

“Describing his own personal experiences, Talbot allows the desert spirituality to constructively criticize the Catholic context in which he lives out the Christian life. He encourages his audience, which should certainly extend beyond Catholicism, to find a deeper and richer experience of God by the Holy Spirit, in embracing aspects of the monastic desert spirituality for themselves. He allows the desert fathers and mothers to speak for themselves, without simply providing another collection of sayings and quotations. Rather, he shows in an engaging manner how this transforming spirituality has been fruitful in his own life, and has the potential to produce spiritual fruit in the lives of all those who embrace it, making Christ the focus of our life, in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

—Father Peter Farrington, priest of the Coptic Orthodox Church, UK

“John Michael Talbot knows about the distractions of this world and gives practical suggestions to rediscover the dignity of man and himself in God’s ray of light. The book is a testimony to decades of wisdom. Simple and impressive are the examples from everyday life, unsurpassed are the quotations of the desert fathers, which are still so relevant today. The book provides orientation for searching people in a time of disorientation.”

—Notker Wolf, OSB  
Abbot Primate Emeritus

“John Michael Talbot is the real deal—a true holy man and spiritual father. This book is a booster shot of grace that will reinvigorate your spiritual life—it is both encouraging and challenging. It’s not a how-to, if that means a set formula that is supposed to work for everyone, rather it is a way of empowering the reader to find his or her own way through the desert. From time to time we all need to strip away the barnacles of the distracted life and get back to what is essential. With this book, you can immerse yourself in a world without the annoying distractions of modern technology, then really begin with yourself and go deeper than perhaps you ever have before.”

—Jim L. Papandrea  
Professor of Church History and Historical Theology  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

“Every generation seems to discover the Desert Fathers as something new, surprising, strange, and radical. Opening heaven’s door, we never find what we had expected. This book will be the Desert’s doorway for a new generation.”

—Mike Aquilina, author of *The Fathers of the Church*

“What a pleasure for me to read John Michael’s new book on desert spirituality. It is a beautiful spiritual offering from a great musician who has become a very special author as well. *Desert Dangers and Delights* addresses a hunger for a faith that can be *experienced* in the here and now.”

—Tom Booth, composer, retreat leader, and spiritual director

“There has never been a more crucial time to listen to the past. And who better to listen to than the desert fathers, who left everything to embrace a life of simple listening to God in the wilderness. My brother John has done much the same with his life; he has spent a lifetime listening to the fathers and has gifted the church with this remarkable digest of their wisdom.”

—Michael Card, faith-based musician and author

“The spiritual life, in Scripture and in church history, is shaped by the garden and the desert. John Michael Talbot, whose fruitful ministry spans fifty years, guides us from that garden to the contemplative life of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. In this new book, he shares the treasures to be found in a place of dangers and delights. Highly recommended.”

—Duane W.H. Arnold, PhD, author of *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria*

# Desert Dangers and Delights

*Stories, Teachings, and Sources*

John Michael Talbot



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# Introduction

**T**he desert is delightful. It is also dangerous. It is delightful when used well, but it can kill if entered into wrongly. The difference is in discernment.

As a delight the desert is an awe-inspiring place. The sunrises and sunsets are stunning. The way the light plays off the sands. The mountains and hills in the distance. The clean air refreshes body and soul. The vistas are unobstructed and magnificent. All seems clear and unobstructed in one's soul there as well. It is easy to be inspired by God in such a place. These things are all delightful!

It can also be forbidding! With the delight, there is danger. In the desert everything unessential is stripped away. The hot is very hot, and the cold is very cold. You can die of thirst or exposure to the elements very easily if not properly prepared. And snakes and scorpions lurk under rocks and dwell in the shelter of caves. That's why so few live there, except in properly developed cities or towns with ample services and utilities. Out of cities and towns there is no lush greenery to visually cushion the harsher realities of life. What you see is what you get. This all symbolizes the challenges of our spiritual lives as well. That's why the desert fathers and mothers retreated to deserts.

I have great memories of the desert. Early in the days of Mason Proffit, a country rock band I was with that achieved some success on Warner Brothers Records, we considered buying a

## 2 *Desert Dangers and Delights*

ranch outside of Tucson. We loved the saguaro cactus and the activity of the wildlife, flora, and fauna of the desert, often not seen by the casual observer. I spent hours walking that desert in those days.

After my conversion to Catholic monastic life I spent powerful times in the desert of Palestine. I loved the abandoned monastic ruins outside of Bethlehem and enjoyed staying for an extended stay at Shepherd's Field, a hermitage below the pilgrim sites. I especially remember walking down the Wadi Kelt ("Valley of Death") from St. George's Monastery, past the numerous ancient caves that line the cliffs and once served as hermits' cells.

Later in my monastic itinerant ministry, some of my most cherished memories have been of driving back and forth across America, specifically the Southwestern deserts of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. I have enjoyed walking in the desert and finding a shady nook or cranny in the rocks (uninhabited by snakes or scorpions!) in which to pray. I have seriously looked at land where we could make a desert monastic foundation of The Brothers and Sisters of Charity. But the time has not yet come. It is one of my yet unrealized dreams.

These dangers and delights are precisely why the first desert fathers and mothers went to the desert. They went to the desert to live a life stripped of everything but God. The desert fathers and mothers were primarily those who went into the deserts of Upper and Lower Egypt beginning in the third and fourth centuries, influencing monasticism in Palestine, Syria, and throughout the ancient world in later centuries. In the desert all cultural distractions were gone. Only those in the mind remained and demanded that they be brought to Christ. They also went because the people of their culture understood it as the dwelling place of demons, and they sought to do battle with the primary causes of the world's woes. They went to battle demons with the victory only Jesus Christ brings fully. They also had the wisdom to start, not by battling the sins of others, but by battling their own. This takes guts. It takes real courage to endure.

So the desert is a place of danger and delight. It first attracts, then frightens, and then delights in a way untouched by the ups and downs of life. This is the way of the desert fathers and mothers.

I believe the desert fathers and mothers have a special significance in our current cultural and ecclesial climate and crisis.

We live in a world where fewer and fewer folks are staying in a church or faith community. Pew research indicates that the proverbial “nones”—as in “none of the above” on a questionnaire about religious affiliation—are quickly becoming the “dones”—as in those who are simply “done” with it all. Most of these folks still love Jesus or at least still believe in God, perhaps even more strongly than before. It’s not so much that they disagree with Catholicism, Christianity, or religion in general. It’s simply that they have already given it their level best for decades, gotten very little in return, and are simply “done” with it.

The “dones” are often done with the church, politics, and the Western world in general. Church is a polarized place where liturgies are poorly done and apparent engagement with Jesus is hard to find. Most seem to have a relationship with religion that is *about* Jesus, rather than *with* Jesus who enlivens our religion. As Scripture says of some, “they make a pretense of religion but deny its power” (2 Tim 3:5). The sex scandals have left most feeling gut punched and falling on our faces before God. God knows, politics is even more polarized and helplessly deadlocked along party lines on most issues. Social media has degenerated from a great place for dialogue into a place of unfiltered and hate-filled arguments. This leaves many of us feeling like exiles in our own church and culture.

It was a climate not unlike ours that prompted the rugged souls to “flee the world” for the solitude and silence of the desert. They reach across the ages to resonate with the souls of the “nones” and “dones” today. They provide an ancient model for those in self-imposed exile that is no longer just angry or resentful at the state of the church and the world. Somehow

the desert fathers and mothers like Antony, Pachomius, and Mary of Egypt found something deeper in the desert, and their inspiration renewed the religion and even the politics of their over-institutionalized Christian world through the likes of Athanasius and Augustine.

A publisher suggested years ago that I write a book on the desert fathers and mothers. I have always hesitated. Who am I to write such a book? I have written on other monastic subjects, but these radical souls always seemed way above my proverbial pay grade! But I am inspired to give it a try now. Why?

In recent years some health struggles stripped me back to the basics, and the desert fathers and mothers ministered to me in a way that other more active saints such as Francis and Benedict no longer fully did. The notion of simply “being” after years of active ministry speaks deeply to my heart.

As founder and spiritual father of a new integrated monastic community, I have always hearkened to the hermit and community call of the desert fathers and mothers. The collections of their lives and sayings sit close to both my study chair and my bedside. They are my rather constant companions and familiar friends. Even my love for the likes of Western figures like Francis and Benedict, and Romuald of the Camaldolese and Bruno of the Carthusians, was rooted in my love for the first monks of the eastern deserts. They remain the bedrock upon which the entire monastic and consecration of life tradition rises. They have always spoken to a very deep place in my soul as well.

The lives and sayings of the desert fathers and mothers have inspired the likes of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and St. Benedict in the Christian west. They are the absolute primer for monastic life in the Christian east. They also inspire me. And they still inspire the hermit or monk within all of us today.

There have been increasingly numerous books written on the desert fathers and mothers in recent decades. What was once a scant curriculum in English is now quite bounteous! There is really no great need for the likes of me to write yet another

such book of quotes. So I write this book from a more personal perspective. My personal positions are built on quotes, but this book is not a mere omnibus of quotes.

There is also a more personal reason for this treatment. I have recently established a friendship with the only monastics that carry this tradition from the place where it all began: Egypt. It has been a joy to establish a friendship with the monks at St. Mary and Moses Monastery in Texas. Coptic monasticism is thoroughly immersed in the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers in a way that other monastics understand only from a distance. So I have been reimmersed in that tradition out of friendship and love.

As I mentioned, this coincided with some health issues that took me to the point of seeing the other side in Christ. During such times the nonessentials are stripped away. The desert fathers and mothers experienced a similar stripping, not merely through health issues, but as an intentional and alternative way of life in Christ and the church. At this point I find them most inspiring.

It has been suggested that I write about what inspired me from their rich repository of wisdom. So I will try to answer that call. I hope to be at least somewhat successful.

The desert fathers and mothers didn't leave us a monastic rule of life and much less with a mystical theology. Those were for later generations to compile. The desert fathers and mothers left us stories and pithy sayings, or apothegms. They don't explicitly treat the content of what we now call passive contemplation, but they do treat external and internal disciplines, and the battle with thoughts that usher us into contemplation extensively. Passive contemplation is, however, implied throughout.

In this book I will share my own stories, Scripture, and the stories and sayings of the desert fathers and mothers about a radical alternative way of living and thinking in Christ. I try to share from my own experience in hopes that it will assist others in theirs. I hide nothing, for we cannot hide from God.

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So I retire into the desert in the twilight of my life, not to run from the world but for its salvation, by first starting with myself. It is an option that can be applied to all of us according to our states of life. If we first leave the world for Christ, then we can bring a salvation that only Jesus can bring.

### **Questions**

- 1) Do you ever feel alone in the world?
- 2) Do you ever feel like an exile in the church?
- 3) Is your primary encounter with religion about Jesus, or with Jesus who enlivens your religion?
- 4) Do you have a personal love relationship with Jesus Christ?
- 5) Are you looking for a way to balance this? Would the desert fathers and mothers help inspire you to find a way?



# 10

## Sacred Silence

“Flee from the crowd, keep silence, and you will live.”

—Anonymous Old Man, in E. A. W. Budge,  
*The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*

“To live without speaking is better than to speak without living.”

—Abba Isidore, in Christine Valters Paintner,  
*Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings, Annotated and Explained*

It is said of Abba Pambo (or Agatho<sup>1</sup>) that in order to learn silence he carried a pebble in his mouth for three years. Many times I wish I had put one in mine! Silence is hard to learn, but it is a priceless treasure to those who learn it.

I remember all too well one of the most embarrassing things I ever did in community (and there are many!). We were young, and I was a young leader, so we didn’t always handle guests very well. Plus, we took ourselves way too seriously! People

1. Owen Chadwick, ed. and trans., *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 49.

who come to monasteries often love the idea of silence but have virtually no experience of actually practicing it. Once we had a particularly talkative guest. I don't mean that she talked a bit too much. I mean that she talked constantly, everywhere, and very, very loudly! This guest was truly delightful, but the constant, boisterous talking started getting on some people's nerves. So in my inexperience, I tried to apply the discipline of Abbot Pambo on her. I actually asked this guest to put a pebble in her mouth for a while. And she actually obeyed . . . at least for a while! This was only one of the most arrogant things I did in my inexperience. Believe it or not, she is still a dear friend. She was most forgiving of my youthful arrogance and inexperience. I am still working on not being such a jerk!

Putting pebbles in our mouths is for us, not others! It is a symbol of using established disciplines to help us learn the wonderful monastic gift of silence. After this I occasionally put a pebble in my own mouth to remind myself to keep quiet unless it was really helpful to say something. I should have done this before I imposed it on someone else!

In our community we have times and places for silence and times and places for speech and even recreation. At all times and places, we teach to beware of speaking if you cannot be silent and conversely to beware of silence if you cannot speak when the occasion calls for it. This is a beautiful balance, but few of even our monastic community members really find it. I'm still working on it too!

Silence is a most appealing concept in the context of our noisy modern world. The constant sound of people in crowded places or just in a family home can sometimes feel quite imprisoning. The same goes for the sounds of cars or traveling on a train or airplane. But even beyond the obvious, just getting away from the constant hum of the electricity we have grown so accustomed to seems like being immersed in a warm bath of natural life again. Such silence can be most renewing of the human spirit.

But it can also be terrifying! Real silence is usually difficult. It reminds me of the old commercial for Rice Krispies cereal, where the monks were trying to keep silence. But the natural sound of the “snap, crackle, and pop” of the cereal in milk disrupted their silence. It started with looks, then giggles, and ends with the monks laughing out loud. It was a very cute commercial. But it captures the real experience of any group or community who tries to live with times or places of silence. It takes some work and some forgiveness of those who naturally break the silence.

I also remember our community exalting silence at a new hermitage and then constantly breaking it! It’s hard to eat in silence when we come from families where meals are noisy affairs. Soon every clink and clank of silverware and plates, not to mention noisy eaters and drinkers, became almost humorous. So we would sometimes laugh or just forget and talk. It came up at almost every Friday chapter of faults. After weeks and months of this, it got to the point of seriously considering whether we should drop the discipline of silence altogether. I mean, why exalt silence and then constantly break it? But we still loved silence so much that we decided to keep it as a community discipline regardless of how many times we broke silence. After decades I’m glad we made the right decision. Times and places of silence create a sacred environment throughout the monastery. But we still struggle with breaking silence. And I don’t know a monastery that doesn’t still struggle with it at times.

Silence is an appealing concept for many modern seekers.

Silence and solitude are among the more immediately appealing aspects of the desert fathers and mothers. But it was as hard for them to practice as it often is for us. Otherwise they would not have spent so much time talking about silence!

Then there’s silence from the technology of the millennial generation. This is almost absurdly apparent. Nowadays folks are constantly messing about with their smartphones, tablets,

or computers, not to mention smart TVs! Silence is indeed “golden” for anyone who wants to have some time to think without being brainwashed or to create without being manipulated.

But silence isn’t easy. As soon as we get away from our gadgets that constantly tether us to the gods of the digital world, we get anxious and nervous. We begin to fidget. Soon, almost unconsciously, our hands are reaching once more to the smartphone or tablet to keep us connected to the digital beast. Studies show the average modern person lasts about thirty seconds in inactivity before reaching to his or her smartphone! They say it is as addictive as heroin, caffeine, or nicotine. I believe it!

It’s even true when we’re around other people. As soon as we get with others, we are talking constantly on our gadgets to others with whom we aren’t sitting face-to-face. Worse yet, the new generation even prefers to text those who are sitting just a few feet away in the same room with them! And let’s be honest, the older generation does it too. And we dare to call it Facebook! There is no substitute for face-to-face communication.

But even when we disconnect from the gods of the digital universe, we often cannot really be silent. We begin to chitchat with others about anything at all. We might maintain serious and godly conversation for a while, but all too soon our talk degenerates into either meaningless chatter or godless, negative judgments about things we really don’t know much about to begin with. As Proverbs 10:19 says, “Where words are many, sin is not wanting.”

And then there are our thoughts. They play like a constant movie of memories and fantasies. They talk all the time, and we struggle to turn them off. The Eastern religions call this, “monkey mind,” because our thoughts jump from bar to bar within the cage. Truth be known, we think all the time. Even at night our minds process what we experience in daily life through dreams—or nightmares! We can never stop thoughts. But we can slow them down, direct them, and focus them on the things of God, the superficial and deep, active and contemplative.

## **Scripture**

Scripture teaches much about silence and speech. Without quoting all the references in Sirach, Wisdom, and Proverbs, I have come to believe that the most distinguishing sign of wisdom is knowing when to be silent and when to speak. And we learn this wisdom only when we learn to silence our rather constant need to speak. Wisdom usually knows when to be silent, when to speak, and who to speak to if we really need to do so.

Jesus is silent in the desert of temptation. It is only when he is fighting the thoughts and temptations the devil put into his mind through images of worldly power and false worship, and through wrongly quoting Scripture, that Jesus responds by quoting Scripture rightly to silence the devil (see Matt 4:1-11). We are told that he often retired to deserted places to pray (see Luke 5:16). We are also told that the devil tempted Jesus repeatedly (see Luke 4:13). Silence and solitude were important to the interior life of Jesus.

We also know that while heaven is filled with the joyful and awe-filled praises of God being sung by the angels and saints, there is also silence there when something dramatic occurs on earth (Rev 8:1). Sometimes it's better to be quiet and wait than to comment right away. Silence is important.

## **The Desert**

The fathers and mothers understood these Scriptures, and they experienced problems similar to ours in their own culture. They were mystics, but they were also rugged realists.

There is a relationship between thoughts and words. You cannot talk until you at least superficially think. Conversely, you cannot control your thoughts until you learn to control your tongue.

Abba Sisois said that if we cannot guard our words, we cannot guard our hearts.<sup>2</sup> We have seen that Abbot Pambo placed a pebble in his mouth for three years in order to learn silence.

2. Chadwick, 136.

We often seek a place of solitude in order to find silence. But even the most remote spot has distractions. If we find ourselves distracted by inanimate objects in solitude, we haven't yet found real interior silence. The problem is usually not the place, but our hearts. Abba Arsenius reminds us that even in solitude and silence, if we are distracted by something as simple as the sounds of the wind through the reeds, then we are not really silent.<sup>3</sup>

To conclude, I explain silence in the more meditational music of my repertoire. You have to hear not only the notes but also the space between the notes to hear God's music. And you have to hear not only the words but also the silence between the words to hear God's word. And sometimes that word is sacred silence itself. This lesson in music has much to teach us about silence in the spiritual life in Christ, the word in silence.

## **Questions**

- 1) Do you see a need for silence in your life?
- 2) Do you put a pebble in your mouth? What other tools can you use to help with silence?
- 3) Is silence hard for you?
- 4) Is exterior silence the same as interior silence?
- 5) Do you sometimes practice exterior silence and still find that you are internally noisy?
- 6) Do you see the connection between silence and defeating demonic temptation?
- 7) Can you hear the space between the notes in the music of your life? Can you hear the word of God in silence?

3. Chadwick, 41.



# 15

## Watchfulness

**W**e hear and read a lot today about “mindfulness.” The word comes from popular Buddhism. It has now worked its way into the lexicon of psychologists, health professionals, and self-help gurus. It is now a standard part of Christian lingo as well. It is similar to the desert tradition of *watchfulness*. In Eastern Christianity there is a rich traditional teaching on watchfulness. But our Christian tradition of watchfulness is unique from mindfulness, and a special gift. That is what we will emphasize here.

I am a student of religion. More specifically, I am a student of the monastic and mystical traditions of the religions of the world. I do this from a specifically Catholic Christian perspective. I am a firm believer in the fullness of God in Jesus Christ, but I recognize the truth found in other traditions and am glad to share common ground with believers of other faiths.

But I am also aware of the dangers of a universalism and syncretism that reduces all religions to seemingly separate but equal paths up the same mountain. All paths are not equal, and all roads are not as safe or direct as others. And all paths go both up and down. I am also aware of the dangers of fundamentalism in any faith that is militantly exclusive and reduces any path

other than its own to being demonic and evil. This leads to a world of religious war and violence.

In our monastery, I have found that very few can integrate the mindfulness authentically taught in eastern religion together in a way that doesn't confuse their own Christianity. Other religious traditions can be most sophisticated, elegant, and persuasive. They can rival the greatest of Christian theology, mysticism, and metaphysics. Unless one is firmly grounded in one's Christian faith, dabbling in meditation techniques from other faith traditions can lead to becoming confused regarding faith and eventually even morality. Some lose their Christianity altogether. I am understandably cautious about integrating it too soon into a young monastic's spirituality. So I teach watchfulness from a solid and rich Christian tradition.

I have taught Christian meditation for decades. We have many areas of experiential common ground on the psychological and spiritual levels with other religions. But after much experience, I now teach clear Christian meditation unto itself, without trying to intermingle one tradition with the other too freely.

Watchfulness is related to both sacred stillness and thoughts. It is also related to stability in the cell. Watchfulness grows from stilling the body and emotions so that thoughts can be observed.

We modern people are often mentally obsessive, but not mindful or watchful in our thoughts. Externally, we suffer from a constant barrage of unedited news images and ideas via the onslaught of social media, TV, and such. Our thoughts are constantly active. Consequently, we cannot really process them with good discernment. The average news cycle is a day or two at best before a new "alert" demands our attention. This leaves us agitated and upset, and the obsession gets even worse.

Watchfulness means calmly watching over our lives, our passions, and our thoughts so as to discern whether or not they are from God, from demons, or from ourselves. It is the first step in discernment.

## Scripture

Jesus says to watch out for evil coming to us under the form of religion, “Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15). He tells us to watch for coming persecutions (Mark 13:23), to watch daily for his second coming, and not to be surprised by it (Mark 13:35–36). So Jesus speaks of watching for the good and the bad that enters our lives and of being ready for his return. As St. Bernard says, there are three comings of Christ: the first in his Incarnation, the second at the end of our lives or the end of time, and the third in an intermediate coming through the Spirit in word and sacrament. We must be watchful for all three.<sup>1</sup>

St. Paul speaks of watchfulness of one’s life of prayer in the Spirit of Christ. “With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones” (Eph 6:18). And again, “Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col 4:2).

## The Desert

The desert fathers and mothers gave birth to a more specialized watchfulness, called in Greek *nepsis*. Interestingly, this is not the word used in Scripture. There we read of being watchful and of keeping watch in the night. *Nepsis* is more specialized. It is the intense, but not scrupulous, watching of thoughts and passions that enter the house of one’s soul.

Watchfulness is conditioned by *hesychia*, or sacred stillness. As we have already seen, this can be likened to an agitated and muddy pond that has been stilled. Only when the sediment that has been stirred up through agitation has settled back to

1. Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini, 1–3: Opera Omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 4 (1966), 188–190.

the bottom does the water become clear enough to see what is really in the pond of one's soul. This is when we can become calmly but intensely watchful according to *nepsis*.

It's also said by St. Hesychios the Priest in the later *Philokalia*, a collection of beautiful eastern monastic wisdom, that watchfulness is like a spider that does the work of spinning the web but afterward is very still so as to perceive anything stirring the web. It is the same with watchfulness.<sup>2</sup> We do the work of asceticism but then enter into sacred stillness so we can perceive what disturbs the web of our life. If it is good, it is nourishing. If bad, it can be rejected.

So we must be very still in *hesychia* in order to see what is going on in the depths of our soul, whether that be from God, the devil, or just ourselves. Then we must make the choice for Jesus.

John of Damascus in the *Philokalia* also says that just as it is easier to cut off the head of a snake when it tries to enter your home than to wait until its entire body has gotten through the door, so it is with watchfulness of thoughts.<sup>3</sup> If we see them as soon as they enter the doorway of the soul, it is easier to cut off the head of the snake of bad thoughts, rather than waiting until they have fully entered the house. Then it is much more difficult.

The earlier desert fathers don't yet have a developed method or theology of watchfulness. But it is certainly present and an essential part of their way of life. For example, Serapion said that if you want to make progress, stay in your cell, *keep a watch upon yourself*, and attend to the work of your hands.<sup>4</sup> And when Abba Poemen was asked how one should to sit in his cell, he said

2. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, trans. and ed., *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 26.166.

3. Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, 76.

4. Owen Chadwick, ed. and trans., *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 99.

that to “sit” in the cell is, externally, to work with the hands, eat once a day, keep silence, and meditate. Internally it is to make progress by bearing injury and fault through self-accusation and asking forgiveness of God, keeping the hours of prayer, and keeping a watch on the secret thoughts of the heart.<sup>5</sup> So watchfulness has both an external and an internal dimension.

To be effective in watchfulness we must still the body and the emotions. Only then will thoughts become clear. To still the body we must also *stay still in one place*. We are so tempted to get up and move around constantly. We must learn to simply sit alone with God. Recall the image offered by the fathers of a spider on a web.

We cannot still the body if we cannot still *the breath*. The Jesus Prayer unites prayer with breathing. This allows our thoughts to drop from the conceptual mind to the intuitive mind, the *nous*, the heart, the center of our being. Settling the breath settles the body. Then the emotions and thoughts settle down. When done rightly it can even reduce blood pressure. Done wrongly, and it will actually increase it!

But there is a necessary caution in order. It is easy to become *scrupulous* with our thoughts in a way that makes us nervous and uptight. That isn’t authentic watchfulness. Desert watchfulness is peaceful and calm.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* (chap. 32) says to gently look around thoughts that tempt or bother us. I expand on this and say to see thoughts as objects coming slowly toward us. If they aren’t from God, we calmly move our head to one side and let them pass. I like this analogy. We don’t get upset when our watchfulness reveals something bad in our thoughts. We simply move aside and let them pass. It is peaceful. It is calm. It is lifegiving.

If we find actions in our lives that are sinful or simply unfruitful, we just repent. We change our minds. We let them go. No

5. Chadwick, 118.

need to get worried or overly upset. But we must actually do it. Jesus forgives everyone who turns back to him with a humble and contrite heart.

So I recommend taking time daily for simply sitting in watchfulness. You cannot stop thoughts and emotions. But you can settle them in order to see them more clearly. Once seen clearly, they can be brought to the cross of Jesus and transformed through the resurrection.

### **Questions**

- 1) Are you watchful of thoughts?
- 2) Do you still the muddy waters of your life through times of prayer?
- 3) Do you incorporate your breathing in prayer?
- 4) Do you recognize the uniquely Christian aspect of this practice?

## Boredom and Listlessness

One of the fiercest demons that faced the desert fathers and mothers was acedia, the noonday devil, or listlessness. I simply call it boredom.

We all get bored. I often get bored with the daily turn of events. For me daily monastic life is a predictable turn of rising, prayers, meals, and work. Even life in itinerant ministry can become a predictable round of hotels, diet food, churches, and constant driving from place to place. Only the time on the platform in ministry and meeting the delightful folks who sponsor and attend my ministries are actually enjoyable for me. Family life also has its own routine. We all get bored with the routine of daily life.

It isn't whether or not we get bored on occasion. It's what we do with it that makes all the difference. Routine can comfort and direct us or bore us. The choice is up to us. Like with a living human body, the very routine that sometimes bores us can be like the stable skeletal system upon which we can hang the rest of the sinews, muscles, heart, and soul of a living body. Without it, we lack form and direction. We can end up a directionless blob of well-meaning intentions that cannot fully function. No.

We need the skeletal routine in order to be a fully functioning human person. But we must also flesh it out to really live.

If left unchecked, this ordinary boredom can gradually lead us to a full-on life of godlessness. Big consequences start in small ways. I've seen this in monastic life with many who cannot make a go of their vocation once the novelty wears off. For most of us, we get bored with a spiritual exercise or way of life. We get bored with ideas or people. We get bored with jobs, ministries, communities, or even spouses and children. This is nothing new.

I've also seen it with the proverbial "I'm spiritual, but not religious" syndrome. I have friends who get bored and disenchanted with organized church. Then they start having home Bible studies and prayer or meditation groups in their homes instead of going to church. When those break up, they settle for personal prayer alone. Then they lose that and end up not praying much at all, their relationship with God dwindles, and their lives become aimless and unhappy. Others simply lose their faith and live in blissful delusion. It all started with boredom with their local church.

This is especially pronounced with the routine of ordinary things and people in monastic life. I often say that monasteries are extraordinary places made up of very ordinary people. If you can't find the extraordinary in the ordinary, you will probably find monastic life very difficult, if not outright impossible!

The early desert fathers treat the workings and remedies for this demonic thought of boredom very basically at first. By the end of the first generation, they have already started to develop it in some detail in the context of monasticism. But these lessons are applicable to us all.

For the desert fathers this demon came in the middle of the unbearably hot desert days. The desert is a place of extremes. During those unbearable hours, many monks could only sleep. While this might be understandable, and even tolerated at times, it could be the kiss of death to the serious monastic.

I know that when I first moved into my hermitage, I would sometimes get bored and ended up just dozing off to sleep. It was easier to overcome when I was at the height of my recording ministry and was almost always spending part of my day working on new music. I would also have a concert tour to get ready for. Nowadays, as I spend more time in hermitage at the monastery, I am facing what anyone of retirement age faces. After a life of accomplishments, retirees are more inactive on the professional level. At this point we must do a serious self-assessment before God. How we deal with boredom makes all the difference.

For myself, I have chosen to dive deeper into monastic spirituality. I have already spent a lifetime studying the main sources. I tend to pick up a book and think, “Yep, I’ve heard all this before.” So, I’m going deeper into the unwritten things of spirituality and just “being” in the presence of God’s Being. When I do this, I might be less active, but I am far from bored!

### **Cassian**

Cassian says that this demon *always* attacks the monk. None are exempt. “What am I doing here? I don’t even like these people! What will happen to me when I am sick and old and unable to care for myself?” These and other similar thoughts stream almost endlessly unless confronted. Unchecked, they cause us to hate the monastery and the monks, the abbot, and even the Scriptures. They suggest to a monk that he should go elsewhere. They end in the destruction of one’s precious vocation.

For most of us, it comes when the newness of monastic life begins to wear off. It also eventually comes to every ministry and to every couple in marriage. It comes when the honeymoon is over, the proverbial “seven-year itch”! It happens to all of us. That’s not the issue. What is at issue is what we do with it. That is a choice. Those who choose to give in will lose their monastic,

clerical, or family vocation, even if their body stays in the monastery, parish, or family house and job. Those who resist it will eventually break through to discover a whole new life!

Cassian, writing at the end of the first generation of the desert fathers, goes on to describe the agonizing process of this demon in more detail. He says that it produces in the mind feelings of extraordinary hunger, so that we cannot think of anything else but food. It suggests that we cannot be free of this demon unless we go and visit the other monks more often. Seeking others during times of solitary prayer is a distraction that can lead away from the deeper things God is trying to usher us into. When these tactics don't work, it simply makes us sleepy. When boredom is not overcome, how easy it is to just go to sleep!

When a monk finally succumbs to the demon of boredom, he begins to roam idly from monastery to monastery, thinking only of which monastery has the best food. In monastic tradition these are called "gyrovagues," or those who wander in physical and spiritual circles and are the bane of monastic life and real obedience to a spiritual father or mother and a specific community.

We still see many would-be monastics wandering from monastery to monastery today. These always find something wrong with every monastery they visit. So they move on. But the problem isn't so much in the monastery, though no monastery is perfect, but in themselves. The same is true of parishes, spouses, families, jobs, or ministries. Boredom in little things leads to the destruction of a bigger vocation if left unchecked. Acedia is dreadfully dogged!

Sometimes we are tempted to different ministry. The temptation to engage in active ministry is all too common in monastic life. The devil uses otherwise good things to accomplish something bad in our monastic vocations. Often, what God wills is for us to break through to a whole new level of prayer. And mystically, that prayer is what really changes the world spiritually.

Cassian describes the mental process of such ones and their eventual outcome. He says that the mind becomes filled with a constant flow of vain distractions once we initially give in to boredom. These distractions are religious in nature at first. But they prep the mind for the habit of mental wandering that leads to worse things. Finally it is ensnared by worldly things and gradually abandons the monastic life altogether.

St. John Climacus (of the Ladder) says similarly that at prayer this demon fills the mind with some job to be done and suggests any plausible excuse to drag us from prayer. The irony is that outside of the singing of the Psalms during prayer, this demon does not arise! When the Office is hardly over, we are wide awake again. Haven't we all had a bit of this experience? During the Divine Office or Mass we just can't stay focused or awake. Our minds wander like an undisciplined mule. But as soon as we are out of church, we are focused on our next task and wide awake again!

John of the Ladder continues. Again, it suggests leaving monastic solitude to be involved in a ministry like hospitality. It urges the hermit to do some kind of manual labor so he can produce something to give to the poor. Or it suggests visiting the sick, even quoting the words of Jesus, "I was sick and you came to visit me" (Matt 25:36). Notice that this is during prayer and solitude. There are times for legitimate work and ministry in a monastery, but not during times set aside for prayer and sacred reading.

## Remedies

How do we resist? There aren't any magic answer pills in the desert. The fathers often say that the answer is simply to rise up and do something, but do something appropriate to the monastic vocation and call. If your mind is wandering during prayer, rise up and pray harder. *Stand up* and pray. Do some *prostrations* or stand up. Pray the Divine Office. Read the Scriptures.

Do a mental inventory of the good and bad things of the day, and praise and thank God for everything on purpose! If you are sleepy and lazy, do some constructive work. Clean and straighten your cell, inside and out. Do the labor assigned to you by your abbot. There's an old saying that if you are bored, it's because you are boring! When you are bored, get up and do something for God. You will soon find yourself free of boredom. You can defeat the noonday devil!

John Climacus recommends *mourning*, or *penthos*. Boredom can be overcome by the remembrance of past sins, battered by hard manual labor, and encouraged by the thought of the blessings to come.<sup>1</sup> Putting boredom into the first person he writes, "The singing of *psalms* and manual *labor* are my opponents by whom I am now bound. My enemy is the *thought of death*, but what really slays me is prayer backed by a firm *hope* in the blessings of the future." And he concludes, "*Unremitting prayer* is the death of despondency."<sup>2</sup>

The earlier desert fathers and mothers are a bit less developed, but no less challenging.

One old monk, asked why he never gave in to boredom said it was simply because each day he hoped to die.<sup>3</sup> Another used to say, "The man who constantly sets the *remembrance of death* before his eyes beats the demon of Boredom."<sup>4</sup> Another old man said that the fear of God drives away all evil things, but dejection drives away the fear of God, and the wandering mind drives away good works from the soul.<sup>5</sup>

1. Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013), 111.

2. Papavassiliou, 113.

3. E. A. W. Budge, ed. and trans., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 2:195.

4. Budge, 2:217.

5. Budge, 2:277.

St. Makarios of Egypt said that one who cultivates a life of prayer must “fight with great diligence and watchfulness, all endurance, all struggle of soul and toil of body, so that he does not become sluggish and surrender himself to distraction of thought, to excessive sleep, [or] to listlessness.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Eight Thoughts**

St. John of Damascus also places the battle with acedia, or boredom, in the *list of eight*. He said that it does not lay within our power to escape these thoughts. But it is within our power to choose whether to entertain or act on them. He goes on to outline *seven stages*, from suggestion of the thought to full acting upon them.<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine reduces these to *three* in the West: 1) the suggestion of the thought, which is common to everyone and not sinful; 2) entertaining the thought, which is sinful; and 3) acting on the thought, which is the fruit of the sinful entertainment of the thought. I like the list of seven for its subtlety and completeness. I like the list of three simply because it’s easier to remember! It works for me.

St. John of Damascus continues. *The eight passions are destroyed by these means*: “gluttony by self-control; unchastity by desire for God and longing for the blessings held in store; avarice by compassion for the poor; anger by goodwill and love for all men; worldly dejection by spiritual joy; listlessness by patience, perseverance, and offering thanks to God; self-esteem by doing good in secret and by praying constantly with a contrite heart; and pride by not judging or despising anyone in the manner of the boastful Pharisee (Luke 18:11-12), and by considering

6. Allyn Smith, ed., *Philokalia: The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts: Selections Annotated and Explained*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2012), 96–97.

7. Smith, 152–153.

oneself the least of all men.” He concludes that once we are free of these eight thoughts, we can fly unencumbered in God through Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

## **Questions**

- 1) What is acedia?
- 2) Do you experience boredom in your spiritual life, in the church, or in your monastic community or ministry?
- 3) Do you understand the progression of acedia in your spiritual life?
- 4) Do you use good, old-fashioned work to balance your prayer in order to cure your boredom?
- 5) Do you see boredom in context of the eight thoughts and the remedies for overcoming them?

8. Smith, 154–155.