

“*A Course in Desert Spirituality* offers keen insight into the wisdom of early Christian mystics like St. Gregory of Nyssa, John Cassian, and Evagrius Ponticus. It makes the Desert Mothers and Fathers come alive. But it also reveals much about the spiritual heart of Thomas Merton himself.”

— Carl McColman, author of *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism* and *The Unteachable Lessons*

“As explored in this book, Christian tradition is embedded in desert spirituality. Merton’s enduring voice takes us on a journey into the desert, allowing us to meet many Desert Mothers and Fathers, and grow in our own sense understanding about desert spirituality. In true Merton form, this book prompts insights and self-reflection. Another gift to the world in the Merton canon.”

— Cassidy Hall, author of *Notes on Silence* and director of *Day of a Stranger*

“This fine book is filled with great insight and inspiration! Isn’t it amazing that in this materialistic and superficial world, early desert spirituality would have so much to teach us today? And even more because it is filtered through the mind and heart of a true master teacher from our own time! This is very good food indeed.”

— Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico



# A Course in Desert Spirituality

Fifteen Sessions  
with the Famous Trappist Monk

*Thomas Merton*

Edited by  
*Jon M. Sweeney*

Foreword by  
*Paul Quenon, OCSO*



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*“The world pursues us into the desert and seeks to win us back. If we have anything in us belonging to the world, the world has a claim on us.” (Lecture 15)*



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## Foreword

*Paul Quenon, OCSO*

The Desert Fathers were a special delight to Thomas Merton in his wide reading and research of the Church Fathers. One well-known photograph of him, by John Howard Griffin, shows him seated over a large tome, in a denim jacket, which was standard winter wear for all the monks; he is reading the volume and laughing at it. Upon closer inspection, you can discern the letters on the page were in a foreign language and one could easily conjecture it was the Migne Latin edition of the *Apothegmata*, the “Sayings” of the Desert Fathers.

Among the variety of conferences I attended by Fr. Louis in the Novitiate, the funniest were those about the Desert Fathers. The hermits’ odd behaviors, their blunt, simple answers to spiritual seekers, were evocative of the short, salutary words of Jesus himself. Words practical, unexpected, maybe off-putting like: “Keep to your cell, and your cell will teach you all things.” Or, “*Fuge, silere et tachere.*” “Flee, keep quiet and be silent.” The exotic names of these peculiar men began to ring in our heads, as well: Paphnutius, Arsenius, Pachomius. We heard stories of their quasi-prophetic behavior, such as one hermit who walked into the gathering of monks as they deliberated on the eviction of one brother who had greatly sinned. Upon his shoulder this wise Father carried a bag of sand with a hole in the bottom, trailing sand across the floor. He declared: “I am another sinner and I leave a trail of sins behind me like this sand.” After that, they decided to forgive and receive the wayward monk back into their midst. Unforgettable.

One of the chief concerns in this literature is “the discernment of spirits”; how do you know what inspirations come from God and what comes from the devil? John Cassian tells the sad story of Brother John who decided he would prove his faith by throwing himself down a well and show he suffered no harm. That he straightway did—and perished.

Merton, in *The Wisdom of the Desert*, his translation of the “Sayings,” compared such tales to the Zen Buddhist masters, and one could as well include Shams Tabrizi, as recounted by Rumi. But one need look no further than the subsequent literature of the Greek and Cappadocian Fathers to see further flowering of that seminal inspiration of the desert monks: most remarkably Evagrius Ponticus, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and extending westward, John Cassian and St. Benedict. While much of this later writing wafted on lengthy wings of rhetoric rather than on cryptic, monastic brevity, at its core it came from men envious of the simple, rustic lives of these solitaries. Most of the authors found in this current volume were wannabe monks, and probably at heart they really were, while being caught up in the complexities and conflicts of a church suffering growing pains in a Hellenic culture.

None of this history was unsuitable for us fledgling novices in a modern monastery, to sample and taste. St. Benedict, in his Rule for monks, recommends such readings in preference to his very own “little rule for beginners.” In today’s turbulent world many women and men in Europe, America, and Latin America are looking toward Benedictine and earlier traditions for a guide on how to live. They feel an urgent need for “discernment of spirits” on many fronts, personal, ecclesiastical, and political. How can we detect what is motivating people—myself, others, and those big faces on the TV screen? The path to “purity of heart,” to unselfish, authentic, and guileless intentions of the mind and will, were understood by these wise and simple men and women of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Here they are carefully spelled out again for our guidance.

## Editor's Prologue

As with this book's predecessor, *A Course in Christian Mysticism*, the volume you are holding originated in talks Thomas Merton gave to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. And as with the earlier book, *A Course in Desert Spirituality* is redacted from previously published, scholarly editions.

Both *Courses* are attractive to those of us who live outside monasteries because of Merton's brilliant ability to survey the key figures and synthesize their writings, inspiring his listeners and readers with what it means for the spiritual life. But this *Course* is also attractive to non-monastics because of Merton's belief—which comes through clearly in the presentation—that monastic wisdom and spirituality are applicable for everyone. As Merton once said:

[T]here is a monastic outlook which is common to all those who have elected to question the value of a life submitted entirely to arbitrary secular presuppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage. Whatever may be the value of "life in the world" there have been, in all cultures, men [and women] who have claimed to find something they vastly prefer in solitude.<sup>1</sup>

So if you are a person with the sort of "monastic outlook" that Merton describes so well, this book of fifteen lectures is for you

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 10.

benefit—even though, perhaps especially because, it began as talks in a monastery.



In his first monastic decade, Merton began to struggle with life in community. This is one of the more intriguing narrative threads of every Merton biography. Books have been written specifically on this subject. We know how the dedicated Trappist sought greater solitude for himself, but also how he was one of the most loquacious spiritual writers of his generation. This irony and contradiction were not lost on anyone around Merton, not even on him.

Merton was frequently asking his abbot for more solitude, just as he was writing letters to hundreds of friends in the United States and abroad about every new book, every trending spiritual movement and idea. He was also actively talking to many of his desire for a more contemplative way of living. We even know of his yearning, at times, to transfer religious orders. If he were a Carthusian, could he better become the monk God wanted him to be? His later attraction to the religions and monastic traditions of the East are often seen in this light as well. There were even rumors after he died in Bangkok that he wasn't actually dead, but had faked his death in order to become a Buddhist monk and live in the East!

It was while studying John Cassian (the most important figure and teacher of these lectures) that Merton first gained permission for periods of greater solitude—and there are many moments in this book when we hear Merton arguing with the texts and the tradition (and himself? and his abbot?) on cenobitism vs. eremitism. The first is monastic life in community with other monks; the latter is the monastic life of hermits. Merton's abbot allowed him to make use of a wood shed on the monastery property for long afternoons and early evenings. Merton named the humble place "St. Anne's," and while maintaining his other commitments, he loved his time alone there. One early February in 1953, he wrote in his journal:

It is a tremendous thing no longer to have to debate in my mind about "being a hermit," even though I am not one. At least now solitude is something concrete—it is "St. Anne's"—the long view of hills, the empty cornfields in the bottoms, the crows in the trees, and the cedars bunched together on the hillside. And when I am here there is always lots of sky and lots of peace and I don't have distractions and everything is serene. . . .

Here there seems to be less and less need even of books.

Cassian has become tremendous, in a site which makes him irritable.<sup>2</sup>

That last line in the entry is a bit confusing, since Cassian drew his spiritual guidelines for monks—captured in his book of *Conferences*, the focus of Lectures 13 and 14 here—from encounters with, and admiration for, the lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who were hermits. It was St. Benedict and his famous *Rule*, soon thereafter, that normalized cenobitism throughout Western monasticism. What do we make of that last line in the journal entry? I'm not sure. Perhaps it reveals some of Merton's own ambivalence or unease with his desire for solitude, which were sometimes very strong in him.



In these pages, you will discover much that is attractive, and some that's occasionally odd and unfortunate, in the lives and teachings and characters of those who left cities such as Alexandria, Damascus, and Jerusalem to seek greater faithfulness and commitment in the way of Christ. Merton demonstrates over and over movement in these two directions (attractive and unfortunate), and each was interesting to him. Particularly in

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 3: 1952–1960)*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 29.

Lecture 2, on “Aberrations,” he shows how we have seen developments in our spiritual understandings since the days of the early church. Montanism, for instance, with its combined “false asceticism and false mysticism,” claimed an important Church Father (Tertullian) and is now understood as tragic. And the “hatred of the flesh” of Encratism, exhibited in heretical moments and occasionally in the genuine lives of Desert Fathers, isn’t something to be emulated. Merton points both to ways in which we need to recapture and rediscover what was practiced long ago, and to what we’ve thankfully left behind.

I vividly remember encountering the treasure trove of lectures that Merton gave to the young men studying to become Trappist monks at The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. I’m old enough that I recall this first encounter via cassette tapes in the college library. The recording wasn’t always clear, and I remember hitting stop, rewind, and play over and over to “catch” the wisdom in these nuggets. More than thirty years later, working with this material in written form has been a way of returning both to Merton and his sources, and to my own discovery of Merton—and that’s been a joy.



For those who are interested in exploring Merton’s teaching on desert spirituality in more detail, the unabridged, fully annotated versions of Merton’s original novitiate conferences on this topic, accompanied by extensive introductions, are available in *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) and *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006).

As O’Connell wrote in the introduction to that first volume: “While packed with factual and interpretive material, the conferences’ focus was on formation rather than information. Their purpose was not to have the novices master a body of knowledge

but to immerse them in a tradition, to allow them to become acclimated to a way of life that reached back in a continuous line to the early centuries of the Church." This is another way of explaining how and why these lectures are now relevant more than a half century after Thomas Merton's death.

There is the hope and possibility that the spirituality of the desert might form us—even those who have not taken monastic or religious vows—into better followers of Christ.

As such, this is not a book to be read casually. What the Desert Fathers and Mothers did with their lives, and how they interpreted the meaning of the Gospel, was never trivial and was not simple. To pick up this book is to study—but more than to study, it is to listen, and carefully. That should be the intention of all who read beyond this point.

As with *A Course in Christian Mysticism*, these are mysteries that you shouldn't attempt to encounter until you are prepared to meet them with your life. These lectures are not meant to be merely interesting; they are meant to transform. That's what Thomas Merton meant for them when they were first delivered, and his passion for that life and its relevance for life today comes through clearly.

From this point on, other than footnotes and backmatter, everything you will read is by Thomas Merton.

Jon M. Sweeney  
The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi



## Preface

If for some reason it were necessary for you to drink a pint of water taken out of the Mississippi River and you could choose where it was to be drawn out of the river—would you take a pint from the source of the river in Minnesota or from the estuary at New Orleans? This example is perhaps not perfect. Christian tradition and spirituality certainly do not become polluted with development. That is not the idea at all. Nevertheless, tradition and spirituality are all the more pure and genuine in proportion as they are in contact with the original sources and retain the same content.

Pius XII insisted that religious strive for renewal of their own authentic tradition, by a return to sources. Monastic spirituality is especially traditional and depends much on return to sources—to Scripture, Liturgy, Fathers of the Church.

Monastic life is the earliest form of religious life. The monk by his vocation belongs to the earliest kind of Christian spirituality. The original monastic sources have contributed to the stream of spirituality that has branched out in all the other orders; but the monk should get the life-giving waters from his proper source and not channeled through other spiritualities of later date, which have in them elements that are alien to the monastic life.

Besides renewal of our own tradition we must of course adapt ourselves to the needs of our time, and a return to tradition does not mean trying to revive, in all its details, the life lived by the early monks, or trying to do all the things that they did. It means living in our time and solving the problems of our time

in the way and with the spirit in which they lived in a different time and solved different problems.

The primary concern of the desert life is to seek God, to seek salvation. The salutation common among Desert Fathers was “*sotheis*”—mayest thou be saved. Many of the sentences [we have come to know as their Sayings] are simply answers to the question, “What ought I to do?”

The Desert Fathers [and Mothers] were not necessarily magic directors, wizard gurus, who had a series of infallible answers on all points. They were humble and sagacious men [and women], of few words, whom the Holy Ghost used for His purposes.<sup>1</sup>

(1956)

<sup>1</sup> Merton doesn't use the phrase “Desert Mothers” in these lectures, for whatever reason. He uses the more common “Desert Fathers.” Only in this first instance, for purposes of adding this editor's note, has the editor added “and Mothers” in editor's brackets. You will see, however, that Merton does discuss women, in addition to men—most of all in Lecture 9.

## **Early Christian Spirituality (First and Second Centuries)**

These were the days of the great persecutions. The Christian was above all confronted at any moment with martyrdom. This is the keynote to the spirituality of the first centuries. Together with martyrdom as an ever-present possibility and conceived as the summit of the spiritual life, was also the ideal of virginity.

Martyrdom and virginity were considered as supreme forms of union with Christ by the sacrifice of all that the world holds dear. Asceticism went with this, hand in hand. The idea was, in all literal fact, to take up one's cross and follow Christ into the Kingdom where He reigns in glory. The Christian had no perspectives in this present life.

The life of the Christian was centered in the unity of the Church—a unity of perfect love, in which everything was still very much in common, and in which the Sacred Liturgy, the reenactment of the Redemptive Sacrifice of Christ, was the great communal act, the source of all strength, life, courage to face martyrdom, etc. The life of the Christian was an intense life of love and self-forgetfulness in the community of the faithful, closely united together in Christ by the Liturgy, and daily expecting to bear witness to their faith in Christ by death.

In this situation there was not much literature, not much "pious reading." What was written was written to be read to the

community, or for the formation of catechumens. Examples include St. Ignatius and his epistles, *The Didache* or “Teaching” (of the Twelve Apostles), [and] the *Shepherd of Hermas* (allegorical and apocalyptic visions). Note that the spirituality of the early church was strongly eschatological. [For example], in *The Didache*: “There are two ways, one of life and one of death; and great is the difference between the two ways” (opening words). The way of life is simply the way of the Gospel and in summarizing it the author repeats and summarizes the main moral teachings of Jesus, quoted from the Gospel. For instance:

This is the way of life: “First you shall love God who made you, secondly, your neighbor as yourself; and whatever you would not like done to you, do not do to another.” The teaching of these words is as follows: “Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what is the merit of loving those who love you? Do not even the pagans do this? But, love those who hate you, and you will not have an enemy.”

Read especially chapters 9 and 10 on the Eucharist—beautiful, simple, deep—[these are] the first beginnings of the liturgy in spontaneous prayer. We should keep this spirit and spontaneity in our own worship. Chapter 10 is a model for the Mass, and can also be a model for our own prayer after communion.

[Then there was] St. Ignatius of Antioch, the second successor to St. Peter as Bishop of Antioch, an important city. His writings are marked by ardent love for Christ, love for unity of the Church, thirst for martyrdom. Study his conception of the Church and of the Christian life. Read his desire for martyrdom. Hence the spirituality of the age of the martyrs can be summed up as follows.

### **Spirituality in the Age of the Martyrs**

- 1) Everything is centered in the unity of the Mystical Christ: humility and meekness and the virtues that promote unity

are paramount, and above all *charity*. From the *Epistle of Clement*:

Make us submissive to Thy most mighty and excellent name, to our princes and governors in this world. For Thou, O Master, hast given them the power of reigning by Thy glorious and unspeakable might, in order that, knowing the glory and honour Thou hast assigned to them, we should obey them and not contradict Thy will. O Lord, grant unto them health, peace, concord, and stability, that they may wield without hindrance the sovereignty which Thou hast given them. For Thou, Master, and heavenly King of all the ages, givest unto the sons of men glory, honour and power over the things of the earth. Guide Thou, O Lord, their counsels according to that which is good, according to that which is pleasing in Thy sight, so that they may use with reverence in peace and mildness the power which Thou hast given them, and enjoy Thy favor (Prayer for the Roman emperors by Clement and the Roman Christians in their liturgical gatherings).

- 2) Special emphasis is put on the mystique of martyrdom—the consummation of the Christian’s consecration of himself to Christ in baptism. Tertullian writes: “A prison provides a Christian with the same advantages that a desert gives to a prophet.” This is interesting. Not only are the Desert Fathers heirs to the vocation of the martyrs, but the martyrs are the heirs of those pre-desert fathers, the prophets. In either case, there is the idea of the *prophetic* vocation of the Christian saint as witness to the presence of Christ in the world (classic example—St. John the Baptist, model of martyrs, of monks, and of prophets). Tertullian encourages martyrs in strength and love of suffering for Christ:

Blessed martyrs, look upon every hardship you have to endure as fitted to develop in you virtues of soul and body. You are about to take up the good fight in which the living God will award the prize. . . . Christ Jesus, who has anointed

you with the Holy Spirit, has willed before the day of battle to take away your freedom and to deal with you stoutly to toughen your strength. Athletes, as we know, in order to harden themselves, withdraw from their fellows to undergo a regime of greater severity. They abstain from all indulgence, all dainty fare, and all too pleasant drink. They do themselves violence, undergo pain, tire themselves out, being surer of winning the more thoroughly they are trained. And yet all this is, as the Apostle says [1 Cor. 9:25] "that they may receive a corruptible crown: but we an incorruptible one." Let us then regard the prison as the place where we are trained to suffer, that we may be broken in to it when we are led forth to the tribunal. For a hard life increases virtue, softness on the contrary destroys it.

St. Cyprian writes in his *Exhortation to Martyrs*: "The world becomes a prison, in time of persecution: but the heavens are opened. Antichrist threatens but Christ comes to the rescue; death is inflicted, but immortality follows; the martyr who is put to death loses the world, but restored to life he gains paradise. Temporal life is snuffed out but eternal life is given in exchange."

Typical of the spirit of the martyrs, this strength and love of sacrifice is passed on and handed down by the martyr to the monk his successor. How necessary to have some of this spirit in our monastic life. Otherwise how feeble and inert we will be, how lacking in generosity, how tepid in fulfilling our sacred obligations.

The age of the martyrs looked at union with Christ Crucified, by martyrdom, as the ideal way of fulfilling one's vocation to union with Christ and swallowing up all sin and burying sin and punishment alike in the Blood of Christ. But not all were martyrs—nor was it sufficient to hope for martyrdom as the exclusive and unique way of being a perfect Christian. What if one did not die a martyr? How should one live? One should live as if preparing for martyrdom. But the Christian virtues should be practiced in a very special way by certain groups within the Church.

## The Ideal of Virgins and Ascetes

The life of virginity is also a life of union with Christ. The virgin is the Bride of Christ. Those who embrace the life of virginity do not merely renounce marriage and legitimate pleasures of the flesh, but in general they embrace lives of greater mortification. While all the faithful fast on Wednesday and Friday, these have an even stricter rule of life. "We often meet with Christians who might marry and thus spare themselves the aggravation of the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. They prefer to refrain from exercising their right, but to lay upon themselves hard penances, to keep under their bodies by fasting, to bring them under obedience by abstinence from certain foods, and thus in every way to mortify by the spirit the works of the flesh," wrote Origen.

Since perfect chastity is a special gift of God, then it must be asked for and preserved by a life of constant prayer. But prayer is not only associated with the virginal life because of its difficulties. Also, the life of virginity fits one to offer special praise to God. It becomes a life of praise, a life devoted (later on) to the *opus Dei*. The virgins follow the Lamb singing hymns wherever He goes. Apocalypse 14:1-6:

And I saw, and behold, the Lamb was standing upon Mount Sion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand having his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like a voice of many waters, and like a voice of loud thunder; and the voice that I heard was as of harpers playing on their harps. And they were singing as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except those hundred and forty-four thousand, who have been purchased from the earth. These are they who were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These were purchased from among men, first-fruits unto God and unto the Lamb, and in their mouth there was found no lie; they are without blemish.

It is especially fitting that pure souls should devote themselves to the praise of God—they are able to love and understand Him better; they are on more intimate terms with Him; praise in the mouth of a pure person is more pleasing to God, etc. This life of prayer early took the form of an embryonic divine office: all Christians assisted at vigils of reading and psalmody in church from Saturday to Sunday (from this arose the office of matins). Virgins and ascetes habitually prayed at set times of the day, especially morning, noon and evening. The prayer life of all was centered, of course, in the Holy Eucharistic sacrifice.

The life of prayer and penance was also accompanied by good works. Virgins and ascetes were assigned officially to certain works of mercy in the Church, as part of their vocation. Hence the virginal life is the angelic life, a special spiritual gift coming down from heaven. But it must be accompanied with humility and works of charity. (St. John Chrysostom will later point out that the foolish virgins with no oil in their lamps lacked works of mercy and were attached to their possessions.) The pure love of the virgins, far from being sterile, is spiritually fecund (*gloriosa fecunditas*) in the Church, not only spiritually but even temporally. St. Ambrose was to say later: “Where virgins are few in number there the population diminishes, but where virginity is held in honor there too the number of inhabitants increases,” and he refers to Alexandria as an example.

## Aberrations in the Early Centuries

In order to understand the Christian tradition of the early centuries we must also know about the aberrations from the true tradition, which had a significant effect. We have to be careful in studying such things: not because we are likely to be led astray by the errors themselves, but because we are apt to make judgements that are too crude both of the nature of error and of the nature of true Christian spirituality. There is a danger of drawing very clear lines of demarcation, with all black on one side and all white on the other, and so a need for greater discernment. For instance, much that was good in Neoplatonism has in fact passed over to the Fathers, for example St. Augustine.

### Hatred of the Flesh

*Encratism* (from *egkrateia*—abstaining), exaggerated asceticism—hatred of the flesh—is not Christian. This error condemned all marriage and all use of meat and wine as evil. On the contrary, St. Methodius gives the true doctrine: “In marriage God associates man with His own creative work.”

True asceticism supposes a balance: perfection consists not in denying oneself but in charity. Asceticism is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Eusebius gives an example of true Christian spirit in the martyr Alcibiades of Lyons. In prison, he was severely abstaining from certain foods. But when it was

pointed out that this was troubling others who thought they might be obliged to do the same, he “made use of everything indifferently, thanking God, for the martyrs were not bereft of the grace of God, but the Holy Spirit was their counsellor.”

### *Tatian and Encratism*

Tatian was an Assyrian convert in Rome. At first interested in Greek philosophy, he turned against it and remained aggressively opposed to Greek influence in Christianity. In a rigorous opposition against Western Christianity, he emphasized extreme asceticism for all and even opposed marriage and procreation. He was condemned as a heretic in the West. He had a decisive influence in Syrian Christianity. Note his *Gospel Harmony* [which shows] examples of the way Tatian changed Gospel texts to suit his own rigorous views. He excluded wine from the Kingdom, omitted references to Joseph as Mary’s “husband,” etc. Note: Jerome, commenting on Galatians 6:8 (“He who sows in the flesh . . .”) attributes to a most zealous heresiarch of the Encratists, Cassianus, the view that this is a text against marriage. This Cassianus may be “Tatianus” (an error of the scribe) or else Julian Cassianus, a Valentinian gnostic. Defending fasting against Jovinian, Jerome mentions Tatian and Marcion as heretics who forbade certain foods out of “hatred for the works of the creator.” The true Christian view: “We give praise for every creature of God”—but Christians fast nevertheless. Fasting is commanded by Christ, but not because any creature is evil. Tatian places great emphasis on suffering in the spiritual life.

### *Marcionites*

As a result of dualism, Marcion separated the “good God” of the New Testament and the evil principle of the Old Testament. Creation comes from the evil one. Hence to despise creation is to insult and condemn the evil principle. Marriage was treated with nausea. Only celibates could be full members of the

Church (cf. Albigenses). Marcion taught a hatred of the body, a Docetist view of the Incarnation and made the claim that Christ hated the flesh. He taught hatred of food: eating is regarded as a bestial and evil action. Marcionites showed aggressive opposition to the world, courting persecution.

*The Acts of Thomas (Apocryphal)*

This work shows a modified encratism, with an emphasis on virginity. Only the virgins are espoused to Christ, and they alone can enter with Him into the Kingdom. It is also necessary to leave all possessions, for Christ comes only to those who are stripped of all things. Vagrancy is praised. In these sources and others (cf. the Apocryphal *Odes of Solomon*) we see asceticism regarded as an essential part of the Christian message. The Gospel is only for those who practice extreme asceticism.

The idea was eschatological: the refusal of procreation had a cosmic significance. It was supposed to hasten the day of the end. The celibate took a real and concrete part in the “reduction of the dominion and duration of the present world.” “Only a church with such qualities could be an instrument working towards the consummation of the cosmic upheaval and the expansion of God’s dominion in the world.” Hence the sacraments were rewards for the continent (for example, Baptism as a crown for the perfect, not an initiation).

Encratism:

- 1) It is dualistic, rejects the Old Testament and ascribes the division of the sexes to the demon.
- 2) Therefore it prescribed total abstention from marriage and meat.
- 3) A “metaphysical hatred of wine” was carried to the point that water only was used at Mass.

Tatian [also] taught that Adam was not saved because he married.

*St. Basil's Master, Eustathius*

Eustathius was St. Basil's friend and guide, who introduced him to the full ascetic ideal, and urged him to go to Egypt. Basil long remained under the influence of Eustathius but gradually came to differ with him.

Eustathius [was] Bishop of Sebaste (Armenia), who had travelled in Egypt, admired the monks, propagated asceticism in Asia Minor, [and] had many followers and many opponents. The left wing of Eustathius' following tended toward heresy and exaggerated asceticism, preparing the way for Messalianism. The influence of Eustathius precipitated a crisis reflected in the Council (Synod) of Gangres in 341, more than ten years before Basil came under his direct influence, though Basil's family embraced ascetic life under the influence of Eustathius about ten years after the council. At the Council of Gangres, opposition to Eustathius by conservative elements in the Church crystallized in a "condemnation" of Eustathius or rather of the extreme tendencies which some of his followers promoted. From this council it is clear that the left-wing Eustathians tended toward schism, asserting that only the perfect ascetics were worthy [of] the name of true Christians. Married clergy were despised. The hierarchy was condemned for compromising with the world of imperial power. Ascetes were accused of disrupting the social order, breaking up marriages, urging slaves to flee masters and officials to leave jobs to become monks. Monks refused to pay taxes, etc. Ascetes were accused of contempt for the ordinary liturgical life of the Church, feasts of martyrs (which tended to be social festivities), contempt for created things, etc. Extremists on the other hand found that Eustathius himself was not strict enough. Some of the ascetes protested against his foundation of a hospital at Sebaste as a source of distractions and worldliness. They departed into the mountains with a group of men and women bound to celibate and ascetic life. These extremists, as later the Messalians, exalted the life of prayer beyond all else; prayer supplied for everything, better than work. They also practiced sacred dances and preached "liberation of women."

Rather than saying that St. Basil reacted against Eustathian asceticism, it would be better to say that St. Basil took what he considered best and most evangelical in the doctrine and practice of his master, and affirmed it, as against the extremism of the left wing, which involved total separation from the ordinary faithful, condemning them as un-Christian. After the Council of Gangres, St. Basil emphasized what was genuine and truly traditional in the doctrine and practice of Eustathius, and worked out a way of life for all Christians to be perfect, according to the teaching of the Gospel. This way of life was not strictly speaking monastic life—though tradition regarded it as such. If by monastic life is meant withdrawal from the ordinary Christian community as well as from the world, then Basil was not “legislating for the monastic life.” If by monastic life is meant ascetic communities within and in contact with the Christian community as a whole, then this is what Basil envisaged! He is talking of what we mean today by the religious life—especially that of active congregations, rather than of “contemplative monks.” The love of money and rank were to be renounced, along with the love of pleasure, comfort, etc. Emphasis was placed on a life of prayer and work, as opposed to the one-sided emphasis on prayer preached by the extremists.

### **Montanism**

Montanism was the great heresy of the second century. It claimed Tertullian as one of its adherents. In it false asceticism and false mysticism were combined. It contains elements common in movements of similar type down the ages:

- 1) Crude idea of eschatology: the end of the world is about to happen any day now.
- 2) The reign of the Holy Spirit had begun. Hence there is an obligation for all to practice extreme asceticism.
- 3) Perfection consists in extraordinary mystical gifts and experience. Montanus was a priest with his two prophetesses,

Priscilla and Maximilla. Frequency of visions and ecstatic madness, spectacular manifestations of “possession by the Holy Spirit,” convulsions, etc. marked the movement, which was condemned by the Church.

## **Neoplatonism**

The above were heretical movements. Neoplatonism is not a Christian deviation; it is a Hellenistic philosophical and mystical school of thought. It falls short of Christianity and was opposed to it, but it cannot be dismissed lightly. It flourished at Alexandria; Plotinus, Proclus, etc. were its main lights. It represented a development of Plato’s philosophy with religious elements from the Near East included; thus it was syncretistic. Much of the Christian tradition on “contemplation” is in fact full of the influence of Neoplatonism.

The word “contemplation” does not occur in the Gospel. The idea of abstracting oneself from all things, purifying one’s mind of all images, and ascending by self-denial to an ecstatic intellectual contact with God the Supreme Truth—ending up by being “alone with the alone”—all this is characteristic of the Neoplatonic approach. It has been taken over by a whole tradition of Christian writers and has become Christianized. But still we must remember in dealing with such writers that we are handling a characteristically Greek type of thought and must take care not to lose sight of Christ Himself and His teachings in order to follow a more or less pagan line of thought from which Christ is all but excluded.

One specifically Neoplatonic element is the idea that contemplation (*gnosis*) is for a select elite and others cannot attain it. It is true St. Paul speaks of perfect Christians and carnal-minded Christians—but that is not quite the same thing.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, 1 Cor. 2:6, 3:1, 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28, 4:12.

Another element is dualism, in which body and soul are considered as separated: soul belongs to the realm of spirit, body to the realm of matter, and the material is inferior if not even evil. Origen was led astray by this idea. Hence arises the conclusion that to live a “purely spiritual” life is better; hence also the emphasis on *apatheia* (complete freedom from passion) as the climax of ascetic life. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find such an ideal of complete deliverance of the soul from the body. On the contrary, the New Testament envisages the spiritualization of the whole man, body and soul together, pointing to the Resurrection of the Flesh. But ideas like *apatheia* became part and parcel of Christian ascetic theory and practice, especially in the Orient. They must always be qualified with Christian correctives.

### **Gnosticism**

Gnosticism [is] a deviation from Christianity (an attempt to “improve” on it), cruder, more oriental, more elaborate than Neoplatonism. It was also more esoteric (that is, salvation and sanctification are more exclusively for an elite of initiates). There is a very curious mythological and magical content in Gnosticism, which posited a “Pleroma” of mythical personages, some friendly to God and some inimical to him. Note the creation of personages like “Sabaoth” due to misunderstanding of the Septuagint. (They thought the Lord Sabaoth [Lord of Armies] was a special personage called “Sabaoth”—a kind of demiurge.) However Gnosticism is centered on Jesus. A fantastic ascent through the thirteen aeons brings the perfect soul at last to Jesus himself, the supreme Mystery of Light, above all the celestial archons.

Gnosticism was an attempt to unite Christianity with astrology and magic, rejecting the Old Testament and substituting for it the pseudo-sciences of the day. Dualism was present even in divine things: God of the Old Testament was evil (enemy of Jesus), God of the New Testament good; body was evil, “tomb”

of the soul, etc. The universe came from an evil principle called Ialdaboth. These ideas were taken up by Manichaeans later.

We can recognize similar trends all down through the history of the Church. Such trends arise when there are times of unrest, when the masses are spiritually hungry and going through a period of transition. Such trends are associated with ignorance (excluding Neoplatonism of course) and misinterpretation of Christian revelation—and with relatively crude natural appetites for spiritual experience. They flare up and lead to many excesses, but when they die down the spirit of whole classes or groups is left “burnt out” and helpless.

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