was one of the early leaders of the ascetic movement of fourth-century Rome. See chapter 6.
6. This consecration most likely included baptism as well.
7. Letter of Jerome to Marcella as translated in Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 106.
8. *Ibid.*, 107.
9. Athanasia had the legal right to sue her husband for theft.
10. We know that John of Ephesus visited Caesaria in 541 C.E. and that Severus lived near her in 508-511 C.E.
11. Scholars do not know if she left her husband, a common and acceptable practice in her day, or if she was widowed.
12. The Roman Empire was in transition, and there was still controversy over the development of the Nicene Creed and over Arianism and other heresies.
13. Copies are preserved at the Great Laura at Iveron and other Orthodox monasteries. The manuscript discovered and translated by Agnes Smith Lewis in 1892 was a

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palimpsest: the parchment on which the Life was written was originally an ancient gospel text that had been partially erased.

14. Palladius, *Lausiaca History* (New York: Newman Press, 1964), 138.

15. An apocryphal story mixes myth of varying origin with a grain of historical truth, or blends the lives of several persons into one story. Often it grows out of an active oral tradition rather than the work of a single author. See A. J. Wensinck, ed. and trans., *Legends of Eastern Saints: Chiefly from Syriac Sources* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1913) for her Life.

16. Origen (185 -254 C.E.), considered Christianity's first systematic theologian, wrote extensively on mysticism and the scriptures. He produced an edition of the Hebrew scriptures, providing six translations in parallel form. Origen was head of the catechetical school in Alexandria for twenty years, then for another twenty years at the catechetical school in Caesaria (Palestine). His works significantly influenced many theologians after him.

17. I am aware that for some scholars, Origen's presence in Caesaria of Cappadocia is controversial. Origen's presence in Caesaria of Palestine is well known. Firmilian was a friend of Origen's and invited him to weather the storm in 235 C.E. See Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 30, n. 13.

18. The Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church separated over doctrinal and political differences in the eleventh century. The Orthodox Church is the dominant Christian church of the East and Russia.

19. Palladius, *Lausiaca History*, 146. Symmachus was a Jewish translator of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. His translations date from around 200 C.E.



## Notes

20. Julian the Apostate was a Roman emperor who attempted to return the empire to pagan practices. Fierce persecution against Christians and Jews ensued.

21. Partial reference in R. M. Price, trans., *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 256-57.

22. She is also sometimes called Mary, Maria, or Maryana. Her Life was written in 778 C.E. in Syriac. See Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996) for a translation of her Life.

23. One Life places her in Bithynia, in northwestern Asia Minor; another Life places her in Syriac Tripoli.

24. See Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* for a translation of their Lives.

25. Doctrinal disputes were often political, as they can be today. To extend hospitality to those who resisted the popular position was deemed political subversion.

26. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 132.

27. The life of Matrona was written in Greek by Saint Symeon the Translator. Copies exist in the Monastery of Iveron and several other monasteries. See also Khalifa Ben-nasser, *Gender and Sanctity in Early Byzantine Monasticism* (Ph.D. dissertation, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1984); Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium*.

28. Gregory of Tours wrote a biography of Monegund. See Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

29. The Bollandists tell us that Symeon Metaphrastes is credited with recording their lives in Greek and that John Moscos made record of their story in his journals.

30. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 134.

31. Adulthood was defined as twelve years of age.

32. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 137.

33. Tim Vivian, *Journeying into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 37-50.

### CHAPTER FIVE: DEACONESSES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

1. I use both terms—*deacon* and *deaconess*—depending on the contemporary usage. Some women were referred to as *the deacon Phoebe* and some were *the deaconess Olympias*. How each deacon or deaconess was called by her contemporaries is the way I use the term throughout *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*.

2. Saint Hippolytus of Rome around 215-220 C.E. wrote the *Apostolic Constitutions*. A partial translation may be found in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990). For a full translation, see *Didascalia Apostolorum*, trans. R. H. Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), especially chapter 6.

3. Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 59. Obviously women were ministering at the altar and performing other sacramental duties, otherwise there was no need to discuss this!

4. Manuscripts, also called codices, are given titles to identify them. Some of these manuscripts include Vatican Manuscript #1872; Codex Syriacus Vaticanus #19; the Nicolai Manuscript (its text is from Gregory of Nazianzus), and the George Varus Manuscript. See John Morinus, *Commentarius de Sacris Ecclesiae Ordinationibus* (Antwerp: Kalverstraat, 1695).

## Notes

5. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 181.
6. The lives of Cyprian and Justina were written in Greek by St. Symeon the Translator. Both Gregory of Nazianzen and Prudentius also mention them. *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian*, however, is filled with as much legend as fact. This Cyprian is not Cyprian of Carthage, one of the church fathers.
7. Nilus of Sinai, writing in a treatise entitled *De Voluntaria Puapertate* (MG 79.968-1060), identifies Magna as a deaconess.
8. Egeria was a fourth-century Spanish woman whose travel journal, *Pilgrimage*, survives to this day. This pilgrimage probably took place between 417 and 419 C.E. See George E. Gingras, trans., *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (New York: Newman Press, 1970).
9. See chapter 6.
10. This is a pun of Palladius, one of her biographers. *Melania* is Greek for "blackness."
11. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 214.
12. Rufinus was born in Italy in 345 C.E. Some of our significant knowledge of women in the early church exists because of his break in friendship with Jerome. Their attacks often took the form of public letters.
13. Paulinus, the brother of Jerome, was ordained a priest without the consent of Bishop John of Jerusalem. This schism was between the communities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.
14. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 215.
15. *Ibid.*, 217.
16. *Ibid.*, 220.
17. *Ibid.*, 165.
18. Our knowledge of Olympias comes from an anonymous biographer and from the patriarch of Constantinople,

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John Chrysostom (347-407 C.E). Sozomen also mentions Olympias in his *History*.

19. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 225.

20. *Ibid.*, 225.

21. *Ibid.*, 226.

22. *Ibid.*, 228-29.

23. Bishop Nectarius preceded John Chrysostom as patriarch and bishop of Constantinople.

24. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 230.

25. Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 95.

26. See chapter 6.

27. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, 86.

28. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 224.

29. *Ibid.*, 228.

30. White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, 86.

31. See Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987) for her Life and a good discussion of this early church phenomenon.

32. See chapter 6.

33. Lampadion, a wealthy widow, was a deaconess in Macrina's community and was in charge of the choir.

### **CHAPTER SIX: MENTORS OF THE MONASTIC WAY**

1. Elise Boulding in Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avila-Latourrette *A Monastic Year: Reflections from a Monastery* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1996), from the foreword.

2. As was common at this time, Macrina's brothers were around thirty-five years old when they finally agreed to baptism.

## Notes

3. Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 59-60.

4. *Ibid.*, 60.

5. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

6. Kevin Corrigan, "Saint Macrina: The Hidden Face Behind the Tradition," in *On Pilgrimage: The Best of Ten Years of Vox Benedictina* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1994), 104.

7. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord*, 70-71.

8. See chapter 5.

9. See "Bethlehem" section of this chapter for more information.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Jerome denounced her for having married twice—the earliest utterance on the subject. Jerome considered her second marriage a crime. The early church increasingly felt that only one marriage was justified. Once there was a divorce or death, one was to remain single and focus all attentions on Christ.

12. Gillian Cloke, "*This Female Man of God*": *Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350-450* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 169.

13. Marcella had been living the monastic life for forty-two years when Jerome arrived in Rome.

14. Jerome is famous for having translated the Bible into the Vulgate, the vernacular Latin of his day. He served as personal assistant to Pope Damasus. Known as "the Irascible," his public fights (in the form of letters) with other prominent leaders and his extensive correspondence are the source of much of our knowledge of early Christian women.

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15. One strong reason for Jerome's departure was that his enemies gossiped about the amount of time Jerome spent at Marcella's community. They did not slander Marcella, however.

16. See chapter 5.

17. See chapter 4, n. 16.

18. This place is known as "Saint Paul Outside the Walls," now a Benedictine monastery where Saint Paul is reputed to be buried.

19. See chapter 6.

20. Members of the Roman aristocracy were under enormous pressure from the emperor to have children. Too many generations had few or no children at all, and the social class was disappearing. The emperor also wanted the wealth to remain in aristocratic hands, as that was where his power lay; the middle/merchant class was inclined to revolt.

21. Around this time, Christians began to understand that continuity of the family name and family wealth belonged within the greater Christian community. The Communion of Saints was replacing the patriarchal family.

22. Peterson, *Handmaids of the Lord*, 327.

23. Valentinian was emperor of the West from 425 to 455. Eudoxia was the daughter of Emperor Theodosius of the East and Empress Eudocia.

24. In later medieval times, the lock would be located outside and the local bishop or abbot would have the key. Today, enclosed nuns are regaining control over their own lives.

25. One can presume that Caesaria contributed significantly to the development of this Rule, although her more famous brother bears the name as author and originator.

26. The Council of Agde in 506 C.E. allowed for married people to be consecrated to the diaconate as long as the couple agreed to separate.

### EPILOGUE: THE GIFT OF THE DESERT

1. Midlife becomes easier when we have tools to understand the call and work of midlife. Several fine books on this subject include Patrick Carroll, S.J., and Katherine Marie Dyckman, S.N.J.M., *Chaos or Creation: Spirituality in Mid-life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986); Richard Olson, *Midlife Journeys: A Traveler's Guide* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1996); Kathleen Fischer, *Autumn Gospel: Women in the Second Half of Life* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1995).

2. Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, trans., *The Life of Blessed Syncletica by Pseudo-Athanasius* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1995), 59.

### APPENDIX: THE ORDINATION RITE OF DEACONS

1. Goar says he found them in the Royal Library, in the private collections of Francis Cardinal Barberini, Nicolai de Nicolis, the Monastery of Crypta Ferrata, Tillianus, Allatianus, Coresianus, and Saint Mark in Florence. See also [www.womenpriests.org](http://www.womenpriests.org).

2. Greek for imposition of hands, the sign of ordination.





## Glossary of Selected Terms

- accidie.** The inability to be committed to the spiritual journey; a carelessness, listlessness, indifference, or laziness toward the hard interior work of conversion and transformation. It is a failure to appropriate Christian values, often revealed through passive-aggressive behavior toward the faith community.
- abba.** A man who is a spiritual mentor or leader, either for one or more individuals or as the head of a monastery.
- amma.** A woman who is a spiritual mentor or leader, either for one or more individuals or as the head of a monastery.
- anchoress/anchorite.** A solitary, residing either in a cave or a cell. In later Christianity, an anchoress or anchorite lived in a cell that was attached (physically) to a church. In Eastern Christianity, this term is used interchangeably with *amma/abba*.
- apatheia.** An intense purity of passion; a passion that is singularly directed toward God. Passion, or powerful emotions, can be a creative life force that assists and supports—or distracts and distorts—on the inner journey. Evagrius Ponticus once said, “Desert apatheia has a daughter whose name is

love.” Apatheia deepens our capacity for love and desire for God.

**Arianism.** A movement within early Christianity, condemned as a heresy, that nearly split the church and the Roman Empire. Arius of Alexandria (d. 336) taught that Christ was not equal in divinity to the First Person of the Trinity but was subordinate. Arius taught that Christ was “created” and that there was a time when Christ did not exist.

**ascetic.** A person who dedicates every aspect of her or his life to contemplation and seeking union with God. An ascetic lives an austere life and has a regular practice of fasting, prayer, self-denial, and generosity toward the poor.

**basilica.** Originally, the simple and spacious meeting halls, often used for political purposes, that were common in the Roman Empire. These became the first public Christian places of worship when Christianity moved from being principally a home-centered faith to a public religion.

**catechesis.** Instruction and training in the way of Jesus Christ; the teaching of the good news with all its commands, demands, and graces. This term particularly applies to preparing new believers for baptism and formal reception into the church.

**cell.** A single room or cave, very simple, even austere, used as a place for living, work, and prayer. The cell was the place where one encountered God in solitude.

**Christology.** The study and explanation of who Jesus of Nazareth is: as human and as the Divine Son of God.

## Glossary of Selected Terms

Over the centuries, many writers have attempted to explain how Jesus is fully human and fully God.

**compunction.** Contrition or remorse. In the desert tradition, compunction is understood as a piercing of our heart by sorrow. This was considered healing and necessary for inner growth.

**conversion.** A spiritual change in priorities and commitments; a spiritual revitalization and reorientation; to live with a new heart.

**deacon.** From the Greek *diakonos*, meaning “servant” or “helper”; an ordained office related to priesthood. For the first several centuries, there was no separate designation between women and men as deacons; both genders were called *deacon*. Only later did gender differentiation set in (*deacon* for men and *deaconess* for women).

**detachment.** In desert spirituality, detachment is the process of letting go of the inner attachment to material objects, personal reputation, position in society, attitudes, and emotions. With detachment, one can own possessions without being possessed by them. For example, another’s behavior is no longer irritating; one is not concerned about theft; and emotions and feelings no longer rule one’s life. It is true simplicity.

**diaspora.** To be driven, as a community or ethnic group, from one’s home due to political, religious, or racial strife; an identifiable group forced to live away from their homeland. For example, the Jews were driven from Jerusalem in 70 C.E., monastics were driven from their monasteries during the

Arian controversy, and in modern days, Jews and African Americans are considered *in diaspora*.

**discernment of spirits.** To test and discern religious influences upon a person, group, or idea. In Christian tradition, a wise person is sought to prayerfully listen and perceive or distinguish between evil and God's influence: *Is this of God? Would this commitment, course of action, possession, decision move me toward or away from God?* The language comes from an era that saw demonic influence acting in humanity.

**Divine Office.** Also called the Liturgy of the Hours, the Office consists of chanting the psalms and sections of scripture and scripture-based prayer. It originates in the biblical prayer of the Jewish synagogue. Most popular in use are the Morning and Evening Office. However, many contemplative traditions, following the example of the ascetics, pray seven times each day.

**eremitic.** A person who lives a life of intense solitude. Also can refer to a religious tradition within which solitaries live alone but within proximity of one another, such as the Carthusian monastics today.

**Eucharist.** Also called Holy Communion, from the Greek for "to give thanks." The Eucharist is the Christian liturgical sacrament in which the church remembers, celebrates, and proclaims Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his followers to "do this in memory of me."

*Glossary of Selected Terms*

**evil one.** Also called Satan or the devil, meaning accuser, slanderer, adversary, and perjurer. This is Lucifer, the fallen archangel and the embodiment of total evil, totally other from God.

**fear of God.** Awe and respect for the immanence and yet total otherness of God. Desert spirituality realizes that we are totally and utterly dependent upon the Divine while also being drawn and attracted to a deepening relationship with God. It is being unafraid of God.

**grace.** God's self-gift, freely given.

**hermit.** A person who withdraws from society in order to live alone. A solitary.

**heterodox.** Unorthodox or not quite orthodox. In the christological debates, this position held that Christ was either fully divine and only "appeared" human, or that he was fully human and not quite divine as the First Person of the Trinity is divine. This term, however, can also have political implications. Many movements, or even churches in particular geographical locations, were called heterodox for having women and freed slaves in positions of leadership. Scholars today are reinvestigating movements long accused of heresy or heterodoxy to uncover portions of our tradition that have been lost in political wrangling.

**idolatry.** The blind adoration, reverence, devotion to anything that is not God. People, things, relationships can come to so consume and possess our lives, minds, and hearts that we lose sight of God.

**laura.** A naturally hewn cave that a desert dweller would adapt to become “home.”

**Life.** A biography of an amma, abba, martyr, or saint, often commissioned by family members or religious communities. These were usually composed in a hagiographical style with the intent of converting the reader. “Facts,” in our modern, scientific sense, were not of primary concern.

**Manichaeism.** A religious movement, popular in Roman society, based on absolute dualism expressed in a perceived conflict between good and evil, light and darkness. Matter—the human body—imprisoned spirit, light, and truth; the “elect” utilized strict asceticism to liberate the light (today we might say, “enlightenment”). Manichaeism was condemned as a heresy.

**martyrium.** A church shrine that houses the relics of a saint, preferably one martyred for the faith.

**mausoleum.** A place of burial large enough to hold many caskets, with space to walk around and even dine, like a family chapel. Mausoleums were common residences for ascetics, as they provided privacy and were a symbol of the desire to become “like angels.”

**monastery.** A group of people gathered around a spiritual leader, sharing the common life and prayer. There is usually a degree of seclusion from the general public as well as some form of religious vows.

**monk.** From the Greek *monos*, meaning “one” or “solitary”; a man or woman who lives in a monastery.

**monophysite.** The position that Jesus of Nazareth as God Incarnate has strictly one nature, not two. In rejecting the Council of Chalcedon's position of one person in two natures, the monophysites stressed the divine nature and rejected the humanity of Jesus. They believed Jesus just *appeared* human.

**oratory.** A small chapel, not a parish church, dedicated exclusively to prayer.

**orthodox.** Correct religious doctrine. In the christological debates, this position held that Christ was fully human and fully divine. This teaching emerged as the officially accepted position of prominent theologians and bishops that resulted in the Nicene Creed and Trinitarian theology.

**repentance.** A deep inner change in disposition and attitude; a movement from despair, regret, and remorse toward serenity.

**rule.** The code of life that regulates the common life of a community. Although these can be legal in nature, most rules, especially in their earliest forms, are spiritual documents. Rules define prayer, commitment, simplicity, and good works; they also exhort community members in pursuit of holiness and give the justification for the community's existence.

**saying.** An oral teaching of an amma or abba to her or his followers that has been remembered, passed on, and eventually written down.

**seder.** The ceremonial meal held during Passover commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egyptian captivity, the Exodus. The seder is

celebrated in the home and is presided over by the female head of the family, usually the mother.

**spirituality.** Phil Borroughs, S.J., defines this, within the Christian context, as “the experience and the expression of the revelation of God in the Spirit of Jesus, to which the believer lovingly responds in prayer and service as an individual, as a participant in a faith community and as a member of the human family within creation.”

**Vulgate.** A translation of the Bible into the vernacular Latin, the common language of the people of the Roman Empire.



## Ordo

### A Calendar of Feasts of Holy Women

IT is an ancient Christian tradition to honor our heroes and favorite saints. Feast days were chosen for special celebrations and prayers. These dates were often chosen according to the date of birth or date of death of the venerated saint. Not all the women discussed in *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* have feast days that we are aware of; some have more than one! With the passing of time, church calendars of the Eastern Church and the Western Church began to diverge, so some saints have a different feast day in the East than in the West. In recent decades, the church calendar has removed or changed feast days; therefore, I have tended to stay with the feast day of the first millennia of Christianity.

We should remember that saints of the early church were so declared by the faithful; there was no official Vatican office that investigated and then declared someone a “saint.” We still see this today. Many of our heroes are remembered in our faith communities—and appropriately called saints by the faithful. Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day are three contemporary examples of heroes honored as saints in many faith communities.

*The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

*January*

- 3 Fracla, Posenna, and Prompta
- 5 Amma Syncletica
- 8 Domnika
- 12 Caesaria
- 14 Macrina the Elder
- 24 Eusebeia Hospitia
- 26 Paula the Elder
- 31 Marcella

*February*

- 3 Cerona
- 7 Mastridia of Jerusalem
- 12 Blessed Woman Marina (East)
- 13 Photina
- 21 Vitalina
- 23 Romana of Todi; Gorgonia  
of Nazianzus

*March*

- 1 Domnina
- 3 Amma Piamon the Virgin
- 10 Anastasia the Patrician
- 13 Euphrasia the Younger
- 15 Matrona

*April*

- 24 Elizabeth the Wonderworker

*May*

[none]

*A Calendar of Feasts of Holy Women*

*June*

18 Blessed Woman Marina (West)

*July*

2 Monegund, Recluse of Tours

13 Amma Sarah

17 Marcellina

19 Macrina the Younger

25 Olympias

*August*

13 Radegunde

16 Amma Triaise

*September*

1 Amma Theodora; Verene

10 Nymphodora, Menodora, and Metrodora

11 Amma Theodora

19 Susanna

25 Euphrosyne of Alexandria

28 Eustochium

29 Blessed Maria the Harp Player

*October*

2 Justina

3 Manna of Fontenet

9 Athanasia of Antioch and Egypt; Poplia

29 Ermalinda

*November*

9 Matrona of Perge

16 Cerona

*The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

*December*

- 1 Florence
- 6 Asella
- 25 Eugenia of Alexandria
- 27 Fabiola
- 31 Melania the Younger

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I have included primary and secondary sources on the lives of women for the first thousand years of the Christian movement. I have intentionally chosen to expand my list beyond the scope of this book for several reasons. The women included in this book were part of a larger movement sweeping beyond the Roman Empire. Also, many of these resources provide threads to a study of the desert mothers while also giving information on other women of influence.

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Laura Swan, O.S.B., holds graduate degrees in theology and spirituality. She is currently prioress of Saint Placid Priory, a Benedictine monastery in the Pacific Northwest.



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