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# PI MONAKHOS THE MONK

## ΠΙΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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### Apophthegmata Patrum

By: William Harmless, S.J.



Two young monks visiting an anchorite  
at St Macarius Monastery

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is an extraordinary anthology. In its pages, one finds "a diverse band of colorful characters, wild adventures, and stinging, memorable 'one-liners.'" Its publication marked an important milestone in the literature of late antiquity. As Peter Brown has noted, "The *Sayings* provided a remarkable new literary genre, close to the world of parable

and folk-wisdom in these *Sayings*, the peasantry of Egypt spoke for the first time to the civilized world." And Philip Rousseau has remarked, "Each entry in this fascinating series captures the attention of the reader like a flash of a signaling lamp, brief, arresting, and intense."

The *Apophthegmata* was sometimes known by other titles, such as *Gerontikon* (Book of the Old Men) or *Paterikon* (Book of the Fathers). The sixth century Palestinian monks Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, as well as their disciple Dorotheos, used these terms. Another common title, the *Paradise of the Fathers*, was used in a seventh century Syriac collection.

The *Apophthegmata* has come down to us in two basic forms: the Alphabetical Collection and the Systematic Collection. The Alphabetical gathers some 1,000 sayings and brief narratives under the names of 130 prominent monks and arranges these according to the Greek alphabet. Thus *Alpha* begins with thirty eight sayings from Antony and follows with those from other notables, such as Arsenius, Agathon, Ammonas, and so on; *Beta* includes Basil of Caesarea and Bessarion; *Gamma*, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gelasius, and so on. Attached to certain manuscripts of the Alphabetical Collection is an additional set of sayings and stories that had come down to the ancient editors without names. This series, referred to as the Anonymous Collection, had as its original core some 240 sayings, but eventually 400 more came to be attached to this core.

The Systematic Collection contains many of the same sayings and sto-



ries but gathers them under twenty one different headings or themes, such as “discernment,” “unceasing prayer,” “hospitality,” and “humility.” The Greek version contains some 1200 sayings. In the mid sixth century, an early version of this Systematic Collection was translated from Greek into Latin by two Roman clerics, the deacon Pelagius and the subdeacon John, who perhaps became the later Popes Pelagius and John. This version, called the *Verba Seniorum* (Sayings of the Old Men), was apparently known to Saint Benedict and powerfully influenced the spirituality of medieval monasticism.

In time, vast collections of *Apophthegmata* appeared not only in Greek and Latin, but also in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic. The linguistic complexity of all this can be daunting. But things are made even more difficult if one seeks to answer the sort of questions scholars raise. For example:

- Does a saying ascribed to Antony really go back to the historical Antony?
- Who gathered these sayings together? When? And why?
- What sources, oral or written, did they draw on?
- Has the wording of individual sayings been altered over time? If so, how? And why?

A number of twentieth century scholars, Wilhelm Bousset, Jean Claude Guy, Derwas Chitty, Antoine Guillaumont, and Lucien Regnault, to name a few of the most prominent have carefully sifted through this huge mass of material and tried to trace out the origins, transmission, and assembling of these collections. Many features of their path breaking studies presume a mastery of the texts, languages, and history that lie beyond the scope of this introduction. But I would like to trace a few of their remarkable discoveries in following chapters. For the moment, let me simply note a couple of their conclusions.

#### **Language.**

The *Apophthegmata*, though written first in Greek (*about 5th-6th centuries*), drew on an oral tradition that was originally Coptic and that stretched back well over 100 years.

#### **Origin.**

The *Apophthegmata* focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on the wisdom of monastic leaders from Lower Egypt, active from the 330s to 460s, especially those from the monastic settlement of Scetis.

#### **Date and Place of Publication.**

Although the *Apophthegmata* preserves memories of Egyptian monasticism and does so with what seems to be remarkable accuracy the final recording of those memories was not done in Egypt, but in Palestine, probably in the late fifth century. It was from the Holy Land, with its traffic in pilgrims to and from the sacred sites, that these stories of the Egyptian monks spread throughout the ancient Christian world.

(From: William Harmless, S.J. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*)



*Contemporary Caves/Solitary Cell of Anchorites in St Anthony's Monastery*



*Contemporary Caves/Solitary Cell of Anchorites in St Bishoy's Monastery*





## The Garden of Monks

By: Fr Anthony St Shenouda

With the kind permission of Bishop Daniel (*the Bishop of St Shenouda Monastery*), we, the monks of the monastery, went on a spiritual retreat to the monasteries of Egypt. This retreat was an eye opener in many aspects. For this I thank Bishop Daniel very much.

One of the aspects that really came to light in this retreat was the variety of personalities of monks that existed in one monastery. Monks are not a special breed that did and thought about things the same way. On the contrary, every monk came with his talents and weaknesses and the monastery was able to utilise these talents and weaknesses for the monk's spiritual growth as well as the community's. This brought my thoughts to the very accurate naming of St Jerome's 4<sup>th</sup> century book "The Garden of the Monks of Egypt". It is a garden in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Egyptian Desert as much as it was a garden in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In the garden you see trees that come in a variety of shapes and colors, some produce admirable flower; others bear fruit which feed many. Some trees grow very high and provide shade for some while some are crawlers that need a strong trunk to crawl upon. Obviously, this garden like every garden had malnourished trees with dry braches and were in need of fertilising.

What further impressed me was not only the wisdom and spiritual insight of the elders in the monasteries, but there was much to admire in the new shoots in this garden. The young novices who did not cease to have a smile on their faces while doing the hardest jobs around the monastery. I could also see in them the spiritual zeal that all monks came with to the monastery but in some cases this zeal weakens, it is for this reason St Arsanius used to say to himself regularly:

*"Arsani, remember why you have come to the desert".*

Likewise in the monastery there are monks whose consolation is in reading and studying the Bible and patristic texts, others learn and memorise the hymns of the church, others use physical labour as a means to pray memorised prayers while serving their brothers. Some are known to people and others are not even known to exist even to the workers in the monastery. Despite this variety of personalities, they all have a common goal, and are all watered from the same fountain of Living Water.

An important plant in this Garden is the solitary monk. The reason why this style of monastic life is of interest to me is that it is almost always neglected or when mentioned it automatically refers to the 4<sup>th</sup> century Anchoritic monks as though this style of monasticism does not exist today. This notion is implied in the titles of some contemporary western writers; for example James Wellard's article entitled "The Last of the Hermits" about Fr Abd el-Masih the Ethiopian or the TV documentary "The Last Anchorite" about a contemporary solitary monk in St Anthony's monastery.

While these titles sound very attractive and grab the attention of many readers,



A new cave being dug at St Macarius Monastery

they do not give an accurate picture of the contemporary monastic life in Egypt. There are two contributing factors to this distorted picture, the first being that when western writers go to Egypt they are limited in their interviews to anchorites who speak western language i.e. French, English and German, which only represent a very small percentage of monks living this style of monasticism.

The other contributing factor is that like their ancestors these anchorites wish to live and die unknown to the world but known to God. That is why many of them are very reluctant to be interviewed by anyone.

On my trip I have been enlightened by the great counsel of these anchorites and was overjoyed at their great spiritual insight, especially that they produce great written works of their own and some translate from original languages, though they refuse to publish them.

While they refused any contact with the outside world they were very happy to talk to me as a new branch that needs watering. They did not even hesitate to offer me some of their unpublished writings for my spiritual benefit.

While I could not take photos with most of these monks I have added to this edition of Pimonakhos some photos of the caves of some of these great anchorites to assure readers that the Anchoritic life is alive and well in the Egyptian desert today as it was in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

## The dove returns to the Ark

By: Pope Shenouda III

When I left the bishopric and returned to my desert cave at the beginning of January 1964, I found the monk Antonius (*Pope Shenouda's name before becoming a bishop*) at the door and he said to me, "I knew that you would return", as he hugged me tightly so that we became one.

At that point I remembered that Saint Arsanius the Recluse, when he returned to the desert of Shehit, had said to his pupils, 'They are ready to say about Arsanius what was said in the story of the Flood, "***But the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, and she returned into the ark ...***" (Gen. 8:9)





## ON DISCRETION IN READING THE PATRISTIC BOOKS ON THE MONASTIC LIFE

*By: Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov*

The books of the holy Fathers on the monastic life must be read with great caution. It has been noticed that novices can never adapt books to their condition, but are invariably drawn by the tendency of the book. If a book gives counsels on silence and shows the abundance of spiritual fruits that are gathered in profound silence, the beginner invariably has the strongest desire to go off into solitude, to an uninhabited desert. If a book speaks of unconditional obedience under the direction of a spirit-bearing father, the beginner will inevitably develop a desire for the strictest life in complete submission to an elder.

God has not given to our time either of these two ways of life. But the books of the holy Fathers describing these states can influence a beginner so strongly that out of inexperience and ignorance he can easily decide to leave the place where he is living and where he has every convenience to work out his salvation and make spiritual progress by putting into practice the evangelical commandments, for an impossible dream of a perfect life pictured vividly and temptingly in his imagination.

St. John of the Ladder says in his chapter on Silence : "In the refectory of a good brotherhood there is always some dog watching to snatch from the table a piece of bread, that is, a soul; and taking it in its mouth, it then runs off and devours it in a lonely spot."

In the chapter on Obedience this guide of monks says : "The devil suggests to those living in obedience a desire for impossible virtues. Similarly to those living in solitude he suggests unsuitable ideas. Scan the mind of inexperienced novices, and there you will find distracted thought: a desire for solitude, for the strictest fast, for uninterrupted prayer, for absolute freedom from vanity, for unbroken remembrance of death, for continual compunction, for perfect angerlessness, for profound silence, for surpassing purity. And if by divine providence they lack these in the beginning, they rush in vain to another life and are deceived. For the enemy urges them to seek these perfections before the time, so that they may not persevere and in due time attain them. But to those living in solitude the fraud extols hospitality, service, brotherly love, community life, visiting the sick. And the deceiver's aim is to make the latter as impatient as the former."

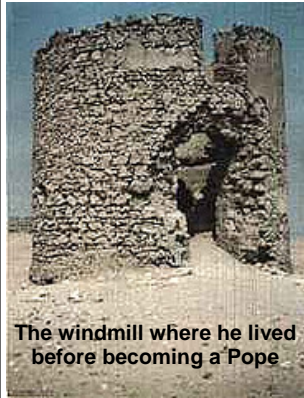
The fallen angel (*Satan*) tries to deceive monks and drag them to perdition by suggesting to them not only sin in its various forms but also the most exalted virtues unsuited to their condition. Do not trust your thoughts, opinions, dreams, impulses or inclinations, even though they offer you or put before you in an attractive guise the most holy monastic life. If the monastery in which you are residing gives you the possibility of living a life according to the



commandments of the Gospel and unless you are exposed to temptations to mortal sin, do not leave your monastery. Endure courageously its defects, both spiritual and material. Do not think you can find a sphere of activity not given by God to our time.

God desires and seeks the salvation of all. And He is always saving all who wish to be saved from drowning in the sea of life and sin. But He does not always save in a boat or in a convenient, well-equipped harbour. He promised to save the Holy Apostle Paul and all his fellow travelers, and He did save them. But the Apostle and his fellow passengers were not saved in the ship, which was wrecked; they were saved with great difficulty, some by swimming and others on boards and various bits of the ship's wreckage.

(From: The Arena: An offering to contemporary monasticism.)



The windmill where he lived before becoming a Pope

Pope Kyrillos 6<sup>th</sup>  
(feast day 9<sup>th</sup> of march)



From the sayings of  
Pope Kyrillos

I would have loved to live as a stranger and die as a stranger but let God's will be done.

"Monasticism and seclusion provide a unique philosophy on life, a philosophy that takes a very deep interest in all that binds man to God. This bond only happens when you read spiritual books. Reading any other books hurts the monk more than it benefits him, or at least it will distort his thoughts."



# THE PARADISE OF THE HOLY FATHERS

The Paradise of the Fathers is the classic compilation of the lives and teachings of the early monastic saints. It has been said that for a monastic to achieve perfection there are only two books needed: the Bible and the Paradise of the Fathers.

Dr. Ernest A. Wallis Budge, Curator of Assyrian and Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum has for decades been recognized as one of the great translators of ancient manuscripts into the English language. These volumes are translated from a Syriac manuscript he discovered in 1888. He first published his translation in 1904 in a private printing. Later in 1907 he printed a revised and updated version in a public edition which has yet to be rivaled to date.

VOLUME I: Contains the Life of St. Anthony by St. Athanasius the Great, the Paradise by Palladius, the Rule of St. Pachomius, and the History of the Monks by St. Jerome.

VOLUME II: Contains the Sayings of the Fathers and Questions and Answers about the monastic life.

Both volumes are available on Amazon in the US, UK and Canada. For bulk orders contact the monastery. Volume 1 will be available in Australia in April.

